

Masks of God

**Martin Luther on
Believing in God
and
Serving the Neighbor
in a Fallen World**

by

Holger Sonntag

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
I. The Historical Context of Luther’s Foundational Teachings on the Two Kingdoms (1517 to 1526)	5
II. Living as God’s Masks in a Fallen World	12
A. Overview.....	12
B. The Basic Distinction of the Two Kingdoms	14
C. Creation, Fall, Natural Law, Reason, and Faith.....	18
1. The Image of God in Creation, Fall, and Redemption.....	18
2. Reason and the Natural Law	21
a) Fallen Reason is Divine yet Requires God’s Word to Avoid Anarchy and Tyranny	21
b) The Natural Law Is Written in the Human Heart, but Fallen Humans Cannot Fully and Reliably Decipher It	25
3. Freedom and Service, Faith and Love	29
D. God Acts in and Through Creation in an Ordered Way in the Structures of Government, Church, and Household.....	35
1. God’s Ordered Power at Work in the World to Preserve Creation and Save Sinners ..	35
2. The Whole Creation is God’s Mask.....	40
3. The Christian’s Person and Office—the Christian as Person of Christ and Person of the World	42
4. Anti-Donatism in Church and Government.....	46
5. Three Distinct Orders as Foundational Structures for a God-pleasing Life in a Fallen World	48
6. The Divine Institution and Purposes of the Three Holy Orders	51
7. The Church of God and the Church of the Devil.....	54
8. Virtuous Government.....	58
a) The Three Virtues of Government.....	58
b) Clarifying the First Virtue of Government by Properly Distinguishing the Two Kingdoms.....	63
9. God’s Rare Miracle People and Ordinary People.....	67

10.	Christ as King over Believers and All Creation.....	69
E.	Love as Queen of the Law—Living and Governing Prudently and Equitably in a Fallen World	80
1.	Distinguishing Doctrine and Life, Faith and Love	81
2.	Love Moderates the Law and Overlooks Sin—How to Govern and Live in the Fallen World	83
a)	Love as Queen and Moderator of the Law.....	83
b)	Love Overlooks Sin	93
c)	Distinguishing the Two Kingdoms by Patiently Bearing with the Imperfections of those Holding Divine Offices of Authority in the Kingdom of the World.....	95
F.	Living in the End Times—Cross, Joy, and Deliverance for All Believers in Christ.....	99
III.	20th-Century Lutheran Responses to Major Philosophical and Political Challenges	104
A.	Luther Meets the Enlightenment and Modern Liberal Society.....	104
B.	Key Intellectual Developments Between the 16th and 20th Centuries.....	109
1.	A New Political Philosophy Advancing Individual Autonomy.....	109
2.	Human History as a History of Development to Greater Morality and Freedom from Superstition Under the Banner of Reason.....	110
3.	Enlightenment as a Rational Form of Christianity	112
4.	Rewriting the Natural Law: From Serving the Neighbor to Experimental Self-Service 113	
5.	Enlightenment Hermeneutics Result in a Confusion of the Two Kingdoms.....	116
C.	God’s Holy Orders, Orders of Creation, or Christ’s Mandates?.....	122
1.	Paul Althaus and Werner Elert	122
a)	Autonomous Orders of Creation, Racial Struggle, and the Hidden God.....	122
b)	Evaluation	127
2.	Dietrich Bonhoeffer	132
a)	Christ as Center of Creation.....	133
b)	Mandates of Christ.....	134
c)	God’s Law and the Ethic of Responsibility	138
d)	Evaluation	141
IV.	Conclusion: Half a Millennium Later—Still God’s Masks	147

*A prince who lacks prudence
will oppress many with injustice.*
Proverbs 28:16 (Luther)

*Here we have no permanent city,
but we seek the one to come.*
Hebrews 13:14 (Luther)

INTRODUCTION

In 1523, Martin Luther (1483-1546)¹ wrote his seminal treatise on civil government.² Luther himself described the significance of this work for his time as follows:

This is how it was back [in 1518]: No one had taught or heard, no one knew anything about secular government, from where it came, what its office and work were, or how it was to serve God. The most learned men (I will not name them) considered secular government to be a heathen, human, godless thing, as if it were a station in life that put the salvation of government officials in jeopardy. This is also why priests and monks had intimidated and convinced to take up other works to serve God, such as attending mass, praying, founding masses, etc.

In sum, princes and lords (those who would have liked to be pious) considered their station in life and office to be nothing and no service of God. They became true priests and monks (without tonsures and cowls). If they wished to serve God, they had to enter the church. All the lords who lived and experienced this at that time must attest that this was the case. For my gracious lord, Duke Frederick of blessed memory, was very glad when I first wrote *About Secular Government*. He had the booklet copied and put in a special binding. He loved it dearly that he too could see what his station in life was in God's view.³

Because Luther considered this treatise so important, what follows will use this treatise as a roadmap. The first part of this book will outline the historical context for Luther's 1523 treatise

¹ Luther's works are cited as follows: AE refers to *Luther's Works: American Edition* (St. Louis: CPH; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955ff.). SLE refers to *Dr. Luthers sämtliche Schriften* (St. Louis: CPH, 1880-1910). WA refers to *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.). The English translations of Luther's works contained in these collected-works editions and directly quoted in this book have been prepared by the author, generally based on the German text in SLE.

The texts contained in the *Christian Book of Concord* of 1580—now commonly called “the Lutheran Confessions”—have been cited according to *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: CPH, 1921). The 16th century writings contained in this collection are abbreviated as follows: AC – Augsburg Confession of 1530; Apol. – Apology of the Augsburg Confession of 1531; SA – Smalcald Articles of 1537; Treatise – Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope of 1537; SC – Small Catechism of 1529; LC – Large Catechism of 1529; Ep. – Epitome of the Formula of Concord of 1577; SD – Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord of 1577. The translations of these writings have been taken from the *Concordia Triglotta*.

² The standard English translation of this work is found in AE 45:81-129. A new popular English edition of this treatise is available as Martin Luther, *Christians and Government* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2024).

³ SLE 20:2111; see AE 46:163. A modern student of Luther considered this work to be “the fundamental and most significant document of Luther's political ethics.” Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 118-19 (abbreviated as Brecht, *Martin Luther* 2).

on temporal authority. By 1523, Luther had found himself cast into the role of the reformer of the church. He already had written several of his most important works, such as *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) and *On Christian Liberty* (1520). But those early years were marked not only by increasing theological clarity but also by deepening theological divisions. The early Lutherans found themselves increasingly in opposition to followers of the pope. Followers of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489-1525) set themselves over against followers of Luther. And in general, political and social unrest continued to increase. In fact, 1523 would not only see the defeat of the Knights' Revolt in Germany. This year was also the eve of the German Peasants War of 1524-26 that resulted in thousands of dead, including Müntzer himself.

The second part of this book will contextualize the 1523 treatise in Luther's theology. It begins by summarizing Luther's 1523 treatise on government where he discussed the divine origin, purpose, and goodness of government. He also discussed the limits of the divine authority of government, thereby distinguishing it from God's kingdom. For while the former restrains sin by ruling over the bodies of humans and their worldly possessions with the authority of the sword, the latter frees them from sin by ruling over the souls of believers with the authority of the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. In this way, this treatise established the basic parameters of what would later become known as the "doctrine of the two kingdoms."⁴

Next, the second part will use the major themes touched upon in Luther's 1523 treatise—anthropology, theology, and prudence—as a roadmap for setting forth Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine as he developed it in other writings and sermons. These three themes will be rounded out with a brief discussion of the end-times in Luther's theology, as relevant for the two-kingdoms doctrine.

In the process, Luther doctrine of the two kingdoms will emerge as eminently practical, fundamental, and relevant to the life of Christians in the world even today. Instead of confining this life to church attendance and certain pious works carried out with likeminded believers, such as prayer and missionary activities, this doctrine frees and requires Christians to live in service of God and neighbor in this world, that is, among fellow sinners. Indeed, unfolding this doctrine in this way will provide insight into Luther's teaching on how the transcendent God has bound himself to being present in and working through creation to preserve and redeem his creation by using creatures as his masks.

By situating Luther's teachings on the two kingdoms in the body of his work, the second part of this book will also provide a basis for responding to various criticisms of Luther. Luther's 16th-century critics depicted him as self-contradictory and blamed him for the violent uprising of the peasants in the 1520s.⁵ Or as a "toady to the sovereigns" for criticizing the rebellious peasants.⁶ Or they alleged he could be ignored because he was an obscure man from an obscure place on the periphery of the Holy Roman Empire.⁷ More recent caricatures portray Luther as a

⁴ See Martin Heckel, *Martin Luthers Reformation und das Recht* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), p. 592, where he summarizes the distinction between the two kingdoms based on the persons belonging to them, the means of ruling over them, and the objects of those kingdoms.

⁵ For instance, Catholic polemicist Johann Cochlaeus (1479-1552) blamed Luther for the Peasants' War and attributed seven heads to Luther, all contradicting each other. Brecht, *Martin Luther* 2, p. 190, 269-71.

⁶ AE 49:113-14.

⁷ AE 34:102.

lackey of princes, an unrelenting “law and order” type, an angry peasant who ate and swore too much, or as the one whose arbitrary God is to blame, at least in part, for Western culture’s descent into unbridled individualism.⁸

Yet the authentic Luther not only spoke with surprising consistency, given that his recovery of profound biblical truths did not happen instantaneously.⁹ Luther, moreover, also spoke truth to the churchly and political powers of his generation and served as a wise teacher of love and equity, providing eminently practical guidance on how to follow Christ faithfully in a fallen world where even the best human efforts often fail and where a strict application of God’s law may result in unjust results that harm the neighbor. And Luther did all this while keeping central Jesus Christ, the incarnate King of his Church and of the whole creation.

The third part of this book will address the fact that the five centuries that have passed since 1523 have witnessed major theological, political, social, and philosophical changes, most notably the complex and pervasive movement called Enlightenment.¹⁰ This movement, begun in the seventeenth century and, with modifications, still going strong today, prize human reason, individual freedom, and progress above all else. The result has been the liberal social and political order prevalent in the West today.

These profound cultural developments have clouded a proper understanding of the biblical doctrine of the two kingdoms, as Luther rediscovered it.¹¹ While the complex history of the emergence of the Enlightenment and its interaction with Christianity cannot be fully analyzed here, the third part of this book will nonetheless outline several prominent features of Enlightenment thinking that have shaped modern society, including a deeply held belief in progress toward a better future. Some of these features have found their way into theology and have thereby impacted the church’s response to this movement when it comes to defining the relationship between the Christians and politics and the world more generally.

In addition to highlighting some salient features of the Enlightenment, the third part will compare Luther’s relevant teachings on the two kingdoms with those of three renowned Lutheran theologians from 20th-century Germany—Paul Althaus (1888-1966), Werner Elert (1885-1954), and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)—who grappled with (or surrendered to) the impact of the Enlightenment and the powerful political ideology of National Socialism on theology and the life of Christians in this world.

The fourth part of this book will offer a brief summation. This summation, like this entire book, is rooted in the conviction that, despite tremendous changes in history, God’s word and

⁸ E.g., Michael A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁹ As Luther himself recognized, he started out as a defender of the pope, indeed, as an “a senseless papist, . . . drowned in the pope’s doctrines.” SLE 14:439; see AE 34:328; see also AE 28:242; 41:110-11.

¹⁰ See, e.g., David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), who focuses his discussion on those who sought to forge a synthesis of religion and Enlightenment.

¹¹ See Joel Biermann, *Wholly Citizens: God’s Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2017), p. 37-72, where he summarizes some recent (mis-)interpretations of Luther’s teachings on this issue; William J. Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), p. 17-43 (same); Heckel, *Reformation*, p. 590-91 (same); see also Matthew Harrison & John Pless, *One Lord, Two Hands? Essays on the Theology of the Two Kingdoms* (St. Louis: CPH, 2021), containing a broad range of topical essays written by European and American theologians from the recent past.

law remain unchanged. The fallen human nature remains unchanged. And God's three holy orders remain unchanged. Simply put, Luther engaged the same fallen human nature with the unchanging spiritual tools provided by God in his unchanging Word. To be sure, the Enlightenment as a distinct philosophical movement was still more than a century away from Luther's time. But Luther was very perceptive regarding fallen reason's perennial quest for emancipation and autonomy from its Creator. Whatever else the Enlightenment is, means, or accomplished, it is—considered in light of God's Word—just another iteration of reason's perennial quest for autonomy and self-determination.

Those who wish to follow the lead of Luther are therefore not unprepared when it comes to engaging the fallen world of today and presenting an alternative to its ways of thinking and acting. As a result, they are able to draw on Luther's deep biblical insights and truly humane teachings. In this way, Luther will prove to be a reliable teacher for those who desire to understand and live out what they already are by God's wise and gracious ordering—God's masks, hands, and feet, sent to aid their neighbors in a fallen world to the glory of God.

I. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF LUTHER'S FOUNDATIONAL TEACHINGS ON THE TWO KINGDOMS (1517 TO 1526)

As Luther recounted it near the end of his life, he found himself in the middle of the “strife” related to reforming the Christian church “by accident, not willingly or intentionally.”¹² This “strife” started when Luther—“then a newly minted doctor, eager, and deeply engaged with Holy Scripture”—“began to preach carefully” against indulgences.¹³ He also expressed his concerns in letters to his archbishop, Albert of Magdeburg and Mainz (1490-1545)—written on October 31, 1517, with Luther’s 95 Theses enclosed—and to his bishop, Jerome Schultze of Brandenburg (c. 1460-1522).¹⁴ It was only after these efforts remained unfruitful that Luther published his theses, a sermon, and an explanation of the theses.¹⁵

Luther’s theological criticism of indulgences was twofold. First, indulgences prevented Christians from following the crucified Christ in humility and suffering.¹⁶ Second, and most importantly, indulgences were nothing more than idols to which the false promises of God’s grace were attached, thereby misleading into hell “many thousands of souls” that died relying on such false promises.¹⁷

For Luther, then, the reformation of the church was primarily about reasserting the First Commandment against the idolatry that had crept into the church. And in such reasserting of the preeminence of the First Commandment, Luther taught the gospel of salvation by faith in Christ alone that gives all glory to the one true God and makes faith in God the highest worship of God.¹⁸

Unlike so many attempts at church reform before Luther—e.g., the work of John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384) and John Huss (1369-1415)—Luther’s work as a reformer was therefore not first and foremost about ridding society of corrupt external practices or unholy living among the clergy or the people. Rather, it was chiefly—though not exclusively, as will be seen—about reforming the doctrine of justification according to the First Commandment.¹⁹ And contrary to Enlightenment notions of “reform”—or polemics against Luther—Luther was not an innovator when it came to Christian faith and life. Rather, he was dedicated to restoring the ancient faith and the ancient good works to the church according to God’s unchanging word.²⁰

While Luther critiqued the sale of indulgences theologically, its impact upon the German people was felt economically. Accordingly, the people saw this sale of as yet another example of

¹² SLE 14:440; see AE 34:328.

¹³ SLE 17:1358; see AE 41:231. For a summary of the developing theology and practice of indulgences up to the time of Luther, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 176-83 (abbreviated as Brecht, *Martin Luther I*).

¹⁴ AE 41:233; AE 48:45-49; see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther I*, p. 190-92.

¹⁵ AE 34:329.

¹⁶ E.g., AE 51:31.

¹⁷ SLE 17:1362; see AE 41:236-37; see also SLE 16:1653 (AE 47:41): “Whoever comforted himself with, and relied on, indulgences and died or lived this way, had to abandon, deny, and forget the Savior Jesus Christ, deriving no comfort from him.”

¹⁸ AE 6:228-29; AE 31:350, 352-53. In LC I, 22-24, Luther discussed the “extreme idolatry” of trust in one’s works instead of trusting in God and expecting from him alone all good things.

¹⁹ AE 6:228-29; AE 54:110.

²⁰ AE 41:134, 135-36.

the hated “pillagings, chicaneries, and countless deceits of the Roman scoundrels.”²¹ Indulgences became even less popular when the people learned that the income generated was used to fill the coffers of high-ranking church leaders, including Archbishop Albert and the pope.²²

Consequently, Luther’s 95 Theses mentioned some of the “keen, clever questions of the common man” revolving around the money collected by means of the sale of indulgences. For instance, since the pope was already so rich, why did he not offer these indulgences for free, out of sheer love for his people?²³ Thus, indulgences were not only of great theological relevance. Their sale was also socially and politically explosive.

In time—even while Luther was being investigated for heresy in Rome between 1518 and 1521²⁴—Luther was forced to address necessary political reforms. And since key church leaders of his time proved to be unwilling to engage in reform, Luther called on God and the *political* leaders of Christendom to do what needed to be done, according to the example of early Christian emperors.²⁵ Luther did so in his 1520 treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*.²⁶ In formulating the reform ideas set forth in this work,²⁷ Luther did not start from scratch. Instead, he combined his own experiences and observations with the tradition of the grievances (*gravamina*) German church leaders and princes had formulated against certain abuses by the Roman papacy beginning in 1455, after the 1448 Concordat of Vienna had already limited the influence of the pope in the Holy Roman Empire.²⁸

Importantly, Luther’s call to reform was accompanied by a biblical refutation of the three “walls” surrounding the papacy, namely, exemption of the clergy from the jurisdiction of political authorities, reservation of scriptural interpretation to the pope, and reservation of calling a general council to the pope.²⁹ This refutation was necessary because these walls had precluded any meaningful reforms in church and society.³⁰ Because Luther perceived the pope and his associates as “the princes of hell,” that is, as powerful spiritual enemies, he understood that a theological reformation by the power of God’s Word needed to precede any kind of social reform by means of political action.³¹ This theological insight was the reason Luther parted ways with early German nationalist thinkers and activists like the knights Ulrich von Hutten (1488-

²¹ SLE 14:441; see AE 34:330.

²² AE 34:329; AE 41:233.

²³ SLE 18:264-265; see AE 31:32-33.

²⁴ Luther was summoned to Rome on suspicion of heresy in the summer of 1518. Instead of facing his accusers in Rome, he was interrogated by Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg in October 1518. Issued in the summer of 1519, the papal bull threatening Luther with excommunication (*Exsurge Domine*) enumerated as erroneous forty-one statements by Luther on the sacrament of penance, indulgences, the power of the papacy, etc. The papal bull pronouncing Luther’s excommunication (*Decet Romanum Pontificem*) was issued in January 1521, before Luther appeared at the diet of Worms in April 1521. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther 1*, p. 242, 251, 391, 426-27, 452.

²⁵ AE 44:90-91, 136-37, 139, 156; see AE 41:22-24.

²⁶ AE 44:123.

²⁷ See esp. AE 44:156-217. Luther characterized his outline of these ideas as his “fool’s play.” SLE 10:296; see AE 44:156.

²⁸ Peter H. Wilson, *Heart of Europe: A History of the Holy Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 72-73, 732-33; Brecht, *Martin Luther 1*, p. 371.

²⁹ AE 44:126-39. In the 1458 Vienna Concordat, the emperor had recognized papal supremacy over church councils, sparking renewed debates over church reform. Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 733.

³⁰ AE 44:126.

³¹ SLE 10:269; see AE 44:124-26; see Dan. 8:25; 2 Cor. 10:3-5; Eph. 6:12, 17.

1523) and Franz von Sickingen (1481-1523), who tried to harness Luther's emergent star power for their political-military liberation movement.³²

While Luther continued to expound scripture on the chief articles of the Christian faith in sermons and treatises—Christian freedom, good works, confession, the Lord's Supper, baptism, etc.—his call to political reform was not heeded by the nobility. Over his objections, this lack of action caused some in Luther's circle—e.g., fellow Wittenberg professor of theology, Andrew Karlstadt (1486-1541)—to take matters into their own hands. So in 1521-22—while Luther was working on his Bible translation at the Wartburg castle, hidden there for his own safety after his appearance at the diet of Worms in April 1521—Karlstadt egged Wittenberg students and citizens on to bully traditionalists into receiving communion under both kinds, destroy images and statutes in churches, and worship in German.³³ In a July 1521 letter to his confidant, Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560), Luther—probably in reaction to statements by Karlstadt³⁴—sketched out his arguments on the biblical foundation of government, apparently to counter Melancthon's concerns about a lack of such a foundation in the gospel itself.³⁵ A brief incognito trip to Wittenberg as “Junker Jörg” in December 1521 made Luther familiar with the widespread resentment against church leaders that expressed itself in widely distributed pamphlets and even violent acts.³⁶

Luther's swiftly reacted by publishing a treatise warning against insurrection and rebellion.³⁷ As he saw it, the renewed preaching of God's word had brought all manner of misdeeds and tyranny to light, which had caused “the common man . . . to be agitated and vexed due to the damage he has suffered in possessions, body, and soul” under the papacy.³⁸ But Luther believed that the papacy was such a great evil that it would not be overthrown by a human insurrection but by the wrath of God itself.³⁹ Nonetheless, Luther expressly opposed insurrection because it was too crude a tool and was directly prohibited by God's word.⁴⁰ He also believed that any insurrection by those among whom the pure gospel had been preached would be caused by the devil to discredit the gospel and advance the cause of the papacy.⁴¹

But what if the political authorities remained inactive—was that not justification enough for an armed insurrection by Christians? No, Luther wrote. Instead, Christians should confess

³² WA Br. 2:249; Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, tr. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 43-49. In 1520/21, von Hutten and von Sickingen repeatedly made the offer to protect Luther by force of arms, but Luther—unlike other Protestant theologians at the time—did not accept these offers and maintained his distance. Wolfgang Breul & Kurt Andermann (eds.), *Ritterschaft und Reformation* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2019), p. 97-104, 114-17. Hans Peter Herrmann, *Identität und Machtanspruch: Deutscher Frühnationalismus um 1500?* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2023), discusses the German nationalism emerging in humanist circles around 1500, which included von Hutten. See Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 255-92, on the development of German national identity during the history of the Holy Roman Empire.

³³ AE 45:53-56; AE 51:69-70; Brecht, *Martin Luther 2*, p. 26-45.

³⁴ Brecht, *Martin Luther 2*, p. 115.

³⁵ AE 48:258-62. The biblical passages referenced in this letter will reappear in Luther's 1523 treatise on government.

³⁶ AE 45:55.

³⁷ AE 45:57.

³⁸ SLE 10:360; see AE 45:57.

³⁹ AE 45:61.

⁴⁰ AE 45:62-63.

⁴¹ AE 45:64-65.

their sin, as their sin had brought the papacy on them as God's punishment; they should pray to God; and they should speak God's word boldly.⁴² He also urged his followers not to regard themselves as *Luther's* followers but as Christians and to deal patiently with the weak.⁴³ At the beginning of Lent 1522, Luther returned to Wittenberg. In his *Invocavit* sermons preached upon his return, Luther opposed Karlstadt's spiritual tyranny because Karlstadt's forced reforms disregarded love, as they were not grounded in, and preceded by, a proper formation of the Christian heart by the patient teaching of God's word.⁴⁴ Luther's preaching and presence calmed the situation in Wittenberg.⁴⁵

While the political authorities did not engage in the reforms Luther advocated, some used their power to oppose the resurgent gospel—e.g., by prohibiting their subjects to read Bibles or by confiscating Bibles.⁴⁶ What was a Christian to do—vis-à-vis political authorities in general and especially when they seek to hinder the spread of the gospel? These are the fundamental questions Luther answered in a series of sermons in late 1522 and in the 1523 treatise on secular government, formulating the basic distinction of the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God as well as addressing the biblical foundation, and limits, of the political authorities in the process.⁴⁷

As Luther observed in this treatise, however, the political situation remained tenuous, as the people were full of contempt for their rulers because they did not govern reasonably but simply ruled by brute force, as if their subjects were animals.⁴⁸ Luther feared that things would not end well.⁴⁹

And things did not end well, as illustrated by the following three developments. First, in 1522/23, German knights friendly to Luther's reform movement—seeking to reverse their gradual political marginalization and advance Luther's cause by force—engaged in the Knights' Revolt under von Sickingen and von Hutten.⁵⁰ In May 1523, von Sickingen died as an outlaw when his stronghold was conquered by forces loyal to the emperor. Von Hutten died of syphilis a few months later, after fleeing to Switzerland.⁵¹ Upon hearing of Sickingen's death, Luther laconically remarked, "Deus iustus, sed mirabilis iudex"—God is a just but strange judge (Ps. 7:11).⁵²

Second, beginning in the early 1520s, a theocratic movement rejecting all human authority in church and state as corrupt took shape in Saxony, claiming to rely on the direct

⁴² AE 45:66-69.

⁴³ AE 45:70-74.

⁴⁴ AE 51:75-78.

⁴⁵ Brecht, *Martin Luther 2*, p. 61. After implementing his radical reforms in Orlamünde/Saxony (and being banished from Saxony in 1524), Karlstadt became a professor in Switzerland where he allied himself with Zwingli and his followers to oppose Luther's teachings on the Lord's Supper. AE 40:75-76.

⁴⁶ AE 45:77.

⁴⁷ AE 45:78-80; Brecht, *Martin Luther 2*, p. 115-17.

⁴⁸ AE 45:116.

⁴⁹ AE 45:116-17.

⁵⁰ Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 553-58; AE 48:244-45; Breul/Anderman, *Ritterschaft*, p. 103, 120-22.

⁵¹ Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 558.

⁵² WA Br. 3:71. Following Sickingen's death, the knights refrained from using military force to find their place in the changing political order of the empire and resorted to legal means. Breul/Andermann, *Ritterschaft*, p. 91.

guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁵³ Thomas Müntzer became their leader.⁵⁴ In 1523, Luther alerted the political authorities to these activities because he feared that this movement's revolutionary teachings would lead to open rebellion and bloodshed.⁵⁵ In 1524, when the authorities summoned Müntzer and associates for an investigation, Müntzer fled Saxony.⁵⁶

In Luther 1524 letter to the princes of Saxony regarding Müntzer, he contrasted his own work as a reformer with the work of Müntzer and his associates to show that Müntzer's impatient and perfectionist calls for the violent overthrow of all human political and ecclesial order demonstrated that the "spirit" animating this movement was not the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ Luther's advice to the princes was to let Müntzer and his followers preach as they pleased but to intervene when their preaching turned into violent action.⁵⁸

Third, beginning in Southwest Germany in late 1524 and preceded by similar such movements in the 15th century, peasants began to formulate grievances and rise up against intensifying management by their lords.⁵⁹ One such document of grievances emerged in the Swabian town of Memmingen in early 1525. It was titled *Twelve Articles*.⁶⁰ As the peasants themselves stated in response to their "antichristian" critics, this document sought "to excuse the disobedience, even the rebellion, of all peasants in a Christian way."⁶¹

Luther's 1525 response to the *Twelve Articles* took up the peasants' offer to be corrected.⁶² He took the matter very seriously because "it concerns both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world."⁶³ "[I]f this rebellion were to proceed and get the upper hand, both kingdoms would be destroyed: Neither secular government nor God's word would remain, but a permanent destruction of all Germany would result."⁶⁴

Expanding on the contempt for princes Luther had noted in his 1523 treatise on government, Luther opened his reply to the *Twelve Articles* by criticizing the rulers: Their opposition to the gospel and their economic oppression of the people were to blame for the perilous state of affairs.⁶⁵ And yet, while the rulers were the cause of their own downfall, Luther earnestly called on the peasants to pursue their own cause "with a good conscience and lawfully."⁶⁶ After all, they "would be lost forever in body and soul," even if they saw temporal success.⁶⁷

⁵³ AE 40:47.

⁵⁴ AE 40:47. According to Brecht, *Martin Luther 2*, p. 148, Müntzer's "revolutionary program"—"his mission of fighting all ungodliness and bringing judgment upon it" without any concern for the weak—combined mysticism and apocalypticism.

⁵⁵ AE 40:47-48.

⁵⁶ AE 40:48.

⁵⁷ AE 40:50-57.

⁵⁸ AE 40:57.

⁵⁹ AE 46:5; Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 591-93.

⁶⁰ See AE 46:6-16.

⁶¹ SLE 16:18; see AE 46:9.

⁶² AE 46:17.

⁶³ SLE 16:46; see AE 46:18.

⁶⁴ SLE 16:46; see AE 46:18.

⁶⁵ AE 46:19-23.

⁶⁶ SLE 16:50; see AE 46:23.

⁶⁷ SLE 16:50; see AE 46:23.

At bottom, Luther accused the peasants of taking the Lord's name in vain against the Second Commandment because they called themselves Christians and yet took up the sword against their governing authorities, contrary to Romans 13.⁶⁸ He explained that the obvious wickedness of the rulers was no excuse for the peasants to be judges in their own cause or to avenge themselves, because that was the task of the political authorities under both natural and Christian law.⁶⁹ Acting contrary to God's order would result in the peasants' temporal defeat and eternal damnation.⁷⁰ If everybody became their own judge, Luther predicted, then "neither authority nor government, neither order nor law would remain in the world; only murder and bloodshed would be left."⁷¹

Against the peasants' assertion that they were entitled to social and political improvements *because they were Christians*, Luther asserted based on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and similar New Testament texts: "Suffering, suffering, cross, cross is the Christian law—this and nothing else."⁷² Luther presented the peasants with a clear alternative: If they wished to continue with their violent course of action, they must drop the name Christian. If they wished to continue as Christians, they must relinquish their pursuit of violent rebellion.⁷³

Rejecting the peasants' call to end serfdom "because Christ has made us all free," Luther stated that this call meant "turning Christian freedom completely carnal;" it was therefore "directly against the gospel."⁷⁴ Luther elaborated:

This article wants to make all men equal and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into an external kingdom of this world, which is impossible. For the worldly kingdom cannot remain unless there is an inequality of persons: Some are free, some are imprisoned; some are lords; some are subjects, etc. As St. Paul says in Galatians 3:28, lord and servant are one *in Christ*.⁷⁵

Because both princes and peasants were in the wrong, Luther concluded his response by calling on both rulers and peasants to get together and come to a peaceful resolution.⁷⁶

But Luther's call went unheeded. As the peasants would not stop their rebellion, Luther concluded that the humility expressed in their *Twelve Articles* was nothing but a lie. He called on the rulers to act decisively:

For rebellion is not simple murder; rather, it is like a great fire that sets ablaze and devastates a country. Thus, rebellion brings with it a country filled with murder and bloodshed. It produces widows and orphans. It destroys everything, like the greatest misfortune. Therefore, let anyone

⁶⁸ AE 46:24-25.

⁶⁹ AE 46:25-26.

⁷⁰ AE 46:26.

⁷¹ SLE 16:54; see AE 46:27.

⁷² SLE 16:56; see AE 46:29.

⁷³ AE 46:36.

⁷⁴ SLE 16:66; see AE 46:39. See also SLE 16:73-74 (AE 46:51): "[B]aptism does not free body and possessions but souls. And the gospel does not make possessions common."

⁷⁵ SLE 16:66; see AE 46:39.

⁷⁶ AE 46:40.

who can do so slam them, kill them, and stab them, secretly or openly, keeping in mind that there is nothing more toxic, harmful, devilish than a rebel.⁷⁷

Marching and fighting with his followers under a rainbow banner with the inscription *verbum Domini manet in aeternum*—the Word of the Lord remains forever—Müntzer was captured and executed after one such decisive action, the battle of Frankenhausen in Thuringia in May 1525.⁷⁸

In the aftermath of the peasants' rebellion, Luther not only justified his harsh advice to the rulers on this point.⁷⁹ He also criticized the princes for engaging in what today might be called “victors' justice” by subjecting everybody who was somehow associated with the rebellion to the same harsh punishment—regardless of the circumstances of the individual case.⁸⁰ Instead of this “one-size-fits-all” approach, Luther urged the princes to practice the virtue of equity to moderate the severity of the law “according to the difference in intentions and hearts.”⁸¹ Luther also elaborated on a highly relevant topic he had already touched on in his 1523 treatise—whether, and when, Christians may engage in warfare, teaching that this was to be done only for defensive purposes among equals and not as a rebellion of subordinates against their overlords.⁸²

⁷⁷ SLE 16:72-73; see AE 46:50.

⁷⁸ AE 46:59; Tom Scott, *Thomas Müntzer: Theology and Revolution in Germany* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 147, 166.

⁷⁹ AE 46:63.

⁸⁰ AE 46:100.

⁸¹ SLE 10:499; see AE 46:102-03. The authorities engaged in a series of tactical concessions designed to separate radicals from moderates even before the end of hostilities. Overall, the political, legal, and economic situation of the peasants improved after the rebellion despite their crushing military defeat. Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 593.

⁸² AE 46:93. Luther's 1526 treatise is available in a popular edition as Martin Luther, *Christians Can Be Soldiers* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2010).

II. LIVING AS GOD’S MASKS IN A FALLEN WORLD

A. Overview

In 1523, Luther wrote his treatise on *Temporal Authority* to set forth the limits of the temporal authority of government. As explained in part one above, this question was prompted by the attempts of some rulers to confiscate copies of the New Testament. In order to determine the limits of temporal authority, Luther explained the biblical foundation for secular government and formulated the basic distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.

Before contextualizing this distinction within Luther’s theology below, it is helpful to begin by providing an overview of this distinction to see how Luther explained it in his 1523 treatise. This overview will introduce the four main themes present in this treatise that will be fleshed out below: The first theme covers what may be called the anthropological aspects of Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms. According to Luther, humans were created by God in his image, that is, to serve God according to his will. But the fall into sin resulted in the loss of the image of God and made God’s institution of government necessary. Government, as instituted by God, is to rule sinners according to the law of nature and reason. But because the fall damaged reason even in its relation to the natural law, God’s revealed law and the restoration of the image of God by faith need to be considered in this anthropological context as well.

The second theme may be called the theological aspect of Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms. This theme includes God’s work in this world in and through creation as his mask to preserve creation and save fallen humanity. It also covers God’s institution of the three holy orders, the church, marriage and the household, and the government. According to Luther, God instituted government to restrain sin. God instituted marriage to perpetuate humanity by procreation. And God instituted the church to worship him and, after the fall, proclaim the gospel concerning the redemption of humanity by the divine-human Savior, Jesus Christ. All humans are called to live as God’s masks in these three orders according to God’s law, that is, as instruments and channels of God’s goodness and love. Indeed, under these masks, Christ himself is present and invisibly rules all creation as King for the good of those who believe in him.

The third theme covers the practical aspects of governing and living together in a fallen world. According to Luther, God’s law of nature provides the unchanging standard according to which people are to live and according to which they are to be governed. This law is summarized in love. This summary provides not only purpose to the law but also moderates it. Without love as purpose and moderation of the law, the law would cause injustice and cause death and destruction in this world because of the fall into sin. Luther fleshed out the moderating role of love in this context by drawing on reason manifested in the philosophical tradition—consistent with both the Old and New Testament—to underscore the importance of prudence and equity when (as is unavoidable in a fallen world) sinners govern sinners. This tradition also provides guidance when responding to difficult situations where application of God’s just law would result in injustice, thereby putting the law’s specific commandments in conflict with the law’s summary of love and social peace. As Luther recognized, without love, prudence, and equity, it would be impossible to govern people in the state, in the family, and even in the church. Indeed, without love, it would be impossible to live with fellow sinners in peace.

The fourth theme covers the end times. According to Luther, the duration of the kingdom of the world—including government and family—is limited to this world prior to the Last Day, when Christ will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. Then the need to maintain outward peace and procreate will come to an end. Then the hidden glory of the members of Christ's kingdom of grace will become visible for all to see.

B. The Basic Distinction of the Two Kingdoms

As he had done in his 1520 treatise on Christian liberty,⁸³ Luther started his 1523 treatise on government with a seeming contradiction in Scripture. On the one hand, both the Old and New Testament teach that God had instituted the government “for the punishment of those who are evil and the protection of those who are good.”⁸⁴ On the other hand, the Sermon on the Mount and other New Testament texts seem to militate against a divine origin of the government because they commanded Christ’s followers not to resist evil, not to avenge themselves, and to love even their enemies.⁸⁵

Christ’s clear commandments therefore seemed to show that government is something his true followers should stay away from. And indeed, this is how theologians before Luther had interpreted the antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21-48) and similar texts. These theologians interpreted these commandments as “evangelical counsels” for those who withdrew from the business of this world as monks and nuns to become perfect followers of Christ, while the ordinary, imperfect Christians—they were needed to feed and defend the monks and nuns—were not required to abide by these counsels of non-violence and non-resistance.⁸⁶

Luther took a different approach to reconcile these two sets of biblical texts. His approach avoided turning what are clearly commandments imposed on all who wished to be Christians into mere advice for a few perfect Christians. Luther did so by shifting the prior distinction between perfect and imperfect Christians to a distinction between believers and unbelievers. While the former distinction was based on the types of works a Christian did—perfect/spiritual or imperfect/bodily—Luther’s distinction was based on whether a person had faith in Christ.

This critical shift reflected Luther’s rediscovery of justification by faith, as Luther explained:

[P]erfection and imperfection do not depend on works. They also do not establish a separate external group among Christians. Rather, they exist in the heart, in faith and love, so that those who believe and love more are perfect, whether they be outwardly male or female, prince or peasant, monk or layman. For love and faith do not create any sects or external differences.⁸⁷

Thus, princes, peasants, and other laypeople—in order to be perfect as God is perfect (Matt. 5:48)—do not need to abandon their jobs in this world and enter a monastery. All they needed was faith in Christ and love of their neighbor.

As Luther went on to explain, it is the presence or absence of faith in Christ that divides “Adam’s children and all people into two groups, the first belonging to the kingdom of God, the second belonging to the kingdom of the world.”⁸⁸ Luther elaborated:

⁸³ AE 31:344; see 1 Cor. 9:19; Rom. 13:8.

⁸⁴ SLE 10:379; see AE 45:87; see also Gen. 9:6; Luke 3:14; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-14.

⁸⁵ AE 45:87; see Matt. 5:39, 44; Rom. 12:17-19; 1 Peter 3:9.

⁸⁶ AE 45:82. Beginning in the 1520s, Anabaptist leaders took the position that Christians may not wield the sword at all. AE 21:3-5. This position gave rise to the pacifism of churches like the Quakers, Mennonites, and the Amish.

⁸⁷ SLE 10:380; see AE 45:88.

⁸⁸ SLE 10:380; see 45:88.

Those who belong to the kingdom of God are all who rightly believe in Christ and who are under Christ. For Christ is the King and Lord in the kingdom of God, as the second psalm in verse 6 and all of Scripture say. . . . Those who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world or under the law.⁸⁹

Because true Christians are by faith in the gospel like good trees who produce good fruit of their own accord (Matt. 7:17-18), they willingly suffer evil and have no need of government coercion to do good among themselves; the unbelievers, however, do need this coercion by the law lest they reduce the world to chaos.⁹⁰

God has therefore ordained two governments: The spiritual government which produces Christians and good people by the Holy Spirit under Christ. And the government of the world which restrains those who are unchristian and evil so that they must keep outward peace and be quiet, even if they do not appreciate it.⁹¹

Because true Christians—as distinguished from both unbelievers and mere outward Christians—will always be a minority on earth, these two governments must be carefully distinguished and must remain on earth until Christ’s return. Trying to rule the world by the gospel alone would lead to the destruction of outward peace; and trying to rule the world by the law alone would lead to nothing but hypocrisy—a mere outward conformity to the law—even if the law enforced by the temporal government were God’s own law.⁹²

But given that the true Christians are ruled by the Spirit and therefore gladly do good and suffer all evil—as commanded in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere—should they not withdraw and leave the kingdom of the world to its own devices? They should not, Luther affirmed, because they do not live for themselves but must be servants of their neighbors, even their unbelieving neighbors.⁹³

Put differently, while true Christians are able to make do without the external legal order—laws, regulations, courts, contracts, police, prisons, government agencies, legislative bodies, armed forces, etc.—and the outward peace it brings, their unbelieving neighbors cannot do without this external order:

Therefore, when you see that there are not enough hangmen, police, judges, lords, and princes, and you find yourself qualified, you should offer yourself and apply for the position, lest the necessary authority be despised and grow weak or disappear. For the world cannot and may not do without it.⁹⁴

The preceding distinctions and discussions allowed Luther to harmonize the two kingdoms by harmonizing two seemingly contradictory propositions he started with—first,

⁸⁹ SLE 10:380, 382; see AE 45:88, 90.

⁹⁰ AE 45:89-90.

⁹¹ SLE 10:382; see AE 45:91.

⁹² AE 45:91-92.

⁹³ AE 45:95-98.

⁹⁴ SLE 10:387; see AE 45:95.

government is a good institution of God to resist evil; and second, Christians may not resist evil. Luther stated:

[Y]ou satisfy externally and internally God's kingdom and the kingdom of the world at the same time. You simultaneously *put up with* evil and injustice and *punish* evil and injustice. You simultaneously *do not resist* evil and *resist* it. In God's kingdom, you consider yourself and what is yours. In the kingdom of the world, you consider the neighbor and what is his. You follow the gospel when it comes to yourself and what is yours, putting up with injustice as a true Christian. When it comes to the neighbor and what is his, you follow love, not putting up with any injustice regarding your neighbor.⁹⁵

Having thus distinguished the two kingdoms, Luther was able to tackle the concrete question his treatise on temporal authority set out to answer: How far does the authority of the kingdom of the world stretch?⁹⁶ As follows from the distinction of the two kingdoms, these two governments “have two kinds of law”:

Worldly government has laws which reach no further body and possessions and what is external on earth. For God cannot and will not let anybody govern the soul but himself. Therefore, when worldly authority dares to make laws for the soul, it interferes with God's government and only misleads and destroys the souls. . . .

When a human law is imposed upon the soul, so that it should believe this or that, as the human lawgiver may prescribe, God's word is certainly not there. But if God's word is not there, it is uncertain whether this is what God wants. For one cannot be certain that he is pleased by what he has not commanded. In fact, one is certain that it does not please God because he wants our faith to be grounded simply and plainly on his divine word alone.⁹⁷

Thus, the kingdom of the world (governing the physical life and property of humans in this earthly life) may be ruled by human laws. In fact, Luther taught it should be ruled by reason that prudently and equitably responds to the needs of individual situations without being tied to inflexible general rules.⁹⁸ By contrast, the kingdom of God (governing the human soul) may not be ruled by anything but the God's word alone. This distinction cuts not only against intrusions by the government. It also bars church authorities from displacing God's word by the authority of the church, preeminent theologians, reason, or church councils.⁹⁹

Attempting to rule the soul in the spiritual kingdom of God by human laws—whether imposed by tyrannical governments or by corrupt church authorities—would mean to attempt to force people to believe in human authorities by human powers. To the extent this is attempted, Luther affirmed that Christians must resist and obey God more than men (Acts 5:29).¹⁰⁰

Moreover, Luther recognized that it is simply impossible to force people to believe based on human authority because “faith is a free act, . . . a divine work in the spirit . . . Hence arises

⁹⁵ SLE 10:387; see AE 45:96.

⁹⁶ AE 45:104.

⁹⁷ SLE 10:395-96; see AE 45:105.

⁹⁸ AE 45:118-20.

⁹⁹ AE 45:106.

¹⁰⁰ AE 45:111.

the common saying, found also in Augustine, ‘No one can or should be forced to believe.’”¹⁰¹ Accordingly, trying to oppose false teachings and heresies “without God’s word by brute force” will only strengthen the heretics in their false beliefs.¹⁰² Dealing with heretics is therefore a task entrusted to bishops, not princes.¹⁰³ As noted, merely applying legal coercion leads to hypocrisy, not the kind of genuine faith in the gospel by which alone sinners enter the kingdom of Christ.¹⁰⁴

This, then, is Luther’s basic distinction between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. The following pages will add important details to this basic distinction and connect it with relevant aspects of Luther’s theology, including his doctrine of creation, his doctrine of human vocations as masks of God, his teachings on love and equity, and even his teachings on the return of Christ. In the process, the complex interplay between these two kingdoms will become clear and provide a reliable framework for Christians living in this fallen world.

¹⁰¹ SLE 10:398; see AE 45:108.

¹⁰² SLE 10:403; see AE 45:114.

¹⁰³ AE 45:114.

¹⁰⁴ AE 45:92.

C. Creation, Fall, Natural Law, Reason, and Faith

In his 1523 treatise, Luther articulated the key reason for God’s establishment of the kingdom of the world as follows: [S]ince no one is by nature a Christian or good, but all are sinners and evil, God restrains them by the law, so that they may not outwardly carry out their wickedness by acting according to their wantonness.”¹⁰⁵ At the same time, Luther concluded this treatise by recommending that princes “should keep written laws subject to reason, from which they originally welled forth as from the spring of law.”¹⁰⁶ It is therefore necessary to outline Luther’s teachings on creation, fall, and redemption, and discuss the impact of these events on human nature and human reason.

This discussion will shed light on the anthropological aspects of government by discussing the creation and fall of humanity into sin to show why government is necessary. It will also address the role reason and natural law, as well as faith and revelation, play in the administration of government after the fall. In the process, an outline of the biblical understanding of freedom will emerge.

1. The Image of God in Creation, Fall, and Redemption

In the beginning, God created humans in his image, as male and female (Gen. 1:1, 26-27; Matt. 19:4).¹⁰⁷ God did so “out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy.”¹⁰⁸ God created humans according to a special plan and purpose—for a better, spiritual life beyond the physical life humans share with the animals.¹⁰⁹ Luther understood the image of God to mean that Adam “not only knew God and believed that he was kind, but that he also led a life that was wholly godly.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, Adam’s creation in the “image of God” means that reason, laws, and the arts were implanted in the human heart from the beginning as beautiful creatures of God.¹¹¹

Luther was particularly critical of any interpretation of the image of God that sought to insert the notion of freedom in human nature, especially the freedom of choice. Luther therefore rejected interpretations claiming that humanity’s natural endowments (such as reason and will) remained unimpaired even after the fall and that only God’s superadded grace was lost.¹¹² In Luther’s judgment, this gave rise to “the dangerous opinion . . . that God governs humans by

¹⁰⁵ SLE 10:382; see AE 45:90.

¹⁰⁶ SLE 10:417; see AE 45:129.

¹⁰⁷ SLE 1:71 (AE 1:58): “[T]he Father does not make a different human from the one the Son makes. And the Son does not make a different human from the one the Holy Spirit makes. Rather, the same one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the one Creator and Maker of this very work.” See AE 34:224. The outward works of the Trinity are therefore undivided, as Luther affirmed with Augustine. AE 15:302. But—reflective of the personal distinctions within the triune Godhead—these undivided outward works are not indistinct, i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are involved in the single act of creation in different ways (Ps. 33:6; John 1:3). The ancient Christian creeds therefore correctly attribute the work of creation to the Father because he creates and sustains the world by the Son and the Spirit. AE 15:309-10.

¹⁰⁸ SC II, 2; see AE 33:243.

¹⁰⁹ AE 1:56-59.

¹¹⁰ SLE 1:76; see AE 1:62-63; see also AE 34:194.

¹¹¹ WA 40.3:222.

¹¹² AE 1:61, 141-42, 166. See SA III, I, 3-7 where Luther listed several ways in which scholastic theologians minimized the effect of the fall on the natural powers and will of humans.

leaving them to themselves, so that they may do and leave undone what their own mind and will causes them to do.”¹¹³

Instigated by the devil, Adam and Eve fell into sin when they inquired into God’s hidden majesty apart from the commandment concerning the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17; Gen. 3).¹¹⁴ The fruit of this tree was therefore not poisonous in itself; rather, Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience to God’s command made it so.¹¹⁵ Thus, not content with being created in the image of God, Adam and Eve attempted to become the image of God, Christ (Col. 1:15-16), but ended up becoming a devil.¹¹⁶

The effects of the fall into sin were “horrible and dreadful” because “through it we have lost the sanity of reason, gloriously and beautifully enlightened, and a will, aligned with God’s word and will,” as well as “the glory of our bodies.”¹¹⁷ This darkened reason can no longer be called sound because it hates God; and the fallen will now “resists God’s will and does not will to obey God.”¹¹⁸ Instead, the fallen will desires to be god instead of the one true God, having an independent knowledge of good and evil.¹¹⁹

This sin is the greatest and gravest, from which all other sins. Indeed, there is no sin without this one, as it says in Sirach 10:[12-13]: “The origin of pride is falling away from God and the heart’s turning away from God. Pride is the cause of all sins.”¹²⁰

The traditional theological term Luther used for Adam’s original state of innocence is “original righteousness.”¹²¹ This original righteousness—believing God, knowing God, loving God, etc.—was not an *external* adornment of Adam; it was part of his created nature.¹²² Similarly, the opposite summary term, “original sin,” also does not describe something extraneous to the natural endowments of human beings. It instead denotes the damage to human nature that was caused by the fall and has been naturally propagated ever since:

Properly understood, original sin is the fall of the entire human nature. By it, first, reason is darkened so that we are no longer able to perceive and understand God, his will, or his works. Moreover, the will is strangely deranged and weakened so that we do not trust the goodness and mercy of God or fear God. Instead, we entertain a false sense of security, let go of God’s word and will, and follow lust and the stirrings of the flesh. Similarly, our conscience is no longer quiet and

¹¹³ SLE 1:74; see AE 1:61; see also WA 42:45: “Ita nata est hinc periculosa sententia, qua pronuntiat Deum ita gubernare homines, ut eos proprio motu sinat agere.”

¹¹⁴ AE 1:224; AE 5:44, 49-50; AE 22:137-38; AE 24:255-56. As Luther explained, God intended Adam to obey the commandment regarding this particular tree to show his inner obedience to God by an outward act of worship (AE 1:94-95).

¹¹⁵ AE 1:95-96, 226-27. The tree of life similarly had its potency not in itself but due to God’s word attached to it.

¹¹⁶ AE 1:224; AE 69:230.

¹¹⁷ SLE 1:172; see AE 1:141.

¹¹⁸ SLE 1:175; see AE 1:143.

¹¹⁹ AE 69:230-31.

¹²⁰ SLE 8:930; see AE 69:231. Commenting on Ex. 33:18-20, Luther observed that man’s inborn “prying [into God’s secret decisions and mysteries apart from his word] is original sin itself, by which we are driven and incited to seek a way to God through natural speculation.” SLE 2:177; see AE 5:44. By their fallen nature, humans are therefore drawn to what Luther called the hidden God, that is, the God who has not revealed himself in his word.

¹²¹ SLE 1:138; see AE 1:113.

¹²² AE 1:164-65.

content but despairs. It seeks and follows unbecoming and forbidden means and help when it thinks of God's judgment.¹²³

In fact, "just as leprosy infects the whole body, so human will and reason have become injured and weakened by sin. As a result, they not only no longer love God but also flee from him, are hostile to him, and would rather be and live without God."¹²⁴ In fact, reason cannot grasp the depth of original sin's corruption, so that the latter must be believed based on the biblical revelation of God's law.¹²⁵ Thus, as it was natural for Adam to love God and God's will before the fall, so it became natural for Adam and his children to hate God and his will after the fall.¹²⁶ Because of the fall, then, Adam passes on to all his natural offspring his *own* likeness and image, not the image of God (Gen. 5:3).¹²⁷

The gospel of the true knowledge of the one true God in the Son effects the restoration of the image of God in those who believe (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24).¹²⁸ The image of God is the "form of Christ" (Gal. 4:19).¹²⁹ Accordingly, the gospel effects a double righteousness in those who believe the gospel: First, faith makes Christ's righteousness our own for justification and salvation. Second, out of this imputed righteousness begins to emerge our sanctification, that is, "another righteousness, namely, a new image, in which we—having been instructed by the Word—make an effort to obey God by the help of the Holy Spirit."¹³⁰

In anthropological disputation, Luther summarized the theological definition of humanity in creation, fall, and redemption as follows:

Out of the fulness of wisdom, theology [in contrast to philosophy's incomplete definition] defines humans completely and perfectly, namely, that they are creatures of God consisting of body and a living soul. In the beginning, they were created according to the image of God without sin, so that they might procreate, rule over the created things, and be immortal. After the fall of Adam, however, humans are subject to the power of the devil, sin, and death—a twofold evil which is insurmountable for their own powers and infinite. From this evil, they cannot be freed by anybody but Jesus Christ, the Son of God (if they believe in him), thus becoming partakers of eternal life.¹³¹

¹²³ SLE 1:139; see AE 1:114

¹²⁴ SLE 1:202; see AE 1:165; see also AE 34:185-86.

¹²⁵ SA III, I, 3; III, II, 4.

¹²⁶ SLE 18:1718 (AE 33:65): "[W]hile we are under the god of this world, . . . we are held captive by his will, . . . so that we will only what he wills . . . And [what he wills] we do willingly and gladly, according to the nature of the will. For if our will were coerced, it would no longer be a will but a coercion, a non-will, so to speak."

¹²⁷ AE 1:339-40.

¹²⁸ AE 1:64-65.

¹²⁹ AE 1:340; AE 26:430-31, 441-42.

¹³⁰ SLE 1:78; see AE 1:64; see also AE 31:298-300. In AE 26:4-12, Luther summarized "our theology" by contrasting the passive/heavenly Christian righteousness by faith with the active/earthly political righteousness, the ceremonial righteousness, and the (moral) righteousness of the Decalogue where the latter is the fruit of the righteousness of faith: "In this manner, the restoration of this image of the new creation begins in this life by the gospel, but it will not be completed in this life. But when it is completed in the kingdom of God, our will will be truly free and good, our reason truly enlightened, and our memory strong and persistent." SLE 1:78-79; see AE 1:65. See also SLE 18:1718-19 (AE 33:65): "[T]hrough the Holy Spirit, we are again his slaves and captives (though this is a royal freedom), so that we will and gladly do what he wills."

¹³¹ SLE 19:1464-65; see AE 34:138. Relatedly, Luther stated in the prefatory remarks to his lecture of Psalm 51: "[T]he proper subject of theology is the human being, who is guilty of sin and lost, and God who justifies and who is

In sum, humans are not autonomous beings of endless possibilities that emerged during a long process of chance evolution. Humans are also not able to perfect themselves based on their own experiences and choices in an open-ended process of development. Rather, humans are creatures of the one true God, created by God in his image, that is, as creatures who knew, loved, and served God perfectly. Seduced by the devil, however, humanity ever since Adam and Eve sought to find its own way to God apart from God's word. As a result, all humans are fallen. The fall caused the loss of that image and made it impossible for humans to know the one true God. In fact, the fall causes humans to look for God where God does not wish to be found, that is, apart from God's word, in his hidden, consuming majesty. The fall also made it impossible for human beings to know themselves fully. And the fall even damaged the "natural" abilities of humans, including their reason and will. But the fall did not release humans from being God's creatures, created by and for the one true God. In his mercy, God sent his Son to redeem humanity and restore in humans the image of God of true knowledge of God and a life for God.

2. Reason and the Natural Law

a) Fallen Reason is Divine yet Requires God's Word to Avoid Anarchy and Tyranny

Even after the fall, reason remained "something divine," "the inventor and ruler of all the arts, medicine, jurisprudence, and of whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory, which humans possess in this life."¹³² Thus, reason "is a sun and a kind of divinity," but both before and after the fall, reason remains limited by God's instituting command in Gen. 1:28 "to rule [the earth, birds, fish, and cattle] in this life."¹³³ And yet, as just discussed, the fall profoundly damaged reason.

To capture the extent of this damage, Luther used the terminology of traditional theology: Fallen reason has some knowledge of a human being's *material cause* (that out of which something is created, i.e., the human body) and a human being's *formal cause* (that which makes a thing what it is, i.e., the human soul or reason), but it is blind to the *efficient cause* (that which

the Savior of this sinful human being. Whatever else is sought or discussed in theology outside of this subject is error and poison. For it is the goal of all Scripture to commend God's goodness who, by his Son, restores to righteousness and life the nature that has fallen into sin and damnation." SLE 5:484; see AE 12:311. See also SLE 5:483 (AE 12:310): "[Philosophy] describes humans as rational living beings etc. . . . [A] lawyer speaks of humans insofar as they are owners and masters of their possessions. A physician speaks of humans insofar as they are healthy or sick. But a theologian deals with humans who are sinners. In theology, this is the essence of humans. And the theologian is about making humans realize their nature is corrupted by sin."

¹³² SLE 19:1462-63; see AE 34:137. See also SLE 1:175 (AE 1:143), where Luther noted that, even though fallen reason hates God, his will, and his word, it nonetheless can be said with Aristotle that reason "always urges and leads to the best" and the "cause of all virtues" in the political and civil matters of this life.

¹³³ SLE 19:1463; see AE 34:137. Gerhard Ebeling, *Disputatio de homine II* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1982), p. 279, calls Gen. 1:28 the "word of institution" that "first constitutes reason in its true power," thereby putting reason in the proper perspective by distinguishing its reign from God's reign.

creates a thing) and the *final cause* (the purpose and goal of that creation) of all human beings and the creation as a whole.¹³⁴ By contrast,

true wisdom is in Holy Scripture and the word of God. For it teaches not only concerning the matter and form of the entire creation but also shows the beginning and end of all things—its Creator and its purpose. And if we do not know these two causes, our wisdom is not much better than that of irrational animals. They too can hear and see but know nothing about the beginning and the end.¹³⁵

Accordingly, while theology teaches that the efficient cause of human beings is God, “philosophy knows the efficient cause least of all.”¹³⁶ And where theology teaches that the final cause of human beings is to glorify God and serve the neighbor, philosophy “states no final cause other than the peace of this life.”¹³⁷ And, because of the fall, even the formal cause—right reason itself—“is lacking. For where God is not known, there is no right will toward God.”¹³⁸ After all, “all wisdom wells up and flows from the First Commandment as its main wellspring. Indeed, this commandment is the true sun by which all the sages see what they see.”¹³⁹

Applying these general insights regarding the limitations of fallen reason to the administration of the government and the household, Luther acknowledged that reason knows the “material” and “formal” causes of political government and the household—houses, cities, and just laws.¹⁴⁰ But reason errs regarding the most important causes—the efficient and the final causes that explain where the household and the civil government came from (as well as how they are preserved) and what their purposes are.¹⁴¹

Reason posits wise leaders as originators and preservers of civil government and the home. Reason also concludes that temporal peace, honor, and prosperity are the final cause—or purpose—of the government and the home.¹⁴² This ignorance of God’s gracious giving as the true cause of these benefits is a direct result of original sin that wants to ascribe all these gifts to human powers—and accordingly rule all these gifts according to human wisdom—as if reason

¹³⁴ AE 34:137. The four causes of traditional theology—final, efficient, material, and formal causes—are found in Aristotle, e.g., *Posterior Analytics* I, 2. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, used this scheme to analyze God’s relationship to creation: He is the efficient cause who both creates the “raw material” and forms it into individual species according to the ideas (or forms) in his intellect, and he does so for himself as the final cause. *Summa Theologica* I, qq. 15, 44. Luther studied the *Posterior Analytics* and other writings by Aristotle to obtain his philosophical bachelor’s degree at Erfurt University in 1502. By the time Luther had earned his philosophical master’s degree in 1504, he had studied Aristotle’s other main writings, including the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Economics*, the *Metaphysics*, and the *Politics*. In 1508/09, Luther lectured on the *Nicomachean Ethics* at Wittenberg University. Brecht, *Martin Luther 1*, p. 32-34, 92.

¹³⁵ SLE 1:152; see AE 1:125.

¹³⁶ SLE 19:1464; see AE 34:137. In AE 1:124, Luther summarized Aristotle’s confused ideas about the origin of humankind that ultimately required Aristotle to maintain that humankind is eternal.

¹³⁷ SLE 19:1464; see AE 34:137. See AE 2:125-26 where virtues of the heathen are distinguished from Christian virtues, the former serving their own glory, the latter serving God and neighbor. According to AE 29:57, the conversion of the nations is the final cause of the good works of the Christians per Matt. 5:16.

¹³⁸ SLE 1:583; see AE 2:126.

¹³⁹ SLE 14:75-76; see AE 35:344; see also AE 51:140.

¹⁴⁰ WA 40.3:202-04, 220-22.

¹⁴¹ WA 40.3:203.

¹⁴² WA 40.3:203-05.

were God himself (Gen. 3:5).¹⁴³ Not being content with its divinely appointed task—ruling what is below it, Gen. 1:28—fallen reason arrogantly invades God’s government, glory, and majesty that are far above human wisdom.¹⁴⁴ And even if fallen reason recognizes God as the giver of government and the family, it conceives of God as a shipbuilder who, after completing the ship, hands it over to humans as the ship’s captains and who therefore does not remain involved in the preservation and steering of the ship.¹⁴⁵

Scripture, however, teaches that God is the efficient cause of both the government and the house: He creates and preserves government and the house, while human beings are only God’s tools and instruments in this process (Psalm 127:1-2).¹⁴⁶ And God creates and preserves his institutions freely, not because of this or that holy work humans offer to him out of superstition.¹⁴⁷ Thus, humans are responsible only for carrying out their God-given duty, not for the ultimate success of their plans and efforts.¹⁴⁸

This biblical teaching is no excuse for laziness or carelessness in the discharge of one’s daily duties in the house or government—quite to the contrary. While faith in the Creator rests in this comfort and gratefully acknowledges and receives God’s good gifts, the bodily works flowing from this faith diligently do what they can to preserve house and government in service of the neighbor.¹⁴⁹ Thus, working and studying hard is commendable, but these activities must be distinguished from fallen reason’s arrogance that ascribes to itself God’s majesty—concretely, God’s ability to make all plans come true—and sees itself as the ultimate creator and ruler over this world, not merely as a secondary cause and God’s tool.¹⁵⁰ Even in those who believe in the Creator, the Holy Spirit must daily fight against this inborn arrogance rising in their hearts in the form of worries (Matt. 6:25-34) by reminding those who believe that they are but God’s instruments and that God is the one who grants success in all things as the efficient cause of all creation.¹⁵¹

Scripture also teaches God’s glory—not humanity’s peace and welfare—as the final cause of government and the family.¹⁵² Concretely, God is glorified when faith in prayer acknowledges God—not our own efforts, wisdom, and plans—as the ultimate Giver of all good things. The First and Second Commandments require this kind of faith and this kind of prayer. Luther expressed this profound concept in this simple model prayer: “I am only the instrument; it is therefore his gift, not my work. I am to work the field. I can be the instrument. But that fruits grow—that is God’s gift, not my labor.”¹⁵³

¹⁴³ WA 40.3:227, 238. See LC I, 10: “[W]hoever trusts and boasts that he possesses great skill, prudence, power, favor, friendship, and honor has also a god, but not this true and only God.”

¹⁴⁴ WA 40.3:242-45.

¹⁴⁵ WA 40.3:232.

¹⁴⁶ WA 40.3:210-11. Luther’s complete 1533 lecture on Ps. 127 is available online in an English under the title *Unless the Lord Builds the House: Martin Luther’s 1533 Lecture on Psalm 127*, tr. Holger Sonntag (Olympia, WA: 2026).

¹⁴⁷ WA 40.3:235-36.

¹⁴⁸ WA 40.3:210-11.

¹⁴⁹ WA 40.3:233-35, 253-54.

¹⁵⁰ WA 40.3:236-38, 243-46.

¹⁵¹ WA 40.3:237.

¹⁵² WA 40.3:211.

¹⁵³ WA 40.3:211, 236-37; LC I, 10, 26, 64, 70-75.

Where faith in God as the origin and purpose of government and the home is lacking—as it must be in a purely rational approach to government and household management (economy)—the result will be either anarchy or tyranny: When reason experiences that things do not go as planned in government or the home, reason gives up on governing altogether and lets the people do as they please, leading to anarchy in the home or in the state.¹⁵⁴ Or reason digs in and will not tolerate even the slightest compromise seeking to modify its ideas, plans, and rules, leading to tyranny in the home or in the state.¹⁵⁵ Either alternative will destroy both government and the home as well as those who try to run either the home or the government this way.¹⁵⁶

This destruction happens because blind reason approaches the “celestial and supranatural” task of governing other men with “a natural mindset,” that is, as an arrogant god who seeks to control the outcome, not as a humble tool that prayerfully does its duty while patiently commending success and failure to the one true God’s gracious hands.¹⁵⁷ By arrogantly placing itself into God’s place and defining the purposes of government as strictly inner-worldly (“my pleasure, my glory, my peace, etc.”), reason abuses its innate (and, in fact, divine) ability to devise just laws and other arts, thereby grievously offending God.¹⁵⁸ Thus, fallen reason’s ignorance about the efficient and final causes is responsible for reason’s inexorable tendency to autonomy—it desires to rule the world outright, instead of simply doing what is possible¹⁵⁹ by administering it for and under God as his instrument.

Thus, a well-run government—one that does what is possible, while avoiding anarchy and tyranny—is nothing to be taken for granted, or to be taken as such an insignificant matter that anyone could run government well on their own.¹⁶⁰ The fact that even the best laid plans, and perfectly just laws, can and do fail to produce desired results, is no reason to forego careful planning, or to stop trying to enact laws approximating God’s law as much as possible.¹⁶¹ Rather, it is reason to despair of the quest to be like God, which includes the arrogant belief that our well-laid plans and our just laws certainly bring about the desired inner-worldly results because of the innate quality of our plans and laws, and not solely because of the gracious blessing God must add to our efforts.¹⁶²

In addition to the inherent limitations in fallen reason’s reach that requires it to be instructed by theology about the weightiest of aspects of house and government—their wherefrom and whereto—there is also the limitation that God has not distributed reason evenly in humanity.¹⁶³ Luther saw this uneven distribution as a good thing: Equal distribution of reason would lead to “turmoil and desolation” because then no one could rule over others.¹⁶⁴ Thus,

¹⁵⁴ WA 40.3:212-13.

¹⁵⁵ WA 40.3:212-13; AE 7:192.

¹⁵⁶ WA 40.3:216: “What is this madness to govern in a way that either your family or you are destroyed?”

¹⁵⁷ WA 40.3:213-16.

¹⁵⁸ WA 40.3:222-23.

¹⁵⁹ AE 7:192-93. There, Luther cites the example of Joseph in Egypt and John Staupitz for the proper administration of the affairs of this world that, while calling upon God, does what it can without trying to force success out of God’s hand.

¹⁶⁰ AE 13:147-48, 151-52.

¹⁶¹ AE 13:150.

¹⁶² AE 13:150-51.

¹⁶³ AE 13:161, 200.

¹⁶⁴ AE 13:161.

reason is actually “a rare thing among the children of humans,” and many who boast of it are actually “complete and great natural fools”¹⁶⁵ It is therefore “the devil and the plague in the world” that everybody, although “unequal to one another in all things—such as body, strength, height, beauty, possessions, appearance, color, etc.—desires to be equal to everybody else in wisdom and fortune, where we are most unequal to each other. Indeed, what is even worse, everybody wants to be superior to others in these matters.”¹⁶⁶

In sum, even fallen reason remains a divine gift that is the source of just laws and countless other arts and blessings for life in this world. God bestows the gift of reason to rule over the things in this world according to God’s will. However, fallen reason is not evenly distributed in humanity. Moreover, fallen reason does not recognize itself as God’s creature with a divine purpose. It must set up itself in god-like autonomy—that is, as following its own rules—instead of in service to God. Fallen reason recognizes neither God as the origin nor his glory and the benefit of the neighbor as the purposes of the government and household management. Instead, fallen reason arrogantly takes these divine institutions as products of its own ingenuity, to shape and rule them as it sees fit for purely inner-worldly, even selfish, ends and purposes.

Fallen reason therefore needs to be enlightened by faith in what God’s word teaches concerning the two most important aspects of government and the household, i.e., their divine origin and purpose. Faith not only limits reason to its proper place of creaturely service under God’s will. Faith—itself always at rest in God’s goodness—also allows reason to place its humble efforts into the hands of God as the gracious Giver of success in worldly affairs. Properly enlightened reason will therefore do what is possible while steering clear of the destructive alternative of anarchy and tyranny.

b) The Natural Law Is Written in the Human Heart, but Fallen Humans Cannot Fully and Reliably Decipher It

Luther’s teaching on the natural law written on the human heart (Rom. 2:15) is consistent with the divine yet limited power of reason just discussed. Luther recognized reason’s innate knowledge of moral laws and even of God: Even after the fall, Adam, Abraham and the other fathers in the Old Testament had the law written by God on their heart even before the Ten Commandments were revealed from heaven on Mt. Sinai.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, according to Rom. 1:19-20,

it is apparent to the Gentiles that there is a God; and they know God from the works of his creation so that they have no excuse. All the Gentiles also know that murder, adultery, theft, cursing, lying, deceiving, and blaspheming are not right. They were not so crazy as to deny that there is a God

¹⁶⁵ SLE 5:817; see AE 13:161.

¹⁶⁶ SLE 5:819; see AE 13:163. D. C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), p. 230, notes that, according to Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), “the phenomenon of the tyranny of the majority comes about as a result of ‘the theory of equality applied to brains.’”

¹⁶⁷ AE 73:103, 193-94.

who punishes such vices. Likewise, they were able to find in their reason that the definite orbits of the heavens could not have their permanence and existence without a Ruler.¹⁶⁸

“For they have this report of God’s law and of the Ten Commandments written in their hearts by nature.”¹⁶⁹ This is why their writings, along with Moses and reason, serve as our “teachers dealing with matters that are useful in this temporal life.”¹⁷⁰ But as reason is not distributed evenly among all, so knowledge of the natural law is not distributed evenly either, although “everyone likes to think that the natural law is found in his head.”¹⁷¹

Indeed, the revelation of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai had become necessary because people had largely forgotten the contents of the natural law regarding God and neighbor.¹⁷² But even though Moses merely re-published what was by nature in the hearts of all people, the Ten Commandments serve the critical purpose of providing God’s objective standard for fallen reason’s reasonableness because “the natural laws have nowhere been written down in such a fine and orderly way as in Moses.”¹⁷³

Moreover, Christ teaches “the natural law . . . in Matt. 7:12, ‘Whatever you want the people do to you, so do to them.’”¹⁷⁴ Indeed, the fact that Christ teaches the natural law in the form of the Golden Rule sheds light on the Ten Commandments themselves, so that even the negative prohibitions in the latter that protect the neighbor and what is his—e.g., do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony against your neighbor—include the command to engage in affirmative conduct that benefits the neighbor by improving everything that is his.¹⁷⁵ Accordingly, humans commonly understand that, as Christ explained in the parable

¹⁶⁸ SLE 7:1703; see AE 22:149; see also AE 40:96-97; AE 73:140, 194; AE 78:4; LC I, 17.

¹⁶⁹ SLE 7:1704; see AE 22:150.

¹⁷⁰ SLE 7:1709; see AE 22:155; see also SLE 5:858 (AE 13:199): “Therefore, he who wants to study and become wise in matters of secular government, let him read the books and writings of the Gentiles. They have painted a truly beautiful and rich picture of this subject, using both words and images, by teaching and presenting examples. The ancient imperial laws were also derived from these works.”

¹⁷¹ SLE 5:816; see AE 13:160-61.

¹⁷² AE 73:141, 199; AE 79:172.

¹⁷³ SLE 20:153; see AE 40:98; see also AE 35:172-73; AE 73:140-41, 156. At the same time, however, the natural law must be distinguished from the actual text of the Ten Commandments, as the latter also contains ceremonial provisions regarding images and the Sabbath that do not belong to the moral law and that are therefore not binding on anyone outside their Old Testament context. AE 35:165; AE 40:97-98; LC I, 80-82.

¹⁷⁴ SLE 10:506; see AE 46:111; see also AE 27:354-55, where Luther equated the natural law, the Golden Rule, and the command to love the neighbor as oneself stated in Matt. 22:39, Rom. 13:9, and Gal. 5:14. Luther’s identification of the law of nature and the Golden Rule is part of a long tradition in Christian theology, as shown in Olivier du Roy, “The Golden Rule as the Law of Nature, from Origen to Martin Luther,” in Jacob Neusner & Bruce Chilton (eds.), *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 88-98.

¹⁷⁵ For example, in LC I, 285-86, Luther commented on the Eighth Commandment: “No one shall harm his neighbor, whether friend or foe, with his tongue. No one shall speak evil of him, whether truly or falsely, unless it is done with proper authority or for his improvement. A person should use his tongue to speak only good of everyone, to cover his neighbor’s sins and infirmities, to overlook them, and to cloak and veil them with his own honor,” *because of the Golden Rule*. See also LC I, 189; SC I, 10 (Fifth); LC I, 202-05 (Sixth); LC I, 233; SC I, 14 (Seventh); SC I, 16 (Eighth). In SLE 10:433-34 (AE 46:230), Luther stated accordingly: “[E]ven natural law says: He who is able to prevent harm and does not do so is guilty of the harm, as someone who certainly had the wish and will to do it and would have done it himself, if he had had cause and opportunity to do it.”

of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), “neighbors are those who belong together before God, where one needs help and the other is able to help.”¹⁷⁶

Fallen reason’s knowledge of God and his moral law is not stable because human experience gets in reason’s way. Put differently, “when the people see and realize in the world that the worse the rogue, the greater his fortune, they think there is no God who punishes sin. As a result, they follow the crowd that lives in sin.”¹⁷⁷ At the same time, “those who wanted to be the most pious” think that keeping the Second Table of the Ten Commandments—commandments four through ten—results in their salvation.¹⁷⁸ In fact, if *fallen* reason is followed consistently, it *naturally* becomes God’s enemy and persecutes his word.¹⁷⁹

This is precisely how the corruption of human reason manifests itself: As noted, reason’s inborn knowledge of the moral law concerning the neighbor can be summarized by the Ten Commandments, the command to love the neighbor, and in the Golden Rule.¹⁸⁰ Yet fallen reason is so blinded by the devil “that it does not understand this inborn knowledge” but despises it, embracing childish ceremonies and ostentatious works instead of the true good works taught by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule.¹⁸¹ Moreover, fallen reason does not know that to be approved by God, fulfilling the dictates of reason is not enough—one must instead “get under the grace and truth of the Son,” revealed only in the gospel beginning with Gen. 3:15.¹⁸² Thus, fallen reason not only fails to grasp the gospel. It also fails to grasp the law. Even though the law is written in the human heart by nature, fallen reason prefers its self-chosen works over doing one’s humble duty in one’s calling.¹⁸³

Being “under” the gospel happens only after humans are convicted of their sins by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the moral law revealed in Scripture.¹⁸⁴ This operation continues even in the Christians for as long as they live in this world.¹⁸⁵ Yet because the Christians are given not only the grace of forgiveness but also the Holy Spirit as a gift through the gospel, they begin to trust in God above all things, do battle against the sin that remains in them, and begin to fulfill the moral law, not by mere outward coercion by means of fear of punishment or desire of rewards, but out of an inward willingness.¹⁸⁶ But even the Christians,

¹⁷⁶ SLE 11:1566; see AE 79:61. Considering humanity’s great need for salvation, Christ himself became such a Samaritan neighbor to all by dying on the cross and having the gospel preached to all. AE 79:61-62.

¹⁷⁷ SLE 7:1705; see AE 22:152. In LC I, 42, Luther affirmed that, while experience seems to suggest that those who trust mammon live a life of abundance and that those who trust in the one true God have nothing, God’s warnings regarding the violation of his law (Ex. 20:5) must be *believed*, because “they do not lie or deceive, but must come true.” Indeed, studying human history in light of God’s word confirms that those who focus all their energy on accumulating wealth do not reap any lasting benefits. LC I, 43-46.

¹⁷⁸ SLE 7:1705; see AE 22:152.

¹⁷⁹ AE 13:167-68; see Ps. 2:1.

¹⁸⁰ AE 27:53, 57-58.

¹⁸¹ SLE 9:664; see AE 27:53; see also AE 21:235; AE 76:280-82. In LC I, 311-18, Luther compared the common, easily overlooked good works God commands in the Ten Commandments—the “true fountain and channel” of all good works—with the pompous religious ceremonies devised by humans that “cause people to open their eyes and ears wide.” See AE 73:199.

¹⁸² SLE 7:1710; see AE 22:154, 156.

¹⁸³ AE 27:56-57.

¹⁸⁴ AE 73:76-77, 90-93, 112, 160.

¹⁸⁵ AE 73:168-76.

¹⁸⁶ AE 41:114; AE 73:86, 125-27; AE 75:385-86; see Rom. 8:3.

because their renewal in this life is not perfect as they battle against their sinful nature, must rely on the written word of God, even the written commandments of God, to know God's will, lest they go astray in faith and life.¹⁸⁷ In any event, the Ten Commandments—in their eternal substance, not as condemning law—will remain with and in the Christians even in the life to come where they will wholeheartedly and joyfully fulfill God's moral law like the angels.¹⁸⁸

In sum, God's moral law—summarized in the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule—is written on the minds of all people. All know by nature that there is one God and how he requires humans to live. However, sin has darkened and distorted rational human knowledge of God and his moral law. Fallen humans therefore will often simply follow what the successful people of the world do and therefore govern his life by experience—by what seems to work. At other times, fallen reason will conjure up special works of holiness and ultimately childish ceremonies that also do not serve the neighbor but confer a special aura of holiness on those who engage in them. The revealed moral law serves the critical purpose of revealing fallen reason's unreasonableness and keeping it in check. The gospel, however, liberates not only from the

¹⁸⁷ AE 34:112-13. In contrast to Luther's constant emphasis on Scripture as the sole norm for Christian faith and life, modernist theologians seek to construct what amounts to a spiritualist norm for the Christian life. For instance, Paul Althaus, *Grundriß der Ethik*, 2nd, newly rev. ed. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1953), p. 38-41, claims that Christian ethics regards neither the life of Christ "as a legalistic example" nor his commandments "as generally applicable legalistic prescriptions." To do so in "blind external obedience" would be unworthy of "the freedom of the children of God." Instead, it is the Holy Spirit who "teaches us God's will for us" in freedom, immediacy, and newness, albeit based on the example and words of the "historical Jesus." Similarly, the apostles, according to Althaus, are examples of recognizing the Spirit's guidance in the conscience, but not "mediators of a new law." In the context, Althaus quotes Luther's thesis that those who "have and keep Christ" also have the Holy Spirit and "will make new decalogues," as St. Paul, St. Peter, and Christ himself did (SLE 19:1441; see AE 34:112). But Althaus omits the critical limitations Luther imposed: Because the Christians are "unequal in spirit" and have "the flesh warring against the spirit" within them, they are, unlike the apostles, not "infallible teachers" of the church and must therefore always "remain with the certain commandments and writings of the apostles, lest the church be divided" (SLE 19:1442; see AE 34:113). This omission is symptomatic of a fundamental hermeneutical shift precipitated by the Enlightenment, discussed further in part III below: Luther taught that the Spirit uses the clear passages of Scripture to interpret its less clear passages to *assert* what Christians ought to believe and do. For example, the commandments taught by Christ and the apostles are clearer, *not different*, than the Ten Commandments taught by Moses (AE 34:112-13; see also, e.g., AE 1:217-18, 223; AE 33:19-22, 25-26). In this sense, Luther's biblical exposition of the Ten Commandments summarized in his catechisms is, in a sense, also *clearer* than this simple words Moses used in Exodus 20. By contrast, Althaus and other post-Enlightenment theologians reject this as "legalist ethical biblicism" and teach instead that it is the Spirit in the Christians' conscience who interprets Scripture, and even makes new commandments, to arrive at only *preliminary* certainty. In his *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 30-32, Althaus recognizes the limitations of the Christians' ability to make "new decalogues" but still distinguishes between Luther's *formal* adherence to the Ten Commandments and Luther's *substantive* freedom from the Ten Commandments as a model and permission for those who, today, have the requisite gifts of the Spirit to "interpret the biblical directives in new ways" in order to make "new decalogues." As will be seen below, Dietrich Bonhoeffer pursued a similar path when seeking to combine Christian freedom and the law.

¹⁸⁸ AE 73:112, 126-27, 140, 161; AE 79:173. In SLE 11:1703 (AE 79:174), Luther taught: "In that [heavenly] life, there will no longer be faith but perfect love. And we will wholeheartedly do everything the law demands. This is why one must now preach what we shall become and remain, namely, that we shall wholeheartedly love God and the neighbor." Directly contradicting these important teachings of Luther, Steven Paulson, "The Simul and the Two Kingdoms: The End of Time, Twice," in Harrison & Pless, *One God*, p. 171-72, confusedly contends that "[n]atural law itself comes to an end . . . Only the Gospel rules in Christ's new kingdom . . . Heaven consists not of law, or of church, but of love—that uniquely *sinful* love created by the crucified Christ . . ." (emphasis added). Unsurprisingly, Paulson also polemicizes against a related doctrine confessed by Luther (LC IV, 65-67), that of progressive sanctification as a fruit of baptism. Paulson, "The Simul," p. 155-56.

condemnation of the law. The gospel also liberates reason from its distorted notions of the law and causes those who believe the gospel to embrace God's moral law of humble service of God and the neighbor from a renewed heart. This life according to God's eternal moral law begins here on earth where it must remain piecemeal due to the persistent reality of original sin even in believers. This life will be perfected in joyful communion with the angels in heaven.

3. Freedom and Service, Faith and Love

Fallen humans are slaves to sin (Rom. 6:17). But because this is fallen natural state of all humans, fallen humans not sin against their fallen will, as seen, but sin according to their fallen nature, that is, "willingly and gladly."¹⁸⁹ Thus, whenever fallen humans comply with the will and law of God—both of which fallen humans naturally and willingly hate—it is only because of some incentive that is external to the fallen human will, either the threat of punishment or the promise of reward.¹⁹⁰ The resulting "political righteousness," while worthless before God, is a good thing in the political sphere.¹⁹¹ Though fallen reason—in its pious version—may believe that this "political righteousness" amounts to worthiness before God, this outward respectability is condemned as mere coerced obedience—hypocrisy—by the spiritual dimension of the law of God that requires a spiritual heart.¹⁹²

This spiritual heart that does not act out of self-love or self-interest but begins to do the spiritual works the law requires in joyful obedience out of faith in God's word is not the product of human exercises in virtue but is a gift of the Holy Spirit himself.¹⁹³ The Spirit, as the Giver of Life and Sanctifier, arrives in human hearts by means of the gospel concerning the alien righteousness of Christ given to those crushed and killed by the condemnation of the spiritual law.¹⁹⁴

This action of God is what sets fallen humans free from sin. "[T]he soul has nothing else—neither in heaven nor on earth—in which it lives and in which it is good, free, and a Christian than the holy gospel, the word of God preached concerning Christ."¹⁹⁵ In the gospel, "[God] presents his dear Son Jesus Christ to you and tells you through his living, comforting word that you should surrender to him and boldly trust in him in steadfast faith. Then, on account of this faith, all your sins shall be forgiven and all your perdition shall be overcome, and you

¹⁸⁹ SLE 18:1718; see AE 33:65.

¹⁹⁰ AE 73:144.

¹⁹¹ AE 73:144.

¹⁹² AE 73:145-46; see SA III, II, 4: "[B]efore and without the law," fallen humans would not have believed "how very low [their] nature has fallen." See also SLE 10:384 (AE 45:92): "[W]ithout the Holy Spirit in the heart," "there must be nothing but hypocrisy, even if the commandments were God's . . . , no matter how fine a person's works may be."

¹⁹³ AE 73:145. "'Spiritual' is nothing else than what is done in us and through us by the Spirit and faith, whether the object we are dealing with is physical or spiritual. Thus, 'Spirit consists in the use, not in the object,' be it seeing, hearing, speaking, grasping, giving birth, bearing, eating, drinking, or whatever else it may be." SLE 20:836; see AE 37:92. In this sense, the spiritual law requires spiritual works, i.e., works done in faith according to God's law. SLE 20:836 (AE 37:92): "For it is useless if you serve the neighbor but do so bodily. For flesh is useless [John 6:63]. But if you do so spiritually, that is, if your heart does so out of faith in God's word, it is life and salvation."

¹⁹⁴ AE 73:76, 90-91, 214. The work of the Spirit is set forth in greater detail in a popular version of a model sermon Luther prepared on John 16 as Martin Luther, *Convicted by the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2009).

¹⁹⁵ SLE 19:990; see AE 31:345.

shall be . . . free from all things.”¹⁹⁶ Faith in the gospel is therefore true freedom, as Luther summarized:

[I]n faith, a Christian has all he needs, and does not need any work, to be good. If he no longer needs any work, he is certainly released from all commandments and laws. If he is released, he is certainly free. *This is the freedom of a Christian*, faith itself, which brings it about, not that we may be idle or may do evil, but that we do not need any works to be good and saved.¹⁹⁷

Faith in the gospel—that is, Christian liberty—is not only the highest worship and service of God because it regards God as just and truthful and is regarded as truthful and just in turn.¹⁹⁸ Faith also “unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom” so that he takes upon himself what is ours (sin, death, eternal damnation) and gives us what is his (grace, life, and eternal salvation).¹⁹⁹ And as Christ is the true King and Priest, he also imparts these prerogatives, so that all Christians “must be kings and priests with Christ through faith.”²⁰⁰ “By faith, a Christian is exalted above all things so that he becomes a lord over all in a spiritual way. For nothing can hurt his salvation. Indeed, all things must be subject to him and help him toward salvation,” although “we must die bodily” and “be defeated in many other things, as we see in Christ and his saints.”²⁰¹ “Beyond this, we are also priests, which is much more than being a king because the priesthood makes us worthy to appear before God and pray for others.”²⁰²

Faith, moreover, is the beginning, motivation, and “master workman” of all truly good works because faith alone makes the person who does the works good and willing to do what is good.²⁰³ Because the Christian pleases God by faith alone, “all works should aim at the benefit of the neighbor, . . . to serve the neighbor out of free love.”²⁰⁴ Love is free if it does not serve the neighbor to obtain the neighbor’s gratitude but simply to please God.²⁰⁵ Christ himself is presented as the example for such Christian life of free love by St. Paul in Phil. 2:5-8.²⁰⁶ Thus, “a Christian does not live in himself but in Christ and in his neighbor. He lives in Christ through faith, in the neighbor through love. Through faith, he ascends above himself into God. Out of

¹⁹⁶ SLE 19:991; see AE 31:346.

¹⁹⁷ SLE 19:994; see AE 31:349-50.

¹⁹⁸ AE 31:350-51.

¹⁹⁹ SLE 19:995; see AE 31:351; Eph. 5:31-32.

²⁰⁰ SLE 19:997; see AE 31:354; 1 Peter 2:9.

²⁰¹ SLE 19:997; see AE 31:354-55; Rom. 8:28; 1 Cor. 3:21-22.

²⁰² SLE 19:998; see AE 31:355.

²⁰³ AE 31:359-63; AE 44:33-34, 108-09.

²⁰⁴ SLE 19:1007; see AE 31:365. Luther’s seminal 1520 treatise on Christian freedom *and service* is available in a popular edition as Martin Luther, *How to Live a Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008). Freedom and service, faith and love are also critical elements of Luther’s theology of worship. See Holger Sonntag & Paul Strawn, *The Unchanging Forms of the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2010); Holger Sonntag & Paul Strawn, *Christian Worship* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2014). See also AE 21:80-82, 131-37, where Luther, based on Matt. 6:1-4, distinguishes between the humble works done by those who seek to serve the neighbor and honor God and the ostentatious works done by those who seek their own god-like glorification from the world. While the latter will cease to do their works when such honor is not forthcoming, the former will persevere in doing good even in adversity because it is rooted in Christ by faith.

²⁰⁵ AE 31:367.

²⁰⁶ AE 31:366.

God, he descends below himself through love. And yet, he always remains in God and divine love.”²⁰⁷ By contrast,

cursed and condemned is every life lived and sought for its own benefit and advantage; cursed are all works not done in love. They are done in love, however, when they are wholeheartedly aimed, not at one’s own pleasure, benefit, honor, comfort, and salvation, but at the benefit, honor, and salvation of others.²⁰⁸

Indeed, such cursed life lived in selfish isolation from the neighbor would miss the purpose of human life altogether, because “we live together on earth in order to serve and help one another.”²⁰⁹

Christ’s exercise of lordship by service and self-sacrifice is the example even for those Christians who hold governmental offices of authority, according to Phil. 2. As Christ emptied himself, so they should empty *their hearts* of their power and authority and resolve in their hearts to exercise the power and authority they do have for the benefit of their subjects:

Behold, Christ, the supreme Prince, came and served me. He did not seek to gain power, possessions, and honor from me but only considered my need and sacrificed everything so that I may have power, possessions, and honor in him. I will do likewise: When it comes to my subjects, I will not seek my advantage but theirs. Accordingly, I will serve them by my office, protecting them, listening to them, and defending them. The sole purpose of my governing will be that they, not I, may obtain good things and advantages.²¹⁰

Because the Christian prince will seek to govern in this Christ-like manner as much as possible, it is not surprising that “the cross will soon weigh this attempt down.”²¹¹ Indeed, given fallen human nature—resulting from the common human desire to be like God and resulting in the common human desire to be subject to no rules whatsoever—“being a ruler is not the least punishment for original sin. It is a punishment that is second only to death.”²¹²

Accordingly, “[w]e are not free from the law in a human way (as I have said above),²¹³ by which the law is abrogated and changed, but in a divine and theological way, by which we are changed and turned from enemies of the law into friends of the law.”²¹⁴ It is therefore “foolish” to think “that through the freedom, by which we become free from the law and from sin, freedom is given for sinning.”²¹⁵ The righteousness of faith, that gift of the Spirit by the gospel before all

²⁰⁷ SLE 19:1011; see AE 31:371. In SLE 11:17-18 (AE 75:42), Luther noted that good works “have no name” because love simply demands that “you should surrender yourself to [your neighbor] with everything you have, just as Christ did not only pray or fast for you . . . but gave himself to you completely, with praying, fasting, all works and suffering, so that there is nothing about him and in him that is not yours and was not done for you.” See also LC II, 27: Christ became our Lord by redeeming us.

²⁰⁸ SLE 10:407; see AE 45:118.

²⁰⁹ SLE 7:499; see AE 21:137.

²¹⁰ SLE 10:408-09; see AE 45:120.

²¹¹ SLE 10:414; see AE 45:126.

²¹² SLE 2:1409; see AE 7:194-95.

²¹³ See AE 27:325-26.

²¹⁴ SLE 8:1584-85; see AE 27:347. By contrast, carnal freedom from the law remains in its hatred of the law and insists that the law be changed and abrogated from serving the neighbor to serving one’s own desires. AE 27:348.

²¹⁵ SLE 8:1585; see AE 27:347; Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 2:16.

works, is therefore not “the freedom to leave something undone,” but “the freedom to do” the works commanded by the law.²¹⁶ Indeed, it is “royal freedom,” as the Holy Spirit’s “slaves and captives,” to “will and gladly do what he wills.”²¹⁷ Good works of service and love as defined in the Ten Commandments are built on the foundation of the freedom from the law—and these works must be zealously taught lest self-chosen works crowd out the genuine good works.²¹⁸

Thus, the spiritual freedom of a Christian that is by faith in the gospel alone—and that manifests itself in the service of love according to the moral law of God—must be carefully distinguished from political freedom as well as carnal freedom (Gal. 5:13).²¹⁹ Political freedom consists in “exemptions from obligations, privileges, and freedom from contributions” granted by the emperor to the church and others.²²⁰ Carnal freedom, freedom of the sinful flesh, is a freedom “by which [the devil] rules in the whole world.”²²¹ “[T]hose who have this freedom obey neither God nor the laws but do what they want. These days, the mob chases after this freedom. The enthusiasts also chase after it, as they want to be free in their opinions and in their actions, so that they may teach and act with impunity, which they dream to be right. These stand fast in the freedom by which the devil has made them free.”²²²

A more subtle form of carnal freedom is embracing the gospel to gain social advantages and to be free of those hardships Christ promised his followers under the cross.²²³ Those who embrace the gospel to gain this form of carnal freedom “are nothing but mouth-Christians, liars, false disciples, or illegitimate children.”²²⁴ This sinful desire to lead a prosperous, painless life in this world while professing Christ’s name is the hypocritical Christians’ theology of glory. It is what made the sale of indulgences (as remission of punishment) so popular. By contrast, Christians—“friends of the cross”—embrace suffering in this world as Christ’s gift and the practical outworking of their baptism.²²⁵ Indeed, Christians rejoice in their sufferings as partakers of Christ’s sufferings (1 Peter 4:13) and as being conformed to their suffering Savior (Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10, 21).²²⁶

Luther even detected an expression of this carnal freedom in our relation to our worldly possessions: “If I am free, I may do what I want. This thing belongs to me. Why should I not sell

²¹⁶ SLE 8:1586; see AE 27:348.

²¹⁷ SLE 18:1718-19; see AE 33:65; Rom. 6:15-22; 8:4-11.

²¹⁸ AE 27:51-55.

²¹⁹ AE 27:3-4.

²²⁰ SLE 9:602; see AE 27:3-4. Note the distinctions outlined in Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 43-44: “[W]e should not confuse the [Holy Roman] Empire’s much cherished freedoms with the modern, democratic ideal of Liberty. The latter derives inspiration from republican Rome and the ancient Greek city states, neither of which feature significantly in the classical legacy embraced by the Empire. Instead, Frankish warrior culture imparted a distinctly pre-modern idea of local and particular liberties, which started to shape the Empire as a status hierarchy, distributing political and social capital unevenly across society. . . . Freedoms and status were corporate in the sense of being shared communally by members of a recognized social group, such as the clergy. They were also local and specific, varying across different parts of the Empire, Fundamentally, however, their freedoms and status related all inhabitants in some way to the Empire as the ultimate source of individual or communal liberties.”

²²¹ SLE 9:602; see AE 27:4.

²²² AE 27:4. In SLE 9:657 (AE 27:48) Luther noted: “This evil [of carnal freedom] is very common and is the worst thing Satan stirs up where faith is taught.”

²²³ AE 23:397-99.

²²⁴ SLE 8:227; see AE 23:398; see also AE 23:401-02.

²²⁵ SLE 18:51; see AE 31:53; see also AE 31:112-13, 151-54, 225-27.

²²⁶ See AE 30:126-27; AE 51:198-99, 206, 208.

it for as much as I can? Likewise: Since salvation is not ours because of our good works, why should we give anything to the needy?”²²⁷ In fact, charging whatever one can without concern for the neighbor was the “common rule” among the merchants in Luther’s age, although this rule is “not only against Christian love but also against natural law.”²²⁸ This rule views selling as “an act completely within your free power and will without any law and moderation, as if you were a god who has no relationship to anyone,” while it ignores that, “because selling is a work you perform in relation to your neighbor, it should be constrained by such a law and conscience that you do it without harm or disadvantage to your neighbor, being concerned more about not harming him than making a profit for yourself.”²²⁹

To be sure, without the ability to act like a god who is not connected to anyone, who would be a merchant?²³⁰ Still, accepting the merchants’ “common rule” while trying “to advise and teach people how to apply it in a Christian way and keep a good, clear conscience, that would be the same as advising and teaching people how injustice should be justice, how evil should be good, and how one could live and act according to divine Scripture and contrary to divine Scripture at the same time.”²³¹

In contrast to both political freedom and carnal freedom, Christian freedom is freedom “from the eternal wrath . . . [i]n the conscience” “for the sake of Christ,” “not from some servitude or Babylonian or Turkish captivity.”²³² As deliverance from “the servitude and terrors of the law,” Christian freedom is the “freedom of conscience and the comfort of the Gospel.”²³³ Christian “freedom from sin” is the “first freedom.”²³⁴ This freedom belongs only to those who believe what the Creed teaches about Christ’s redeeming work, although it is “a common speech and word,” a “lesson of children.”²³⁵

Moreover, Christian freedom “is a freedom to do with delight only what is good and to live well without coercion of the law,” after God’s grace and favor in Christ caused us to love the law and caused the law to become “one with us.”²³⁶ “It is therefore a spiritual freedom that does not abrogate the law but offers what the law demands, namely, delight and love, whereby the law is satisfied, leaving it with nothing else to require or demand.”²³⁷ It is not carnal freedom because Christ did not free us from the law “by tearing up the ledger” but by “paying it for you and giving you the means to satisfy your debt posted in his ledger.”²³⁸ Indeed, Christ did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it—both in himself and in those who believe in him.²³⁹

In sum, there are three main types of freedom—political freedom, carnal freedom, and Christian freedom. Political freedom consists in certain privileges granted by the government.

²²⁷ SLE 9:660; see AE 27:50.

²²⁸ SLE 10:916; see AE 45:247.

²²⁹ SLE 10:916-17; see AE 45:248.

²³⁰ AE 45:248-49.

²³¹ SLE 10:927; see AE 45:260.

²³² SLE 9:603; see AE 27:4.

²³³ SLE 9:605; see AE 27:6; Matt. 9:2.

²³⁴ SLE 8:232; see AE 23:407.

²³⁵ SLE 8:240; see AE 23:410.

²³⁶ SLE 8:105; see AE 35:375; see also AE 35:369.

²³⁷ SLE 14:105; see AE 35:376; see also AE 35:368.

²³⁸ SLE 14:105; see AE 35:376; Col. 2:14.

²³⁹ AE 79:175-76; Matt. 5:17.

Carnal freedom consists in doing as one pleases, in thinking and saying what one wishes, in exploiting the neighbor to the maximum extent possible—and also in being free from Christian suffering here on earth. Carnal freedom is nothing but slavery to sin. Christian freedom is a twofold gift from God. First and foremost, it is freedom from sin and the condemnation of the law in the conscience by faith in the gospel. Second, Christian freedom is freedom from sinning as the freedom to do what the law commands in humble service to the neighbor in love. This second aspect of Christian freedom is a fruit of the first aspect of Christian freedom in the same way as love of the neighbor is the fruit of faith in Christ.

D. God Acts in and Through Creation in an Ordered Way in the Structures of Government, Church, and Household

Luther opened his 1523 treatise on government by demonstrating from God's word that government has been instituted by God in history, "lest anybody doubt that it is in the world by God's will and order."²⁴⁰ Government, therefore, exists in this world, not as the result of human ingenuity working itself out in the course of historical developments, but as an institution and order willed by God. This section will therefore explore the order of government, as well as the two other orders of family and church, in which God is present and through which he acts in this world to preserve and save his fallen creation. Indeed, as will be seen, Christ himself is active in the world as its King to rule and preserve all creation invisibly for the eternal benefit of those who are visibly ruled by the means of grace in his kingdom of grace, the church.

1. God's Ordered Power at Work in the World to Preserve Creation and Save Sinners

As noted, Luther's reformation of the church was first and foremost about the First Commandment—"you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2). But this focus on God did not lead Luther to embrace the kind of theocratic spiritualism embraced by Müntzer that discounted the created reality of this world. Quite to the contrary, Luther consistently and emphatically taught that God is present in, and works through, creation.

This is so when it comes to salvation. The Holy Spirit uses the created means of human words, water, bread and wine to distribute the spiritual benefits won by the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ.²⁴¹ In fact, in the incarnate Christ, as he is revealed in God's word, "there we want to rightly contemplate God, even look into his heart that he is gracious and merciful."²⁴²

God also works in and through creation when it comes to God's gifts that make and keep our physical bodies alive. God does not create or keep us alive by some direct operation. Rather, he uses created means—including angels and humans—and specific offices he instituted for these purposes.²⁴³

Given that praising good and punishing evil is the core function of government as God's servant (Rom. 13:3-4), one of the created means God uses to preserve the world is the curbing of sins whereby God keeps the devil, the sinful human nature, and the world in check. This gift is also given to us by human beings acting in the three orders God instituted: our parents; the government; and the ministers of the church (as well as all people).²⁴⁴ "The first estate is that of parents who earnestly keep discipline in the house and who are to govern children and servants. The second estate is secular government that bears the sword to coerce the disobedient and

²⁴⁰ SLE 10:378; see AE 45:85.

²⁴¹ AE 3:272-73; AE 40:213-14; AE 41:171-72; see SA III, VIII, 10-11, where Luther taught confessed "we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments."

²⁴² SLE 1:1253; see AE 3:276-77; see also LC II, 65 where Luther taught that Christ is "a mirror of the paternal heart, outside of whom we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge."

²⁴³ AE 3:273-74, 288.

²⁴⁴ AE 3:279-80; see WA 43:74: "tres ordines." AE 3:279: "three social classes."

negligent by discipline and force. The third estate is that of the church or preachers who governs by the word of God.”²⁴⁵

Importantly, based on Rom. 2:4—and consistent with the government’s duty to praise what is good (Rom. 13:3)—sin may be curbed also by promises, benefits and rewards, not just force, coercion, and punishments.²⁴⁶ Moreover, the church’s primary mission is unique in that it is not to restrain sin by the preaching of the law but to remove sin by the forgiveness of sin offered through gospel.²⁴⁷

But if those human servants of God charged with curbing sin in their respective offices are remiss in their duty—or if they are overzealous—they become guilty of the sin of others (1 Tim. 5:22).²⁴⁸ Then “public misfortune is always wont to follow.”²⁴⁹ In other words, if God’s ordinary human agents fail to do their duty to curb sin—for instance, if minor thieves are harshly punished, while big corporations are honored by government leaders, even if these corporations bleed an entire country dry—God himself will interfere and judge the land in some extraordinary manner.²⁵⁰ Thus, those sinners who evade punishment by God’s ordinary human agents (pastors, parents, government officials)—either due to their own cunning or due to the slackness or corruption of these agents—“shall not escape the wrath and punishment of God,” because God will not forget his commandments.²⁵¹ There is therefore no need for Christians, as private individuals, to take matters into their own hands to avenge the uncurbed sins they see around them but leave this confidently to God’s intervention (Rom. 12:19).²⁵² Even in the case of a seemingly invincible tyrant, “God is present. He has fire, water, iron, stone, and countless other ways of killing. How quickly he kills a tyrant!”²⁵³

An important reason why “public misfortune” may not follow—even if human office holders does not find the golden mean between being too lax and too zealous when it comes to curbing sin—are the Christians themselves. Indeed, Christians play a central role in the preservation of the creation by created mean that goes beyond doing their duty as parents, government leaders, and pastors. Luther pointed to two additional ways in which God uses Christians to preserve creation. First, God mercifully preserves the fallen world simply because there still are true Christians in this world. As noted, there is misfortune in the land because no one cares about God’s commandments.²⁵⁴ The reason misfortune does not always happen is that “[t]here must still be somewhere upon earth some godly people because God continues to grant us so much good! On our own account we should not have a farthing in the house nor a straw in the field.”²⁵⁵ Indeed, “because of one righteous person God at times spares, and shows kindness to, an entire family, city, and country.”²⁵⁶ It would be unjust, even tyrannical, for God to punish

²⁴⁵ SLE 1:1256; see AE 3:279.

²⁴⁶ AE 3:40, 225; AE 54:240; AE 61:215; AE 73:102, 191-92, 215; AE 75:385-86.

²⁴⁷ AE 28:235; AE 77:130-33.

²⁴⁸ AE 3:279-80; see AE 28:354-55; see also AE 45:108 note 65.

²⁴⁹ SLE 1:1257; see AE 3:279-80.

²⁵⁰ LC I, 228-231.

²⁵¹ LC I, 234, 238; see LC I, 242-245, 247-248.

²⁵² AE 46:109-11.

²⁵³ SLE 10:505; see AE 46:109.

²⁵⁴ LC I, 154-55.

²⁵⁵ LC I, 156.

²⁵⁶ SLE 1:1202; see AE 3:235; see also AE 7:61-62; AE 24:80.

the righteous with the unrighteous, and so he spares the latter along with the former when he refrains from punishing an entire community.²⁵⁷

The second, related reason why God, instead of inflicting “public misfortune,” graciously preserves the fallen world—including the governments of this world—are the prayers of the Christians. This is why Christians are commanded to pray for those in authority (1 Tim. 2:1-2).²⁵⁸ The Christians’ prayer matters because, according to Christ’s promise (John 14:12-14), it “is one of the loftiest works by which they help and preserve the world, even if they did nothing else.”²⁵⁹

This preservation by prayer is needed because reason and daily experience show that governing a large number of people is humanly impossible because “the common yahoos among burghers, peasants, and nobility do not willingly like to be subject to others and would rather be free from obedience and coercion.”²⁶⁰ Thus, for government to be preserved despite this widespread tendency to seek carnal freedom, there must be more than military might. There must be “a hidden help, . . . namely, the word and order of God and the prayers of the Christians.”²⁶¹ Therefore, “the entire bodily government and existence stands and remains for as long as it is supposed to stand due to nothing but God’s order or command and the Christians’ prayer. These are the two pillars that bear the entire world. Once they are gone, everything must fall down.”²⁶² Therefore, while silencing God’s word and persecuting innocent Christians may seem convenient for a government in the short run, this approach to God’s word and his people eventually will spell the destruction of that government, because by doing so, that government destroys that which alone can give it relative permanency in a fallen world.²⁶³ Unrestrained by the Christians’ prayers and by instruction in God’s word concerning the divine institution of government, the “common yahoos” of all social classes will certainly succeed in their quest to “be free from obedience and coercion.”

Theologically considered, then, there may be more to human resistance to God’s order of government than reasonable disagreements, because resistance may have a twofold spiritual dimension. First, resistance against government (outside the parameters set by Acts 5:29)²⁶⁴ is a “work of the flesh,” that is, a product of the sinful human nature.²⁶⁵ If left unchecked—either by

²⁵⁷ AE 3:235; see Gen. 18:23; Gen. 19:22; Ps. 26:9; Ezek. 18.

²⁵⁸ AE 28:256.

²⁵⁹ SLE 8:352; see AE 24:80.

²⁶⁰ SLE 8:353; see AE 24:81.

²⁶¹ SLE 8:353; see AE 24:81.

²⁶² SLE 8:354; see AE 24:81.

²⁶³ AE 24:81-82.

²⁶⁴ AE 45:111-12.

²⁶⁵ See Gal. 5:19-20: “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: . . . hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, . . .” By contrast, the “fruits of the Spirit” are characteristics and behaviors of believers that are summarized in love and allow people to live with each other in peace, overlooking each other’s shortcomings and even putting the best construction on everything, as required by the Eighth Commandment. AE 27:93-94; LC I, 288-89; see Gal. 5:22-23; 1 Cor. 13.

the Spirit²⁶⁶ or by the outward coercion of government²⁶⁷—this may lead to the overthrow of the government.²⁶⁸

Second, the devil is not only a liar who wreaks havoc in spiritual matters but also a murderer who seeks to cause physical destruction and death in this world (John 8:44).²⁶⁹ This is why the petition for daily bread in the Lord’s Prayer is not only a petition “*for* temporal authority and government, as that by which most of all God preserves to us our daily bread and all the comforts of this life.”²⁷⁰ While God gives plenty of “daily bread”—that is, “[e]verything that belongs to the support and wants of the body”²⁷¹—“we are not able to retain any of [it] or use [it] in security and happiness, if He did not give us a permanent and peaceful government. For where there are dissension, strife, and war, there the daily bread is already taken away, or at least checked.”²⁷² Because the devil is also a murderer, the Fourth Petition is therefore also a prayer “*against* our chief enemy, the devil,” because “he also prevents and hinders the stability of all government and honorable, peaceable relations on earth. There he causes so much contention, murder, sedition, and war.”²⁷³

Thus, God preserves order as well as human life in this world—and even bestows salvation in this world—by mean of his creation, including human beings. This hidden reality caused Luther to marvel:

[T]his is the great glory with which the Divine Majesty adorns us: It performs its works through us, calling our word its word and our work its work. One may therefore rightly and properly say that the mouth of a good Christian teacher is God’s mouth, and the hand you extend to serve a poor brother is God’s hand. . . . It would therefore be the height of ingratitude to despise these human actions.²⁷⁴

Importantly, what gives human actions effect is God’s power and, indeed, God’s own presence in these actions. This is the only reason why human action, when done according to God’s institution²⁷⁵ in his divine orders, can prevail even against the devil, as Luther explained:

God must be above all and nearest to all to preserve such ring or circle against the devil. He must do everything in all vocations, even in all creatures. Thus Ps. 127 says that there are only two governments for the body on earth, the city and the household: “Unless the Lord builds the house,” likewise: “unless the Lord guards the city.”²⁷⁶

²⁶⁶ AE 27:65-66; see Gal. 5:16.

²⁶⁷ AE 45:90.

²⁶⁸ AE 27:91.

²⁶⁹ LC III, 80.

²⁷⁰ LC III, 74.

²⁷¹ SC III, 14; see LC III, 72-73.

²⁷² LC III, 74.

²⁷³ LC III, 80.

²⁷⁴ SLE 1:1248, 1268; see AE 3:272, 288.

²⁷⁵ Luther analogizes God’s action through creation for preservation and salvation in that both are effective because of God’s words of institution. AE 38:202-03. Similarly, what distinguishes marriage from adultery is God’s word that instituted the former while forbidding the latter. AE 1:96.

²⁷⁶ SLE 16:2300; see AE 41:176-77.

Stated in the categories of traditional theology, Luther taught that God acts through creatures by his ordered power, not his absolute power.²⁷⁷ And while God may act according to the latter—e.g., when miraculously causing fire not to burn Daniel’s companions (Dan. 3:25)—humans must concern themselves only with the former.²⁷⁸ In Luther’s diagnosis, it is fallen reason that seeks God in lofty mystical revelations—such as sought by leading a “contemplative life” in a monastery—apart from (or beyond) the created means. Yet it is by such created means that God not only wants to save us (the means of grace); God also wants to sustain us in this life by created means (the daily bread).²⁷⁹ As noted, God carries out these acts of ordered power not from afar but as being present in them along with his gifts.²⁸⁰ While this reality is hidden from the physical eyes, faith perceives it because it is so instructed by God’s word.²⁸¹

In sum, the one true God not only created the world. He continues to be present in and work through his creation. In this way, he not only redeems humans from sin by the incarnate Savior and distributes this redemption by the created means of grace offered in and through the church. God also preserves his fallen creation until the Last Day by the presence and prayer of Christians in this world, as well as by the actions of those holding office in household, government, and the church. This is God’s ordered power at work in and through creation. To this power we must direct our attention to perceive and experience God at work in his creation

²⁷⁷ See, e.g., AE 3:274. A fundamental problem in the recent scholarly discussion of the distinction between God’s absolute and ordered power is that this distinction is used as ammunition in the culture wars of today. As has become popular among some, late-medieval “nominalism” and its supposedly capricious God are not only seen as a fall from the reasonable order of the (moral) world taught by Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) at the heights of “realism,” ensuring (eternal) rewards for the good and punishment for the evil. “Nominalism” has also come to be blamed for all the ills of modernism, such as notions of arbitrary freedom, unbridled immorality, and radical individualism. Luther’s theology is often seen as thoroughly nominalist and therefore a key building block of the perceived chaos of modernism. See, e.g., D. C. Schindler, *The Politics of the Real: The Church Between Liberalism and Integralism* (Steubenville, OH: New Polity Press, 2021), p. 23-29; Gillespie, *Theological Origins*, p. 22-25, 114, 157-58, 274. On the specific issue of the distinction between God’s absolute and ordered power, however, these scholars fail to recognize the shift in the meaning of the distinction. This failure causes them to superimpose the earlier, hypothetical understanding of God’s absolute power (what he could have done but chose not to do) on the latter understanding of God’s absolute power as the extraordinary exercise of his power seen, e.g., in miracles. For the earlier, hypothetical understanding of “absolute power,” God’s miracles are part of God’s “ordered power” because God actually performs them. See Francis Oakley, “The Absolute and Ordained Power of God in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Theology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998), p. 437-61; Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 36-38.

²⁷⁸ AE 3:274, 276; see SLE 18:1795 (AE 33:140): “We, however, must look to the word [of God] and leave that inscrutable will [of God] alone.” See also SLE 19:37 (AE 36:42): “For God . . . has never dealt with, nor does he now deal with, people otherwise than through the word of promise. In turn, we cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the word of his promise.” Accordingly, while Christ is present and active everywhere, he wishes to be found only by faith in the word. AE 36:342-43. “Therefore, when we approach the God who has not revealed himself, there is no faith, no word, and no knowledge at all. For it is an invisible God; you will not make him visible.” SLE 2:177 (AE 5:44).

²⁷⁹ AE 3:275-77; AE 54:67-68; see SA III, VIII, 5, 9: Because the devil led Adam and Eve “led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit,” “enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning [from the first fall] to the end of the world, [its poison] having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon.” In AE 73:91-93, Luther warned against seeking to grasp God’s unveiled majesty as done by mystics and spiritualists within and outside Christendom.

²⁸⁰ AE 12:377; LC II, 69.

²⁸¹ AE 15:218.

for our temporal and eternal good. Thus, we must not seek to peer directly into God’s blinding majesty (1 Tim. 6:16), as fallen reason in its religious default mode of mysticism and spiritualism is bound to do to its own temporal and eternal detriment. At the same time, however, God’s presence and action in his creation is not contained by the means of his ordered power. Otherwise, he would be subject to the control of those wielding the means of his ordered power. Especially when those charged with carrying out his ordered power to restrain sin are overwhelmed or neglect their duties, God acts in extraordinary ways—albeit still by created means—to enforce his commandments by punishing the evil and delivering the good.

2. The Whole Creation is God’s Mask

As God is present in and acts through creation, all of God’s creatures are God’s masks—*personae* or *larvae* in Latin.²⁸² This image conveys the following basic ideas: The One wearing the mask speaks through the mask²⁸³ while being hidden by it. The mask itself has no independent agency apart from the divine Wearer of the mask. Accordingly, those who do their own thing instead of carrying out God’s will are masks of the devil.²⁸⁴

It is beneficial for all humans that “the whole creation is God’s mask,” because “God does not deal with us in this life face to face.”²⁸⁵ But the dignity of the mask and the deeper divine reality behind the mask are recognized and properly distinguished only by believers from God’s word, while unbelievers take the mask literally at face-value, that is, as all there is—either by honoring the created mask instead of the divine Wearer of the mask (Rom. 1:20-25) or by despising the created masks and seeking the unmasked God without created means.²⁸⁶

Believers will also wear with humility whatever mask God has allotted, realizing that whatever the mask they wear, their life is not about themselves and their enjoyment but about serving “[God’s] order and human needs” for God’s glory and the common good.²⁸⁷ And this humility also realizes that, while God wants his creatures to play a role in sustaining his creation, their efforts do not determine the success of their labors.²⁸⁸ It is God’s blessing that makes their child-like contributions to his great work of preserving the world succeed and prosper:

[God] well could give you grain and fruits without your plowing and planting, but he does not want to do this. He also does not want your plowing and planting to yield grain and fruits without his involvement. Rather, you are to plow and plant and then pronounce a blessing by praying as follows: “Now you provide, God; now give grain and fruit, dear Lord. Our plowing and planting will not do

²⁸² AE 26:95; WA 40.1:174. Luther was familiar with Cicero’s treatise *De Officiis* and the concept of *persona* discussed in *De Officiis* I, 97-98, 107, 115; see AE 54:243; AE 63:170-71. There, Cicero taught that each individual human had four *personae*, namely, universal human nature by which humans, unlike wild beasts, partake in reason from which all morality and propriety (*decorum*) is derived; individual human nature consisting of one’s physical and mental properties; individual circumstances (wealth, political offices, etc.) allotted by chance and time; and individual choices as to where to apply oneself in life. According to *De Officiis* I, 117, these four *personae* should be considered when deciding what is the appropriate, or decorous, thing to do (*quod deceat*) in a given situation.

²⁸³ *Personare*—the verb behind *persona*—means “to sound through.”

²⁸⁴ AE 13:171; AE 39:278; AE 41:291.

²⁸⁵ SLE 9:133; see AE 26:95.

²⁸⁶ AE 26:95.

²⁸⁷ SLE 2:1395; see AE 7:184.

²⁸⁸ WA 40.3:210-11.

yield anything. It is your gift.” Just as the children are habituated to fast and pray and to spread their clothes at night so that the Christ Child (or St. Nicholas) may give them gifts, but if they do not pray, they receive nothing or a switch and horse manure.

But what are all our labors in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the household, in war, and in governing for God than such children’s work by which God wills to give his gifts in the field, in the household, and everywhere? Our labors are God’s masks. He wants to be hidden by them and accomplish everything. . . . God gives all good things, but you must lend a hand and grab the bull by the horns, that is, you must work to provide God a cause and mask.²⁸⁹

Explaining St. Paul’s warning not to respect persons in Gal. 2:6, Luther emphasized that there must be no respecting of persons at the expense of God’s word and salvation (Acts 5:29), but when God and salvation are not at stake, persons/masks must be respected in this world according to their positions in the social order. Otherwise, if the principle that there are no distinctions *in Christ before God* (Gal. 3:28) is applied *to this world*, chaos and insubordination will ensue.²⁹⁰ Put differently, if an individual with a prestigious mask or office—e.g., a political leader—teaches false doctrine, that individual must not be obeyed on this point, despite his high office. But when the faith is not in controversy, that mask must be honored as that of the divine majesty himself.²⁹¹

In the Large Catechism, Luther tied his teachings on persons and masks to the First Commandment by explaining that trusting in the transcendent God *alone* for all good things *includes* properly honoring the created means he uses to deliver these goods:

[W]e are to trust in God alone, and look to Him and expect from Him naught but good, as from one who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessities of both temporal and eternal things. . . . For even though otherwise we experience much good from men, still whatever we receive by His command or arrangement is all received from God. For our parents, and all rulers, and every one besides with respect to his neighbor, have received from God the command that they should do us all manner of good, so that we receive these blessings not from them, but, through them, from God. For creatures are only the hands, channels, and means whereby God gives all things, as He gives to the mother breasts and milk to offer to her child, and corn and all manner of produce from the earth for nourishment, none of which blessings could be produced by any creature of itself. . . . On this account also these means of receiving good gifts through creatures are not to be rejected, neither should we in presumption seek other ways and means than God has commanded. For that would not be receiving from God, but seeking of ourselves.²⁹²

Accordingly, seeing that God freely gives and preserves “all that we have and see before our eyes,” “we sense and see His Paternal heart and his transcendent love toward us.”²⁹³ In fact, in the First Article of the Creed, “we see how the Father has given Himself to us, together with all creatures, and has most richly provided for us in this life.”²⁹⁴ Learning to see creation as the

²⁸⁹ SLE 5:1308-09; see AE 14:114-15.

²⁹⁰ AE 26:97.

²⁹¹ See LC I, 106, where Luther commented on the Fourth Commandment that “it is a far higher thing to honor than to love one, inasmuch as it comprehends not only love, but also modesty, humility, and deference as to *a majesty there hidden*.”

²⁹² LC I, 24, 26-27.

²⁹³ LC II, 17, 23.

²⁹⁴ LC II, 24.

means of the Father's self-giving to provide for the physical needs of all—not as godless, dead matter we can autonomously use, shape, and throw away to advance our own glory and to satisfy our own greed—will cause the human hearts to be “warmed and kindled to be thankful, and to employ all such good things to the honor and praise of God.”²⁹⁵ In other words, this will cause humans “to serve Him with all these things, as He demands and has enjoined in the Ten Commandments.”²⁹⁶

As discussed above in the section on Christian freedom, this life as a channel of God's gifts to the neighbors is to be lived *freely* in love, as a fruit of faith that already has all things, that is, without seeking temporal or eternal rewards.²⁹⁷

God's good gifts must flow from one to the other and become common, so that each may provide for the neighbor as if he were in the other's place. God's gifts flow to us from Christ who provided for us in this life as if he were what we are. From us, these gifts are to flow to those who need them, so that I must even employ my faith and righteousness for my neighbor before God, to cover his sin and take his sin upon me, and deal with his sin as if it were my own, just as Christ did for all of us. See, this is the nature of genuine love. Yet love is genuine where faith is genuine. This is why the holy apostle, in 1 Cor. 13:5, attributes to love “that it does not seek its own” but what benefits the neighbor.²⁹⁸

In sum, the visible, tangible world is neither God nor godless “stuff.” Creation therefore is not something one may worship, nor is it something one may discard to find the true God elsewhere. Rather, the created world is God's face, mask, hands, channels, and means by which he gives himself to sustain and save us. Christians are to be an integral part of this self-giving of God in the royal freedom of service. Freed and indeed enriched by God in every way, the redeemed will begin to share freely what they have received abundantly, whatever the station in life, or mask, God has given them. Only believers recognize God's masks as the deep reality of creation and their part in it from God's word. Unbelievers are blind to the divine origin, dignity, and purpose of all creatures, including human beings and the three social orders of church, government, and family. Accordingly, unbelievers will either worship creation as if it were all there is or despise creation and seek God behind his created masks (or not at all). As a result, they will be unwilling to serve as channels of God's self-giving goodness and prefer to be storehouses of God's gifts for their own benefit in a self-referential understanding of freedom.

3. The Christian's Person and Office—the Christian as Person of Christ and Person of the World

Luther expanded on the doctrine of God's masks—all of creation—by distinguishing between the Christians' person (*Person*) and office (*Amt*) or, using different terminology,

²⁹⁵ LC II, 23.

²⁹⁶ LC II, 19, see LC II, 21, 23; Acts 17:27-28; 1 Cor. 6:20.

²⁹⁷ AE 31:370-71.

²⁹⁸ SLE 19:1011; see AE 31:371. Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 286-93, 348-58, insightfully connects genuine freedom etymologically to “fruitful inner abundance” of what is good as well as “unconstrained giving” of that good and draws on Aristotle's understanding of “liberality as the paradigm of freedom” that is “perfected in friendship and community.”

between their “person of Christ” (*Christperson*) and the “person of the world” (*Weltperson*). For instance, when explaining the meaning of the beatitude regarding “meekness” in Matt. 5:5, Luther observed that this instruction regarding good works²⁹⁹ is not directed at the government or at father or mother, but at the individual Christian, as each should live by himself outside of his office and government.³⁰⁰ Thus, while the government and the parents must not act meekly within their respective spheres of responsibility, the individual outside such office—when interacting with his neighbors and other people—must act meekly. Luther explained:

I have often said that one must clearly distinguish these two, office and person. There is a difference between the one called John or Martin and the other called elector or doctor and preacher. For here two different persons arise in one human being. In the former, we are created and born. According to this person, we are all equal, whether we are husband, wife, child, young, old, etc. But once we are born, God dresses and adorns you by another person. God turns you into a child, me into a father; someone else he turns into a master, the other into a servant; yet another he turns into a prince, the other into a burgher, and so forth. This is then called a divine person, someone who carries out a divine office, and who proceeds adorned in his glory.³⁰¹ As a result, he is no longer simply John or Nick but a prince of Saxony, or father and master. Christ is here not talking about this person but lets it proceed in its office and government, as he has ordained it. Rather, he is here talking only about the bare, individual, natural person, teaching how each of us, as a human being, is to act in relation to others.³⁰²

Importantly, not only those who are at the top of a social hierarchy enjoy the great dignity of their respective office by being called “a divine person.” While all men are equal by birth, inescapable social differentiation and *glorification* happens when God, after birth, “adorns you by another person” by assigning each their respective *divine* office—children, parents, masters, servants, princes, and citizens. The reason God bestows the various divine offices—and other created gifts such as knowledge and power—is not the recipient’s own advantage but the service of the neighbor.³⁰³ Thus, a human being’s divine glory *in this life* is not *inherent* in the individual self but is given in God’s *external* orders and offices that require all to serve their neighbors.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁹ According to Luther, the eight beatitudes in Matt. 5 “are nothing but an instruction concerning the fruits and good works of a Christian.” SLE 7:373; see AE 21:26.

³⁰⁰ AE 21:22-23.

³⁰¹ See AE 21:23: “dignity.”

³⁰² SLE 7:370; see AE 21:23. “Those in government office should always be mindful of their office and act in it in a manly way. For God has adorned and honored them before others with outstanding dignity and glory, with purple, gold, and other adornment, to be a terror for the devil and evil people. For original sin rages and is senseless, and the devil drives people into all manner of sin and shame.” SLE 2:1410; see AE 7:195.

³⁰³ “Therefore, if you have this gift from God that you are more powerful, higher, more learned, nobler than others, you should consider that he commanded you to serve others by this gift. Otherwise, you should also know that a poor young shepherd—who is nothing compared to you in the world in terms of gifts and reputation—is much greater before God and his angels. He will be raised up into heaven, while you will be cast into hell with all you pretty, big glory and adornments. For God has created, and invited to his kingdom, not only princes, counts, noblemen, and highly learned people. One Christian is as good for him as the other.” SLE 12:1978; see AE 51:349.

³⁰⁴ Luther’s external, office-based understanding of the divine glory or dignity of human beings is similar to that of Cicero and other Roman thinkers for whom, most commonly, “[d]ignitas is an attribute signifying a certain standing or rank in the community; it rests on a particular office of status, and on the prestige that accrues to its holder.” Miriam Griffith, “Dignity in Roman and Stoic Thought,” in Remy Debes (ed.), *Dignity: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 50.

Luther therefore teaches human glory and dignity as realized in the social reality of serving others by being channels of God's benefits to others.³⁰⁵

Expounding further on the difference between an individual person and an office holder, Luther reflected on Christ's command not to be angry with a brother, Matt. 5:22, by explaining how love and anger come together in the appropriate office holders as loving anger that does not abuse God's office to prosecute some vendetta against real or perceived personal enemies but only seeks to serve the neighbor by means of divine offices:

It is true that . . . there must and should be anger. But see to it that it proceeds as it should and as you have been commanded to use it. You may not be angry for your own sake but only for the sake of your office and of God. You may not confuse the two, your person and your office. As far as your person is concerned, you may not be angry at anybody, no matter how much you are offended. But where your office requires it, there you must be angry, even if you have not been harmed as far as your person is concerned. Accordingly, a good judge is angry at an evildoer, but he—as far as his person is concerned—does not want anything bad to happen to the evildoer. The judge would rather leave the evildoer unpunished. His anger therefore proceeds from a heart where there is nothing but love toward the neighbor. The evil deed alone must bear the anger, because it must be punished.³⁰⁶

The selfless administration of public offices is a difficult undertaking. Indeed, false Christians show that “flesh and blood always desires and seeks from the gospel its own dominion, glory, and benefit, and the absence of suffering.”³⁰⁷ Even true Christians “are tempted this way, when they see that things go badly in the world and in their own government, that they would like to interfere and take charge.”³⁰⁸

But this should not be. Let no one think that God wants us to govern and rule using the world's law and punishment. Rather, being a Christian is entirely different. As Christians, we should not be concerned or engaged in these matters but leave them to those who are put in charge of distributing possessions, doing business, punishing, protecting, etc. We should let it go as it goes.³⁰⁹

For Christians “have been placed into a different, higher existence, which is a divine, eternal kingdom where no one needs the things of this world, where each individually is in Christ a lord both over the devil and the world.”³¹⁰ As a result, Christians live “before God and in the world so that their heart clings to God and they do not engage in secular government, authority, power, punishment, anger, or vengeance.”³¹¹ In fact, true Christians are those who have no need of the sword among themselves and do not use it for their personal advantage.³¹² Being a Christian is therefore no mandate to rule the world politically, although it would be very fitting

³⁰⁵ See AE 21:334-38, where Luther discusses the justness of one's claim to God's created and spiritual gifts and what the government and individuals should do when these claims are challenged.

³⁰⁶ SLE 7:439; see AE 21:83.

³⁰⁷ SLE 7:466; see AE 21:107.

³⁰⁸ SLE 7:466; see AE 21:107-08.

³⁰⁹ SLE 7:466; see AE 21:108.

³¹⁰ SLE 7:466-67; see AE 21:108.

³¹¹ SLE 7:467; see AE 21:108.

³¹² AE 45:93-96.

that Christians—as those who already believe in God and therefore offer the highest service to him³¹³—engage in governing as an activity that God’s word expressly designates as a service of God (Rom. 13:4).³¹⁴ Rather, being a Christian is a mandate to disengage *the heart* from the world, and from the things of the world, and to rest it in God, as set forth in the Sermon on the Mount.

Nonetheless, Christians must also be “some kind of a person of the world [*eine welt person*]” because they must remain a part of the “government of the world” for as long as they live on earth to serve the neighbor in love.³¹⁵ As a result, “the two persons or two kinds of offices [are] held by one human being who [is] both a Christian and a prince, judge, master, servant, all of whom are called persons of the world because they belong to the government of the world.”³¹⁶ The Christian as a “person of the world” is the “Christian-in-relation,” that is, a Christian insofar as he is “tied to another person in this life”³¹⁷—in a word, the Christian as “neighbor.”³¹⁸ Christians in themselves are lords over all things. But as neighbors, they are subjects, fathers, mothers, rulers, children, and so forth, who are called to defend, guard, serve, protect, and provide for those in their care.³¹⁹ Accordingly, as persons of the world, Christians “are not forbidden to go to court and file a complaint against injustice, violence, etc., as long as the heart is not false but remains as patient as before, acting only to defend what is right and restrain what is not right, out of true love of justice.”³²⁰

Thus, while being a Christian is not a mandate to rule the world politically, it is also not a mandate to withdraw from it physically. Rather, it is a mandate to engage in the divinely instituted offices in this world with a pure and detached heart that rests in Christ by faith and that, therefore, does not seek personal advantages in the world but only what serves the neighbor in love.

The distinction between person and office corresponds to the Christians’ relationship to God and neighbor: In their relation to God, as (Christ) persons, Christians are in the role of human beings, as everybody’s equals, who gladly suffer all injustice in patient love. Strictly speaking, Christians in their relation to God “do not have a person or mask.”³²¹ But in their respective offices, as “a person of the world” in their relation to neighbors, Christians act as the

³¹³ AE 31:350.

³¹⁴ AE 45:99-100.

³¹⁵ SLE 7:468; see AE 21:109; see also AE 45:95-96.

³¹⁶ SLE 7:467-68; see AE 21:109.

³¹⁷ SLE 7:468; see AE 21:109. This shows the gravity of the sin of carnal merchants noted above: By setting the price for their goods as high as possible, they act as sovereign gods not tied to anyone, not as neighbors and “persons of the world” tied to everyone in humble service. See AE 45:248.

³¹⁸ Commenting on the ending of Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:36-37), Luther noted: “It is certainly unusual that the one who does good and loves the other is called the neighbor, while usually (also according to Scripture and the way this commandment [to love the neighbor] reads) the neighbor is the one who needs the help or who is to be served and to whom love is to be shown. But both belong together in the category of relationship, tying us all together, so that we are each other’s neighbor. . . . [N]eighbors are those who belong together before God, where one needs help and the other is able to help.” SLE 11:1565-66; see AE 79:60-61.

³¹⁹ AE 21:109.

³²⁰ SLE 7:471; see AE 21:111; see SLE 10:387 (AE 45:96): “You follow the gospel when it comes to yourself and what is yours, putting up with injustice as a true Christian. When it comes to the neighbor and what is his, you follow love, not putting up with any injustice regarding your neighbor.”

³²¹ SLE 7:535; see AE 21:170.

mask of God to serve their neighbors selflessly, that is, while their hearts remains attached to God and therefore detached from this world and their selves.³²²

In sum, by distinguishing between the Christians' person and office, "Christ person" and "person of the world," Luther accomplishes at least three things: First, he accounts for how all human beings are both equal and unequal. We are all equal as persons before God—created by God, saved by Christ—but we are all unequal as holders of a variety of offices in this world in relation to fellow humans. By virtue of these offices, some are in positions of authority over others. Second, while these offices result in social hierarchies in all three holy orders, these offices are equal in that they are all given by God to accomplish his purposes in this world. Importantly, the divine dignity these offices bestow consists precisely in the service³²³ the holders of these offices are called to render to their neighbors in their respective offices, whether as government officials, pastors, parents, children, or employees. In this world, true human dignity therefore consists in serving others according to one's calling, that is, in *becoming* their neighbors in word and deed. Third, the distinction allows Luther to shed light on the selfless motivation that drives Christians when carrying out their official duties in this world. Whatever office Christians hold—child, husband, wife, governor, judge, pastor, congregant, etc.—Christians do not carry out these offices to satisfy some selfish need or agenda. Rather, these offices are all about selflessly serving the neighbor out of faith in Christ. Thus, Christians for themselves—in their hearts, by faith—have all things in God, live in peace with all, and gladly suffer all at the hands of all, as commanded by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. But their love for their neighbors constrains them to tolerate no injustice affecting the neighbor.

4. Anti-Donatism in Church and Government

It is important to discuss one last aspect of the distinction between person and office here. In the 4th century, the sect of the Donatists claimed that the sacraments were invalid when administered by priests or bishops who had become "traitors" (*traditores*) by "handing over" (*tradere*) sacred scriptures, holy vessels, and the names of fellow Christians to the Roman authorities in times of persecution.³²⁴ Luther continued the anti-Donatist tradition of Augustine of Hippo who affirmed the validity of the official acts of the clergy regardless of the cleric's personal faith or holiness.³²⁵ Luther explains this position by distinguishing between person and office as follows:

This is how you are to regard all who have an office in the Church. For not all of them are Christians or good people who hold office and preach. God is not concerned about this. Let the person be anything he pleases, but the office is right and good. It does not belong to humans but to God himself. For instance, Caiaphas prophesies, not as Caiaphas—a murderer and evil scoundrel—but as high priest. In the same way, the pastor or preacher baptizes and brings people

³²² See LC I, 108: "[W]e are, indeed, all alike in the eyes of God; but among us there must necessarily be such inequality and ordered difference, and therefore God commands it to be observed, that you obey me as your father, and that I have the supremacy;" see also AE 26:356; AE 41:154-55; Gal. 3:28.

³²³ The Latin word behind the English "office" means "service."

³²⁴ See, e.g., Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), p. 219-20.

³²⁵ See Brown, *Augustine*, p. 222.

to eternal life—not as John Pommer, but as a pastor. For God allows this to happen to honor and confirm the office.³²⁶

At the same time, however, the preaching office established by God is not a grant of unrestricted authority to those who hold this office. The office is given to preach God’s word—the word Christ has commanded to be preached (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15)—not the doctrines of humans, including church leaders (Luke 10:16).³²⁷

Along with religious Donatism, Luther also rejected its secular variant by distinguishing the (corrupt) person from the divine office through which God himself acts:

[E]verything the government orders is right, and God confirms it. Therefore, when it convicts and punishes evildoers according to its office, that is God’s judgment which he ratifies in heaven above. God wants this judgment to be upheld, even though—apart from this office—it is forbidden [to judge]. . . . As Solomon . . . says in Prov. 8:15: “By me the kings reign,”³²⁸ that is, their law and judgment is my law and judgment, along with all their official acts—if they rule rightly. This is true even though no less than most of them in the world are great scoundrels among them who confidently misuse what is right and their power. Nonetheless, if they remain in their office and do what is right, it is all God’s doing.³²⁹

Thus, while the personal immorality or unbelief of an office holder does not interfere with God’s action through said office, official actions taken without or against “what is right” do not become “God’s doing” simply because the one performing them is the holder of a divine office. These actions are, to use a traditional legal term, *ultra vires*, that is, beyond the divine authority of a given office. They are therefore no longer the actions God performs through the offices he has established. They are no more than the person’s own actions that remain unrati- fied by God in heaven.

Put differently, princes and all who hold an office in the world (e.g., parents and children) can and should boast that they owe their respective offices to the grace of God.³³⁰ But this grace is not an unrestricted grant of absolute power the office holders may use as they see fit. Rather, God bestows these powers so that they are used within the limits of their office, that is, by doing “what is right” according to God’s commandments.³³¹ Then, and only then, are they executing

³²⁶ SLE 7:657-58; see AE 21:277.

³²⁷ See, e.g., AE 35:147-48; AE 68:163-66.

³²⁸ This verse is inscribed in the 10th century crown of the Holy Roman Emperor on a plate depicting Christ in glory between two cherubim. See 1 Cor. 1:24; AE 7:109. As Luther observed, princes “also wear golden crowns so that they may realize how God appointed them to be gods—they have not come into this position by themselves—to be his collaborators.” SLE 5:711 (AE 13:55); see Ps. 82:1; AE 7:190. In the Holy Roman Empire, the anointing of the king at his coronation “was certainly understood as transforming the new king from mere mortal to God’s instrument.” Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 309.

³²⁹ AE 21:277-78.

³³⁰ AE 23:321.

³³¹ In SLE 2:1343 (AE 7:145), Luther criticized those rulers who rely on their own wisdom. As a result of their self-reliance, God’s Wisdom—given to rulers to “enact what is right” (Prov. 8:15)—has no place among them: “They still enact and order but only unjust, useless things that cause only harm to the fatherland and communities everywhere.” In SLE 5:728 (AE 13:70), Luther asked: “What good does it do that you boast and confess that you are a lord by God’s grace, when your heart and your entire life look as if you had no God and were a self-made, free

their offices according to the institution of these offices; only then are their official acts truly “God’s doing.” Thus, as far as the requirement to remain faithful to God’s institution and will in the office one holds, there is no difference between office holders in the world and office holders in the church.

In sum, the effectiveness of the various offices of service God graciously bestows on all people do not depend on the personal holiness or faith of the office holder. This is because these offices are God’s offices. But this does not mean that these offices are limitless authorizations that would allow the office holder to abuse the offices in carnal freedom to his personal advantage. Rather, God graciously bestows these offices so that the office holders may carry them out according to God’s will by doing what is right in service of the neighbor.

5. Three Distinct Orders as Foundational Structures for a God-pleasing Life in a Fallen World

As noted above, Luther taught that God had instituted “three orders” in this world to keep sin in check: parents, government, and church.³³² Elsewhere, Luther called these three orders “the three holy governments or estates . . . , namely, household management, secular government, and the priesthood, or the house, the city, and the church.”³³³ Luther distinguished these divinely instituted hierarchies from unbiblical speculations about the three hierarchies of angels and the corresponding hierarchy of church officials that fascinated medieval theologians in the wake of writings on these topics by an anonymous author writing under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, a follower of St. Paul (Acts 17:34).³³⁴

Thus, God works in and through the three genuine hierarchies.³³⁵ The three hierarchies cooperate as follows:

The first [government] is household management, from which the people come. The second is governing the city, meaning the country, the people, princes and lords, which we call the worldly government. Everything is covered here: children, property, money, animals, etc. The home must build. The city must

lord who had all power to act against God’s commandment, according to your own arbitrary will?” Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 267-69, similarly observes that, properly understood, “power” is not the ability to do as one pleases in a world of boundless possibilities or to impose one’s *own* will on others; rather, true power is essentially linked to knowledge of, and subordination to, the ordered reality of truth.

³³² AE 3:279-80; see SLE 20:1098 (AE 37:364): “[T]he holy orders and true religious foundations instituted by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the secular government.” Elsewhere, Luther distinguished the four works commanded by the Fourth Commandment regarding parents, spiritual authorities, secular authorities, and employers. AE 44:80-98. Summarizing his discussion, Luther stated “everything that has been said about these works is included in these two—obedience and care. Obedience is the duty of subjects. Care is the duty of the overlords so that they be diligent to rule their subjects well, deal kindly with them, and do everything that is useful and helpful for them. This is their way to heaven, and these are their best works they can do on earth.” SLE 10:1374-75; see AE 44:99; see also Rom. 12:6-8; Acts 5:29.

³³³ SLE 2:297; see AE 5:139 (WA 43:524: “Hae igitur sunt tres hierarchiae . . . , videlicet oeconomia, Politia et Sacerdotium, sive Domus, Civitas et Ecclesia.”). In his Small Catechism, Luther introduced the table of duties as a selection of scriptural passages “for various holy orders and positions.”

³³⁴ See AE 1:235. These hierarchies are also different from the three classes of people Plato described in his *Republic*, the rulers/guardians/philosophers, helpers/soldiers, and craftsmen/moneymakers in whom different parts of the soul predominate, where the philosophers rule due to their contemplation of the unchanging eternal truth from which they establish just laws. See, e.g., Plato, *Republic* III, 415a-d; IV, 434b-c, 440e-441c, VI, 484a-485b.

³³⁵ AE 54:446.

guard, protect, and defend it. Then comes the third, God's own house and city, that is, the church. It must obtain people from the house and protection and defense from the city.³³⁶

Luther emphasized that “the house is the source of the political community. For if father and mother, wife and husband, are not there who beget and instruct children, the political community cannot remain.”³³⁷ This is also true for the church, as its ministers also cannot accomplish much without mothers and fathers doing their duty as bishop and bishopess by leading their families in morning, mealtime, and evening prayer and teaching their children the catechism and at least some of key bible passages.³³⁸ Indeed, Luther wrote his Small Catechism as an instructional manual in the basics of the faith for use by the head of the household.³³⁹ Yet despite the parents' religious duties toward their children, the family is not a church in that moral and religious differences in one family—among the spouses or among parents and children—do not destroy the obligation to care for each other within the family with physical gifts, provided that the non-believers wish to remain with the Christians and allow them to practice their faith (1 Cor. 7:12-16).³⁴⁰

To assist the parents in their difficult task of raising children in a God-pleasing way, Luther called on the government to establish public schools—along with carefully curated public libraries—to instruct children “in the fear of God, discipline, arts, doctrine, and honor.”³⁴¹ Beyond these fundamental subject matters, godly schools perform a dual service to society at large in that they supply both the church and the government with faithful and able servants who serve as God's masks in these two holy orders.³⁴²

When properly schooled ministers of the church faithfully administer the means of grace, God himself does great things for individuals and, in fact, the whole world. By the gospel in word and sacraments, individuals are miraculously set free from sin, death and every disease, and eternal damnation.³⁴³ The world benefits as faithful pastors instruct all people in what they should do in their various stations and offices in life—parents, servants, children, etc.—to lead a peaceful life that is pleasing to God.³⁴⁴

While the government cannot make dead people alive, it has the lesser but still highly important tasks of turning wild beasts into human beings and preventing human beings from becoming wild beasts, which serves to preserve outward peace as well as physical lives and

³³⁶ SLE 16:2300-01; see AE 41:177.

³³⁷ WA 40.3:220-21.

³³⁸ AE 51:137; see LC I, 168, where Luther notes that parents have duty not only to provide for physical needs of their children but “but, most of all, to train them to the honor and praise of God.”

³³⁹ See SC, *passim*.

³⁴⁰ AE 28:32-39. Marriage is therefore not a sacrament open only to Christians. AE 36:92-96; see AE 41:157-64.

³⁴¹ SLE 10:422; see AE 46:218; see also LC I, 141; AE 41:176; AE 45:355-57, 368-69, 373-77.

³⁴² AE 41:132, 176; AE 45:357-68; AE 46:231-32, 241-42, 251-52; see LC I, 172-73, where Luther noted that, “if we wish to have excellent and apt persons both for civil and ecclesiastical government, we must spare no diligence, time, or cost in teaching and educating our children, that they may serve God and the world, and we must not think only how we may amass money and possessions for them.” Luther also emphasized the need for schools to train physicians and those trained in the seven liberal arts, as the latter are fundamental tools for all preachers and government officials. AE 46:252-53.

³⁴³ AE 46:223-25.

³⁴⁴ AE 46:226-27.

possessions.³⁴⁵ The government is therefore to be praised as “a glorious, divine order and an excellent gift of God, who has founded and instituted it and who wants to have it maintained as something we cannot do without.”³⁴⁶

Faithful soldiers are certainly important servants of God to protect outward peace.³⁴⁷ Yet more important are those who are well-trained in the law—“government’s wisdom and reason”—and who hold offices at any level of government, as they play a key role in preserving the government and the gifts God gives through this institution.³⁴⁸ In fact, because reason is so critical in these offices—and because reason is a rare thing that is not equally distributed, as seen above—the work in government is more difficult than the work in the church; thus, only the ablest students should go into this field.³⁴⁹

By doing their part in raising up children to serve the public good within God’s holy orders, godly schools resist the devil who wants to overthrow both church and government by keeping people ignorant about proper service in these two orders and by causing people to focus single-mindedly on earning a good living by learning some more practical skills by experience.³⁵⁰ Seen in a spiritual context, it is evident that not all schools and not all learning will be of equal benefit for Christians and society at large, as some schools will do the devil’s bidding by powerfully undermining God’s holy orders.³⁵¹ This discernment is of critical importance because the life of all people must take place within these three holy orders ordained by God in order to be a life pleasing to him and to be of service to the neighbor.³⁵²

In sum, God did not create the world in some unstructured, chaotic way, thereby leaving it up to human ingenuity to devise the critical structures of social life in an endless process of trial and error in response to changing historical challenges or preferences. Rather, God himself established the unchanging foundational social structures for human life in this world—family with the marriage of husband and wife at its core, government, and church. It is within and through those structures that God provides for humanity’s essential needs: procreation and education, protection, and redemption. Outside of these divinely instituted structures, there can be no truly human life.

The family—and by extension the school—plays a very important role in God’s ordering of the world. Not only does God use parents to bring new human beings into this world. Parents also educate children in the rudiments of faith and virtuous living in this world. Additionally, the family is the first social location where children should learn who Christ is and what it means to lead a life of serving the neighbor. As Luther recognized, without these essential contributions of the family, the tasks of government and church become difficult if not impossible.

³⁴⁵ AE 46:237.

³⁴⁶ SLE 10:439; see AE 46:237.

³⁴⁷ AE 46:245-46.

³⁴⁸ SLE 10:441; see AE 46:239-40.

³⁴⁹ AE 46:242.

³⁵⁰ AE 45:348, 369; AE 46:217-19, 222.

³⁵¹ AE 45:349-50.

³⁵² AE 4:23; see also AE 5:269; AE 41:177. Albrecht Peters, *Der Mensch* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979), p. 50, observed: “While Melancthon, who took up the natural-law tradition rather uncritically, explicates the social dimension of our human existence out of the social impulse innate in human beings, Luther bases the social dimension of human beings on the orders and institutions of the Creator.”

6. The Divine Institution and Purposes of the Three Holy Orders

It is worthwhile to shed some light on the specific times in history when God instituted the three holy orders of family, government, and church, because their respective institution provides further insight into the purpose of these hierarchies. The church was instituted first, already in paradise, even before the household and the government, “without walls and any splendor, in the most spacious and most delightful place.”³⁵³ Specifically, the church was instituted when God preached to Adam a “brief sermon” regarding the tree of knowledge, Gen. 2:16-17, which, if the fall had not occurred, “would have been the bible for Adam and all of us.” Indeed, this sermon “would have summarized and concluded the entire study of wisdom and would have—as if drawn on a board—shown us the goodness of God who had created nature pure and perfect, without any of the damages and illnesses which later on followed the fall.”³⁵⁴

The fact that the church was instituted by God’s word before the house and the government is significant because it indicates “that humans were created for a different purpose than the other living beings. For because the church is instituted and ordained by the word of God, it is certain that humans were created for an eternal and spiritual life.”³⁵⁵ After the fall, the true church gathered around the promise of the Seed (Gen. 3:15) who would crush the devil’s head; this promise was fulfilled in Christ who “truly is the Seed of Mary.”³⁵⁶

The household was instituted when “God turn[ed] lonely Adam into a husband by joining a wife to him, whom he needed for the increase of the human race.”³⁵⁷ This increase is the “common good that concerned the entire human race”—as opposed to Adam’s personal good—that is for marriage to accomplish per Gen. 2:18.³⁵⁸ After the fall, marriage takes on the additional purposes of companionship and protection, as well as being “a remedy against sin.”³⁵⁹ While the fall imposed on Adam the punishment of “labor and the sweat of his brow,” “the wife was ordered to be subject to her husband,” “by the law that was given after the fall.”³⁶⁰ Yet even after the fall, “your wife, . . . because she is your wife, is a master in the household as well as you.”³⁶¹ But then as now, the husband is the head of the household so that the wife “shines by virtue of her husband’s rays” and wives and husbands differ “in no other respect than in sex;

³⁵³ SLE 1:126; see AE 1:103. It is worth noting that Luther, while not a legalist when it came to abolishing elaborate forms of worship, did prefer simpler, less splendid forms of worship because they were less spiritually dangerous, less divisive, and more consistent with Christ’s “simple institution” of his Supper on the night he was betrayed. SLE 19:1039; see AE 35:81-82. The simple form of the Lord’s Supper instituted by Christ therefore corresponds to the simple form of the church God instituted in paradise.

³⁵⁴ SLE 1:128; see AE 1:105.

³⁵⁵ SLE 1:127; see AE 1:104.

³⁵⁶ SLE 1:237; see AE 1:194; see also AE 1:246-47, 324.

³⁵⁷ SLE 1:140; see AE 1:115.

³⁵⁸ SLE 1:141; see AE 1:115-16.

³⁵⁹ SLE 1:142; see AE 1:116; see also 1 Cor. 7:2 and AE 28:11-12.

³⁶⁰ SLE 1:168; see AE 1:137-38, 203; see Gen. 3:16; Eph. 5:22-33. In general, man’s rule over woman extends to the household and the political sphere, as well as the church. See, e.g., AE 1:203; AE 15:130-31; AE 28:276. At the same time, Luther recognized (despite his at time dismissive remarks about women in general, e.g., AE 13:161) that God, from time to time, did authorize women—e.g., Sarah, Deborah, Huldah, and Mary—to rule over men, even in spiritual matters. AE 36:152; AE 40:390-91. As Luther observed, these women administered public affairs very well. AE 28:276 (WA 26:46: “optime administrarunt res”). Yet their rule over men in the world and the church is an exception triggered when there are no suitable men available to rule or preach. AE 28:277, 280; AE 36:152.

³⁶¹ SLE 1:168; see AE 1:137.

otherwise the wife is altogether like the husband.”³⁶² Thus, even now after the fall, “the wife—if she is honest, disciplined, pious, and God-fearing—has an equal share with the husband in the care, food, and the various offices and work in the household.”³⁶³ Moreover, husband and wife remain each other’s precious gift from God, as Eve and Adam were to each other.³⁶⁴

Finally, the government—consistent with its purpose to restrain sin (Rom. 13)—was instituted after the fall, as “it was not necessary” “before the fall.”³⁶⁵ Cain, Adam’s first-born, already appears as “king and priest” and, as a farmer, has to do with government, while Abel, as a shepherd, is limited to the household (Gen. 4:2).³⁶⁶ After the government was essentially destroyed before the flood,³⁶⁷ God reinstated the government after the flood in Gen. 9:6.³⁶⁸

In Gen. 9:6, God specifically instituted the death penalty as “a new law,” which is “the origin of all laws in the world.”³⁶⁹ Luther reasoned that, “[i]f God grants humans power over life and death, he certainly gives them power over that which is less, such as possessions, house and farm, wife, children and servants, fields, etc. God wants all these to be under the power of some people so that evildoers may be punished.”³⁷⁰ Specifically, the government—after establishing guilt in court—“should punish all sins forbidden in the Second Table.”³⁷¹ The purpose of the government therefore is “to restrain recklessness lest cruelty and other sins completely gain the upper hand. . . . By the government, God has protected our life and possessions as with barriers and walls.”³⁷² But without “this divine power . . . , what sort of life would we be living,” given “that there would always be much misfortune and anger in the world”?³⁷³

Even though the divine image in humans was lost to some extent by the fall,³⁷⁴ God nonetheless protects man as “the noblest creature of all,” because that image “can again be obtained through the word and the Holy Spirit.”³⁷⁵ The (re-)establishment of government after the flood is therefore another “proof of the supreme love of God toward humans.”³⁷⁶ And even by doing its inner-worldly duty of protecting human life by keeping sin in check, the government has a purpose that transcends this world and thereby serves the ultimately spiritual purpose of all men for which the triune God created them—eternal life in the presence of God.

³⁶² AE 1:137; see Gen. 2:23.

³⁶³ SLE 1:168; see AE 1:137.

³⁶⁴ AE 21:87. Luther elaborates on this comforting teaching further in sermons he preached in 1531. They are available in a popular format as Martin Luther, *What Is Marriage, Really?* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2013).

³⁶⁵ SLE 1:127; see AE 1:103.

³⁶⁶ SLE 1:298; see AE 1:243, 246.

³⁶⁷ AE 2:32.

³⁶⁸ AE 2:139-40; AE 45:85-86.

³⁶⁹ SLE 1:598-99; see AE 2:140.

³⁷⁰ SLE 1:599; see AE 2:140.

³⁷¹ SLE 1:599; see AE 2:140-41.

³⁷² SLE 1:599-600; see AE 2:141.

³⁷³ SLE 1:599; see AE 2:141; see also AE 46:237-38.

³⁷⁴ As discussed, Luther understood the image of God to express humanity’s proper relationship with God as well as humanity’s endowment with reason and useful arts for this life. It is therefore evident that the former aspect of the image was lost while the latter aspect was merely damaged by the fall.

³⁷⁵ SLE 1:600; see AE 2:141.

³⁷⁶ SLE 1:600; see AE 2:141.

The significance of government as a *divine* institution lies in that this institution by God “resolves the argument that vexed Plato and all philosophers.”³⁷⁷ This problem consists in the question of why some may rule while others must obey, although “human beings are of the same rank and dignity among themselves.”³⁷⁸ Given the equality of all humans, one human’s rule over other humans “seems to be tyranny” and “injustice” to human reason.³⁷⁹ “But we who have the word recognize that this thinking is countered by the commandment of God, who orders and institutes things this way. Hence, we ought to subject ourselves to the divine order and put up with it.”³⁸⁰

Finally, the fact that God instituted the government does not mean God instituted a particular form of government, such as monarchy or democracy.³⁸¹ So long as those who exercise governmental power do their divinely assigned duty of protecting human lives and livelihoods by keeping sin in check in accordance with God’s unchanging law, they act as God’s governing agents.

In sum, church, family, and government do not owe their existence to human ingenuity. Nor did they emerge by chance out of long, complex processes of human and social development. Rather, these three holy orders owe their existence to God’s action at distinct times in history. God instituted the church already in paradise, before the fall. As in the case of the divine image in humans, the fact that God instituted the church for humans, but not for animals, indicates that humans alone have the higher purpose of immortal life with God. Since the fall into sin, the church has been gathered around the proclamation of the promise concerning the divine-human Seed who would crush Satan to set sinners free to live the life God intends for them. God instituted the family already in paradise as well when he created Eve for Adam so as to enable Adam to procreate. After the fall, marriage additionally serves as remedy for sinful desires. God instituted the government after the fall and reconfirmed this institution after the flood. The government by God’s design has authority over human life and all other human affairs in order to protect the life of human beings—the noblest of creatures—from the destructive effects of sin. This bodily protection of human life enables the church’s proclamation of the gospel to restore the lost image of God in human beings so that they may realize the spiritual purpose for which God created them.

³⁷⁷ SLE 1:600; see AE 2:142.

³⁷⁸ SLE 1:600; see AE 2:142. Plato, e.g., introduced the idea of a social contract by one of Socrates’s interlocutors in the *Republic* as a very preliminary approach to “the nature and origin of justice” but the interlocutor conceded that “anyone who had the power to do it and was in reality ‘a man’ would never make a compact with anybody either to wrong nor to be wronged; for he would be mad.” Plato, *Republic* II, 358e-359b (tr. P. Shorey). Plato’s own solution consisted in outlining a comprehensive structure of reality from the idea of the Good down to the souls of individuals whereby he argued that those who are capable of contemplating the Good—the true philosophers—should also be able to establish a just rule over others.

³⁷⁹ SLE 1:601; see AE 2:142.

³⁸⁰ SLE 1:601; see AE 2:142.

³⁸¹ AE 39:64.

7. The Church of God and the Church of the Devil

As God's creatures and institutions, the three hierarchies are under constant attack in this world. In fact, given that unchastity—caused by a violation of the First Commandment³⁸²—was a prominent sin of the world that existed before the flood (Gen. 6:1-4), this sin resulted in “the confusion of all orders.”³⁸³

The church was ruined by idolatry and false worship, as well as tyrants who cruelly persecuted pious teachers and holy people. And by tyranny and injustice, worldly government broke down, but household management was abrogated by unbridled unchastity which was pursued without fear and punishment.³⁸⁴

Importantly, this ruining of the church by idolatry and false worship began when it split into two at the first mention of an offering of a sacrifice in Gen. 4:3. As Adam and Eve served not only as parents but also as priests, they delivered “holy sermons” to their children in terms of God's law and God's gospel, covering their former state in paradise, the effect of sin, admonition to live in the fear of God, the hope of eternal life, as well as “the promise of the Seed and future redemption from all misery and misfortune.”³⁸⁵ Sacrifices were handed down to “to show gratitude to such a kind and gracious God” for the hope of future redemption he provided.³⁸⁶

Yet despite the piety and excellence of the teaching of Adam and Eve as the first priests, the reception of this teaching was mixed. Cain, the firstborn and heir apparent to political rule, did not believe in the divine promise set forth in the parents' teaching, while Abel who was without outward prestige as the second-born, did believe and therefore offered the better sacrifice.³⁸⁷

The result was a split in the church over (faith in) the gospel and God-pleasing worship, resulting in persecution and death on part of the believing church at the hands of the hypocritical

³⁸² According to AE 2:6, violation of the First Commandment was the preeminent sin of the world before the flood, as original sin caused humans to become prideful by God's abundant gifts while despising the Creator. This sin then resulted in adultery and other violations of the Second Table.

³⁸³ SLE 1:472; see WA 42:284: “*perturbatio omnium Ordinum*,” AE 2:32: “the disorganization of all classes of men.”

³⁸⁴ SLE 1:472; see AE 2:32.

³⁸⁵ SLE 1:302; see AE 1:246; see also Gen. 4:26.

³⁸⁶ SLE 1:303; see AE 1:247. In SLE 1:303-04 (AE 1:248-49), Luther noted that sacrifices commanded by God functioned as a sacrament, that is, as “an outward and visible sign of [God's] grace in addition to the word,” in which “Adam took great comfort . . . after he had lost Paradise.”

³⁸⁷ AE 1:247, 251, 257-58; see Hebr. 11:4. In SLE 9:349 (AE 26:263-64), Luther deduced from Hebr. 11:6 that Cain's sacrifice was “a hypocritical and faithless one,” “because he was godless and a hypocrite” who presumptuously trusted in his own righteousness and who therefore lacked “faith in grace.”

church.³⁸⁸ Both churches will continue to the end of the world.³⁸⁹ And while the membership ratio between the two churches may vary over time, the constant theme of their relationship will always be “that the hypocritical and bloodthirsty church enjoy[s] honor before the world and plague[s] and torture[s] the true church that [i]s loved by God.”³⁹⁰

This, however, is nothing but the outworking of the promise of Gen. 3:15 throughout human history, the serpent’s seed biting the heel of the blessed Seed, thereby conforming the true followers of Christ to their crucified Savior.³⁹¹ Thus, the members of the true church must not be offended by their suffering in the world.³⁹² Rather, “we must consider the cross and such condemnation [by the hypocritical church] to be certain and infallible signs of the true and authentic church.”³⁹³

In addition to the cross, the true church has other biblical marks by which the Holy Spirit gathers for Christ a holy people and by which the true church is recognized as the church that has remained faithful to the ancient church of the apostles.³⁹⁴ These biblical marks of faithfulness also distinguish the true church from the false church, as countless unbiblical innovations expose the latter as the new false church.³⁹⁵ What turns these innovations into “devilish poison and hellish murder”—instead of mere practical innovations one could bear in love for the sake of peace—is that they “must be called the command of the church, holy worship, a good life, a spiritual existence, for which one deserve grace and life (if one observes them) or wrath and death (if one doesn’t).”³⁹⁶ “This is what it means to turn lies into truth, the devil into God, hell into heaven, and vice versa.”³⁹⁷

Importantly, one of the key elements dividing these churches—in addition to the gospel—is the papal office. The hypocritical church instituted “this sacrilegious innovation” that

³⁸⁸ AE 1:247, 252-53; see Matt. 23:35. Luther acknowledged that St. Augustine addressed the conflict between Cain and Abel in his treatise *On the City of God*. AE 1:252. Augustine, however, speculatively backdated the beginning of this conflict to the fall of the angels—the angels were created on the first day, and the fall also happened on the first day—and described it as the conflict between truth (light) and pride (darkness), love of God and love of self, the “city of God” and the “city of men.” See Augustine, *City of God* XI, 19; XII, 6; XIV, 13, 28; XV, 1. Within this broader context, Augustine described the difference between Cain’s and Abel’s sacrifice without referencing (the absence of) faith in the promise per Heb. 11:4, but by noting that Cain proudly offered the sacrifice without offering himself, i.e., he used God only to enjoy worldly advantages, while Abel used the world to enjoy God. *City of God* XV, 7.

³⁸⁹ AE 1:252.

³⁹⁰ SLE 1:309; see AE 1:252.

³⁹¹ AE 1:252-53; AE 41:178; see John 16:2; Rom. 8:29.

³⁹² AE 1:253.

³⁹³ SLE 1:310; see AE 1:253.

³⁹⁴ AE 41:148-67, 171-73, 193-98. A key treatise on Luther’s doctrine of the church, discussing these marks, is available in a popular format: Martin Luther, *A Christian Holy People* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press: 2012).

³⁹⁵ AE 41:199-206.

³⁹⁶ SLE 17:1333-34; see AE 41:206; see also SLE 16:2292 (AE 41:167-68): “When the devil saw that God built such a holy church, he got busy and built his chapel next door, bigger than God’s church. This is what he did: He saw that God took external things—baptism, the word, the sacrament of the altar, keys, etc.—by which he sanctified his church. And because he is always God’s ape who wants to imitate (and improve upon) God in all things, he also took up external things that were supposed to sanctify people,” such as holy water, salt, candles, herbs, bells, images, and the like.

³⁹⁷ SLE 17:1334; see AE 41:206.

it gave the church “a bodily head,” even though the church “is a spiritual kingdom.”³⁹⁸ The pope’s own decrees assert that “that no Christian can be saved unless he obeys him and is subject to him in all things that he wishes, that he says, and that he does.”³⁹⁹ However, membership in Christ’s spiritual kingdom by faith in Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation.⁴⁰⁰

As for the government of the visible church on earth,

[t]he Church can never be better governed and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ, and all the bishops equal in office (although they be unequal in gifts), be diligently joined in unity of doctrine, faith, Sacraments, prayer, and works of love, etc., as St. Jerome writes that the priests at Alexandria together and in common governed the churches, as did also the apostles, and afterwards all bishops throughout all Christendom, until the Pope raised his head above all.⁴⁰¹

In addition to this apostolic form of governance of the visible church, church councils—again following apostolic precedent (Acts 15)—may need to be convened from time to time as gatherings of ministers from multiple congregations. This should be done to deal with false teachings that attack the ancient faith or the ancient good works revealed in God’s unchanging word but that are too powerful to be dealt with at the local level.⁴⁰²

Moreover, among the marks of the ancient true church is the proper teaching on honoring the “worldly rulers” and on marriage “as a divine, blessed, and well-pleasing creation and order for procreation and against carnal unchastity.”⁴⁰³ The Holy Spirit uses even these outward institutions to sanctify his holy people.⁴⁰⁴ By contrast, the new false church has been innovative in these fundamental areas of human life together as well by “damning, reviling, and condemning the institution of marriage as impure and unfit for worship,”⁴⁰⁵ by ruling (and seeking to expand) the church by the sword,⁴⁰⁶ and by deposing political authorities at will based on a false understanding of the office of the keys (Matt. 16:18-19).⁴⁰⁷

³⁹⁸ SLE 17:1331; see AE 41:203; see also SA II, IV, 1. In AE 41:290-92 Luther identified Boniface III, a seventh-century Roman bishop, as the first pope in this sense because he was the first to claim the title of “universal pope”; see also AE 39:65, 68; AE 45:88; LC II, 51.

³⁹⁹ SA II, IV, 4.

⁴⁰⁰ LC II, 45.

⁴⁰¹ SA II, IV, 9. In SLE 16:2279 (AE 41:154), Luther noted that “the church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers . . . For one must have bishops, pastors, or preachers who publicly and privately give, offer, and apply the four [means of grace] mentioned above.” In SLE 10:406 (AE 45:117), Luther noted that the ruling of Christians by priests and bishops is “nothing other than teaching God’s word, by which they lead Christians and overcome heresy.” See AE 31:356.

⁴⁰² AE 41:135-36.

⁴⁰³ SLE 17:1325; see AE 41:196-97.

⁴⁰⁴ AE 41:166.

⁴⁰⁵ SLE 17:1332; see AE 41:204. Catholic priests, as a rule, are required to be celibate. The Roman Catechism, prepared in the 1560s, required that married couples abstain from sexual intercourse prior to taking communion “for some days.” *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*, tr. John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1947), p. 248.

⁴⁰⁶ AE 41:205.

⁴⁰⁷ AE 41:292-93. The pope’s power to depose kings and emperors was asserted for the first time in the 11th century as part of an ascetic reform movement within church and society. At the time, pope Gregory VII (c. 1015-1085) saw the relation between “church and state” as that between soul and body, with the pope as the head of the whole body. Indeed, he argued that kings were a pagan-human institution, naturally subject to the priesthood instituted by God.

The hypocritical church therefore not only undermines the church by opposing and persecuting the true church and introducing all sorts of innovations, including the papal office and a “gospel” that does not teach salvation by faith in Christ alone. By its erroneous teachings on the other two hierarchies that lead men from these divine hierarchies to spiritual estates of the devil’s making, it also undermines the government and marriage/the house.⁴⁰⁸ “Now, if you take out of the world *veram religionem, veram politiam, veram oeconomiam*, that is, a true spiritual existence, true worldly government, and true home discipline, what is left in the world besides utter flesh, world, and devil? It is a life like that of playboys who live with whores.”⁴⁰⁹

Based on these objective biblical marks of the true church, Luther concluded that the church gathered around the pope is the hypocritical church of Cain and the devil filled with all manner of innovations, while he and his followers continued the true church of Abel and Christ that has remained faithful to the true ancient church of the apostles.⁴¹⁰

Despite this irreconcilable and fundamental division in the visible church, Christ’s spiritual kingdom is one, namely, the one holy Christian and apostolic church, “holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd,” whose “holiness . . . consists in the Word of God and true faith.”⁴¹¹ This church is “the pillar and ground of the truth” that cannot err because God’s word cannot err.⁴¹² Built by faith on the rock of “the Christ, the Son of the living God”—as he is taught and explicated in the writings of the prophets and apostles—this church cannot be overcome by the gates of hell.⁴¹³ “[O]utside of this Christian Church, where the Gospel is not, there is no forgiveness, as also there can be no holiness,” which is why those who replace faith in the gospel by trust in their own works to establish their holiness before God “have expelled and severed themselves [from the Church].”⁴¹⁴

Based on this concept, he excommunicated *and deposed* emperor Henry IV. While this reform movement sought to purify the church from worldly entanglements—e.g., by requiring clerical celibacy and prohibiting imperial investiture of bishops in Germany—it resulted in greater political entanglement of the papacy, while radical lay piety, inquisition, crusades (and related indulgences), and monasticism spread. Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 51-62, 97-98; Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 126-27; see AE 39:209-11; AE 41:332; AE 44:164; AE 46:186; AE 54:407.

⁴⁰⁸ AE 41:177.

⁴⁰⁹ SLE 20:2130; see AE 46:182.

⁴¹⁰ AE 1:254; AE 41:193-94; see SA III, XII, 1: “We do not concede to them that they are the Church, and [in truth] they are not [the Church].”

⁴¹¹ SA III, XII, 2-3; see LC II, 51. Accordingly, “the church springs from the word of promise through faith. By the same word of promise it is nourished and preserved. . . . For the word of God is incomparably superior to the church. Beyond this word, the church has not authority to institute, ordain, or do anything. Rather, the church is to be instituted, ordained, and made as a creature.” SLE 19:108; see AE 36:107; see also AE 40:37. The Holy Spirit uses the Church to “teach and preach to us the Word.” In this precise sense, the Church is “the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God.” LC II, 42, 53. The renowned theologians of the church’s past should be recognized by Christians as fellow saints “by the rule of love, not the standard of faith.” But their teachings must be subjected to the judgment of faith based on God’s biblical word, to distinguish between what is of the Spirit and what is of the flesh in their writings. Christians should embrace the former while disregarding the latter. Their holiness of life does not mean that everything they taught is correct. SLE 18:1739; see AE 33:88-89; see also AE 35:135; AE 36:189-90; AE 39:192-93, 268; AE 44:255, 268-69, 272; AE 52:173-76, 191-92, 249; AE 79:334-35; see 1 Cor. 3:11-15.

⁴¹² 1 Tim. 3:15; AE 33:85; AE 41:217; AE 61:226.

⁴¹³ Matt. 16:13-19; 1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20; AE 39:86-89; AE 41:309-16; AE 67:276-78.

⁴¹⁴ LC II, 56.

Christ's spiritual kingdom of grace exists in the true visible church on earth, that is, among those who outwardly profess the true Christian faith. This assembly has those outward ancient markers discussed above, which the Spirit uses to gather and sanctify God's people, even as the church, in the world, is organized into other structures such as parishes and church bodies.⁴¹⁵ This outward assembly includes both believers and unbelievers where the latter—being “in this [visible] community without being in the [spiritual] community”—“are dead before God,” because they lack saving faith in Christ.⁴¹⁶ The false outward church has its own innovative marks, as discussed. But even in the false outward church with its many innovations are those who are true believers, that is, individuals who, by God's grace, disregard the innovations and cling to Christ's ancient gospel to the extent it has not been eradicated by the new church.⁴¹⁷

In sum, God created household, government, and church as the permanent structures for human communal life on earth. But since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, these structures have been under constant assault. In fact, the church permanently split into two soon after the fall. The resulting antagonism between the true church and the false church cannot be healed and therefore permeates all human history from the time of the split until the return of Christ in glory. Under the cross of persecution, the true visible church gathers around God's word, sacraments, ministry, and the other outward markers the Holy Spirit uses to sanctify sinners in faith and love. The true church also teaches government and marriage as divine, sanctifying institutions of God. The true church preserves and defends the ancient faith and the ancient good works taught in God's word. But not all who are outward members of the true visible church are also members of Christ's spiritual kingdom because not all outward members have saving faith in Christ in their hearts. By contrast, the false church is innovative in that it adds to God's biblical institutions and sanctifying marks other, humanly devised institutions (including the papacy), teachings (including a denial of the gospel), and activities that crowd out God's gifts because they seem much holier and more efficacious than what God has instituted. However, to the extent the gospel still sounds forth in the false church, there will also be members of Christ's spiritual kingdom in the false outward church.

8. Virtuous Government

a) The Three Virtues of Government

As a divine institution, the government has a divine dignity, to the point that God's word calls government officials “gods” and the political community “the congregation of God” (Ps. 82:1).⁴¹⁸ God acts and judges through them to preserve fallen creation in outward peace, and

⁴¹⁵ AE 39:69-70; AE 41:165-66; LC II, 42-45.

⁴¹⁶ SLE 18:1019; see AE 39:70-71.

⁴¹⁷ AE 41:207-11, 296; see SLE 17:2212 (AE 40:251): “We must . . . admit that the enthusiasts [who practice rebaptism] have the Scriptures and the word of God in other articles of the faith. Whoever hears it from them and believes will be saved, even though they are unholy heretics and blasphemers of Christ.”

⁴¹⁸ AE 13:43-44, 46-47; see Ex. 22:8. The same word used for God and gods in Ps. 82:1 is used in Ex. 22:8 to refer to judges. Elsewhere, Luther noted that the divine dignity of rulers is an echo of the attempt of Adam and Eve to be like God. Because this sin is the origin of all other human sins, God punishes it by placing the god-like burden of governing people on humans to remind them of the severity of the corruption wrought by original sin. AE 7:195.

resisting these officials means to resist God.⁴¹⁹ This divinity of the rulers shields them from criticism that is based on mere human ideas, even if that criticism is uttered by a member of the clergy or the people.⁴²⁰ Yet their dignity does not make them immune from all criticism, so as to make them free to indulge in “their vice and recklessness.”⁴²¹ Rather, because they are set over the political communities that also belong to God, God himself judges them.⁴²²

God judges the “gods” of government by means of those who are charged with the public preaching of the word of God. This charge includes “rebuking and judging their gods freely and openly” instead of secretly grumbling against them.⁴²³ Done this way, rebuking government officials is not seditious.⁴²⁴ In fact, *not* rebuking the vices of government leaders would be seditious. By failing to rebuke those vices, “the preacher makes the masses mad and unwilling, strengthens the evil of tyrants, shares in their evil, and becomes guilty of it. This might cause God to become angry and allow an uprising to come as a scourge.”⁴²⁵ However, preachers must not follow the example of Müntzer and Karstadt who caused unrest by rebuking only government officials while flattering the people.⁴²⁶ Like the biblical prophets, preachers are neither toadies of princes nor slaves of the peasants. They are God’s servants who are called to preach God’s word impartially to lords and servants alike.⁴²⁷

Thus, while government officials are gods over God’s congregation, they are not “gods over God” or over his word in order to indulge in their self-will.⁴²⁸ “For God’s word establishes them and turns them into gods and subjects everything to them. This is why they are not to despise this word that appointed and established them. Instead, they are to be subject to it, allowing themselves to be judged, rebuked, made, and taught by the same.”⁴²⁹ Indeed, God says to all rulers who proudly invoke that they govern by God’s grace but do not care about God’s law in the administration of their high government offices: “What about me? What about my commandments which I have given you? You did not put yourselves in charge. I, I, I have said that you are gods.”⁴³⁰

God’s word, therefore, institutes government as a divine office on earth. But this institution is not a grant of unrestricted power. Rather, God’s word also limits and directs governmental power by teaching those who hold governmental office what they should do in this office to preserve life and peace in the political congregation of God. And God’s word also warns government officials should they fail to govern in a manner that pleases God.⁴³¹ If they

⁴¹⁹ AE 13:44-45; see Rom. 13:2.

⁴²⁰ AE 13:42, 45, 49.

⁴²¹ SLE 5:698; see AE 13:42-43. Luther made the same important point in his comments on Ex. 22:8. AE 63:34.

⁴²² AE 13:47-48.

⁴²³ SLE 5:705; see AE 13:48-49.

⁴²⁴ AE 13:50.

⁴²⁵ SLE 5:706; see AE 13:50-51.

⁴²⁶ AE 13:51.

⁴²⁷ AE 13:51; see AE 12:242.

⁴²⁸ SLE 5:704; see AE 13:48.

⁴²⁹ SLE 5:704; see AE 13:48. Commenting on Ex. 22:8, Luther made the same point: God’s word (i.e., his institution of their office)—not any personal characteristics of the judge (or prince)—turns human judges into gods who function as God’s masks and who therefore handle the sword that properly belongs to God in a legitimate way, that is, in a way that does not result in their own death. AE 63:33-35; see Matt. 26:52.

⁴³⁰ SLE 5:727; see AE 13:70.

⁴³¹ AE 13:68.

fail to heed God’s word, they are without God, cease to be gods, and thus become mere princes—and will “assuredly be lost,” as usually happens to tyrants.⁴³²

Luther distilled three concrete virtues from Ps. 82:2-4 which political government is to practice in this world—promoting God’s word; protecting the poor; and military defense against foreign enemies. Their first virtue is that “they can vindicate those who fear God and curb the godless.”⁴³³ This specifically involves ensuring that “God’s word is protected and wielded, so that it can be freely taught and learned” and that “false teachers are not given the opportunity to teach and are not aided against God-fearing teachers.”⁴³⁴ Those government officials who practice this “heroic virtue” are rightly called “saviors” because they help “many to salvation, that they, redeemed from sin and death, may attain salvation.”⁴³⁵ In order to have faithful preachers, the government is duty-bound to maintain schools, and to compel their subjects to send their children to schools, where such men are trained.⁴³⁶

The second governmental virtue is “vindicating the poor orphans and widows and promoting their affairs.”⁴³⁷ Generally including “all works of justice,” this virtue specifically involves giving and enforcing “good laws and customs” applicable to “all estates, dealings, trades, businesses, services, and works.”⁴³⁸ Distinguishing this virtue from the then-common efforts to aid the poor by physical relief efforts, Luther conceded that these efforts—e.g., building hospitals for the poor—is “a precious good work” that is praiseworthy “as a great and beautiful, though human, virtue.”⁴³⁹ Exemplary in taking care of the physical needs of the poor is Joseph’s building of barns and his gathering of grain to feed the Egyptians (and their neighbors) during the seven years of famine.⁴⁴⁰ In his day, Luther offered his advice to government officials on how to arrange for the *peaceful* transfer of the property owned by religious foundations and monasteries—instead of allowing these assets to be looted by greed—into a “common chest” to purchase grain for the common stores and to offer other assistance to meet the community’s material needs.⁴⁴¹ This provided an example of how, in conjunction with other reasonable

⁴³² SLE 5:730; see AE 13:72.

⁴³³ SLE 5:707; see AE 13:52; see Ps. 82:2.

⁴³⁴ SLE 5:708; see AE 13:52.

⁴³⁵ SLE 5:714; see AE 13:58.

⁴³⁶ AE 41:135; AE 46:256-57.

⁴³⁷ SLE 5:709; see AE 13:53; see Ps. 82:3.

⁴³⁸ SLE 5:709; see AE 13:53.

⁴³⁹ SLE 5:709-10; see AE 13:53-54.

⁴⁴⁰ In SLE 2:1360 (AE 7:158-59), Luther characterized the building of storehouses for grain as part of the “the office of kings and princes” and “the order of the Holy Spirit who entrusted to the princes the provision of grain and the other daily needs of the subjects.” In SLE 7:537 (AE 21:171-72), Luther commented on Matt. 6:19-21 by observing that filling public storehouses like Joseph “would certainly be a fine treasure and a good and Christian use of temporal possessions,” because the prince does not gather this treasure “for himself but as a common person, indeed, as a common father of the entire country,” although “[w]e should not all be beggars” but should instead “earn enough to support [ourselves] without burdening others and to help others as well.” In SLE 10:2015 (AE 43:126-27), Luther noted that providing for public hospitals to care for those suffering from infectious diseases would be an example of a public exercise of the Fifth Commandment in its *positive* meaning and, if done by the government, a sign of “a proper government in cities and states.”

⁴⁴¹ AE 45:169-73, 186-91.

measures (e.g., taxing the citizens),⁴⁴² physical relief work could be organized, while begging—which had taken on religious significance, also by means of the mendicant orders such as Luther’s own Augustinian Hermits—was prohibited.⁴⁴³

Yet compared to these praiseworthy acts of providing physical relief to the sick, the poor, the aged, and others according to their needs, it is a “divine virtue” to make and preserve just laws—a virtue second only to the preaching of God’s word—because those laws truly serve the truly poor and prevent the others from becoming poor⁴⁴⁴ and prevent the people from contracting an infectious disease.⁴⁴⁵ Government officials who practice this heroic virtue are rightly called “fathers” because, “by administering just laws, they feed all their subjects, as a father feeds his children.”⁴⁴⁶ In order to have capable people to administer and make just laws, the government is duty-bound to compel its subjects to send their children to schools where such men are trained, if need be on a public scholarship.⁴⁴⁷

The third virtue of government, according to Luther, is that the government can “protect and guard against iniquity and violence, that is, it can bring about peace” by military means.⁴⁴⁸ Peace brings great benefits to all to the point of being called “half a kingdom of heaven,” while war brings great calamity to the point of being “counted half a hell, or hell’s precursor or beginning.”⁴⁴⁹ Therefore, “[o]ne must not begin a war or strive after it; it comes unbidden, all too soon. One must keep peace for as long as possible, even though one must buy it with all the money that would be spent on the war or won by the war. Victory never repays for what is lost by war.”⁴⁵⁰ Government officials who practice this heroic virtue are rightly called “deliverers” because they deliver the poor and preserve peace.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴² See AE 45:192, where the 1523 Leisnig order distinguished the agreed-upon tax to support the public welfare program from the previous practice of “fleecing” the people for false pretenses and committed the people to pay their taxes instead of abusing Christian freedom as a cover for their own greed.

⁴⁴³ AE 44:189-91; AE 45:185-86, 286-87; Brecht, *Martin Luther 1*, p. 51-57.

⁴⁴⁴ SLE 5:710; see AE 13:53-54.

⁴⁴⁵ In SLE 10:2021, 2023 (AE 43:131-34), Luther criticized those who “tempt God by leaving undone everything they should use to fend off death or the plague, . . . saying that the plague is God’s punishment and that, if God wanted to protect them, he would do so without any medicine and our efforts. But this is not trusting God but tempting God. For God created medicine and gave us reason to manage and take care of the body so that it may be healthy and live.” “[E]ven worse are those who, while infected without outward signs, walk among the people, believing that, if they could infect others, they themselves would be rid of the plague.” These individuals should be handed to the hangman as murderers.

⁴⁴⁶ SLE 5:714-15; see AE 13:58. In SLE 2:1360 (AE 7:158), Luther emphasized that kings “should be fathers of the fatherland and shepherds, not bears or wolves.” In LC I, 150, he stated that, “through [civil rulers], as through our parents, God gives to us food, house and home, protection and security.” In LC III, 74-75, Luther noted that prayer for daily bread is chiefly a prayer for government officials because God’s bodily gifts are preserved through them, which is why a loaf of bread should be part of their coats of arms and be stamped on their coins.

⁴⁴⁷ AE 46:256-57.

⁴⁴⁸ SLE 5:711; see AE 13:55; Ps. 82:4.

⁴⁴⁹ SLE 5:711; see AE 13:55.

⁴⁵⁰ SLE 5:713; see AE 13:57. In AE 45:125-26, Luther noted that subjects must serve the government in a just, i.e., *defensive* war, must not serve them in an unjust war, and give the government the benefit of the doubt when it is not clear whether the war is just. According to AE 46:118-22, just wars are defensive wars among equals.

⁴⁵¹ SLE 5:714; see AE 13:58. As noted, according to LC III, 74-75, the petition for daily bread in the Lord’s Prayer is chiefly a prayer for government officials because they allow us to enjoy God’s gifts in peace and quietness despite the devil’s murderous attacks.

Importantly, as only physical objects fall within its proper sphere of authority, the government should wage wars only to defend the physical lives and possessions of its people from violence and attack. This means, first, that such wars are not waged by people *as Christians*, because, as discussed, people *as Christians* will not resist evil.⁴⁵² Put differently, the church militant should not fight the government's wars with swords of iron but should fight its own wars with the weapons of the Spirit.⁴⁵³ Religious insignia on the battlefield should therefore be avoided.⁴⁵⁴

This also means that, even if the aggressor holds to a non-Christian religion, the destruction of that religion is not a legitimate aim of military action, as was done in the crusades that ended in great misery.⁴⁵⁵ Similarly, seeking to overthrow the proclamation of the pure gospel—and seeking to advance false doctrine—by military force is certainly not something Christians can support by their service as soldiers.⁴⁵⁶

But as an attack by external enemies is also a punishment of sin sent from God, every defensive war also has a spiritual dimension where *Christians* ought to do spiritual battle—beginning with their *own* repentance and reformation of life, to be followed by confident prayers for victory over the aggressor.⁴⁵⁷ The physical fighting, however, is to be done by the government and its military—which Christians may join in good conscience *as soldiers* (not as Christians, as has been said)—in order to protect the people, not to seek revenge or worldly glory.⁴⁵⁸ Defending one's subjects is God's command to the government.⁴⁵⁹ Importantly, however, even though the cause of defending the homeland is just in itself—and should be undertaken with careful preparation—this defense can please God (and succeed) only if it is done in humility, that is, trusting in God as the one who alone grants the victory.⁴⁶⁰

Concluding his discussion of the three governmental virtues based on Psalm 82 by commenting on Ps. 82:8, Luther observed that the three virtues the political gods are called to practice (yet all too often neglect) are surpassed⁴⁶¹ by the three corresponding *spiritual* virtues

⁴⁵² AE 46:166-67.

⁴⁵³ AE 46:168.

⁴⁵⁴ AE 46:168.

⁴⁵⁵ AE 46:186. This position was not commonly held in Luther's time or thereafter. For instances, some Franciscan theologians active in Europe and the Americas argued that military force should be used to crush false religion, whether that of the Lutheran heretics during the 1546/47 Smalcaldic War or that of the Native Americans during the conquest of the Americas. Ian Campbell and Todd Rester (ed.), *Franciscans and Scotists on War: John Duns Scotus's Theology, Anti-Judaism, and Holy War in Early Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2025), p. 108-59 (Alfonso de Castro against the Lutheran heretics) and p. 160-205 (Juan Fochoer against the Mexican pagans). For the development in the following century, see James Muldoon, *The Americas in the Spanish World Order: The Justification for Conquest in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: Univ. of PA Press, 1994), where he analyzes a key work by Spanish jurist Juan de Solórzano Pereira (1575-1655), who served as a senior judge in Lima, Peru, *Disputatio de Indiarum iure sive de iusta Indiarum Occidentalium inquisitione, acquisitione, et retentione* (Madrid: Francisco Martinez, 1629).

⁴⁵⁶ AE 47:29-30, 34-35, 36, 52.

⁴⁵⁷ AE 46:170-73, 184.

⁴⁵⁸ AE 46:185.

⁴⁵⁹ AE 46:190.

⁴⁶⁰ AE 46:123-25, 190-92, 200-03.

⁴⁶¹ "Just as eternal life surpasses this temporal life, so the preaching office surpasses the worldly office [of government], that is, just as the body surpasses the shadow. For worldly dominion is an image, shadow, and figure of the dominion of Christ." SLE 10:439; see AE 46:237.

Christ—he is (unlike government leaders) God by nature—practices in his kingdom of grace: “He advances God’s word and the preachers; he vindicates and preserves the poor; he protects and rescues those in misery; he rebukes the godless and tyrants.”⁴⁶² Given the imperfection of the temporal righteousness achieved in the political sphere, “there is necessary a different kingdom where you find a different righteousness, wisdom, and power,” which are eternal.⁴⁶³

In sum, government is a divine institution that exists for the sole purpose of serving the people according to God’s word, not to preserve itself or to allow rulers to live out their own wickedness protected by God-given immunity. The church is called to hold the government to account based on God’s unchanging word, not based on its own vision for a humanly desirable social order. Three virtues crystallize the unchanging tasks of government: First, supporting and defending the true proclamation of God’s unchanging word; second, defending the people, especially the poor, from exploitation, disease, and starvation by just laws and social welfare institutions such as hospitals or emergency food supplies; and third, defending the people against attacks by external enemies.

These three virtues—promoting the proclamation of God’s word, helping the poor, and averting external violence—are a virtual summary of the Ten Commandments, understood as both prohibitions of harming the neighbor and as commands to help the neighbor. Put differently, virtuous government not only sees to it that the Ten Commandments are kept by the people. Virtuous government also practices the Ten Commandments by *protecting and promoting* the spiritual and physical wellbeing of the governed.

Importantly, because even the best government will achieve no more than piecemeal, temporary results in promoting these virtues in a fallen world, Christians can take comfort in Christ who practices his corresponding saving virtues perfectly and eternally in his spiritual kingdom.

b) Clarifying the First Virtue of Government by Properly Distinguishing the Two Kingdoms

Already in Luther’s day, the first virtue of government—supporting faithful preachers—required clarification as to how “opposing doctrines or heresies” are to be “resisted,” although “no one should or can be forced to believe.”⁴⁶⁴ As Luther clarified, this virtue only addresses the external teaching of blasphemous doctrines, not what a person believes or does not believe in his heart.⁴⁶⁵

Luther explained what he meant here by distinguishing between various scenarios based on the specific teaching or dispute at issue. For instance, those who teach in God’s name that government is not to be tolerated are not to be tolerated because these heretics are also “seditious.”⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶² SLE 5:731; see AE 13:72.

⁴⁶³ SLE 5:731; see AE 13:72.

⁴⁶⁴ SLE 5:717; see AE 13:61.

⁴⁶⁵ AE 13:62.

⁴⁶⁶ SLE 5:717-18; see AE 13:61.

Equally not to be tolerated are those who “teach contrary to a public article of the faith that is clearly grounded in Scripture and believed throughout the world.”⁴⁶⁷ These articles—confessed in the Creed and taught to children—include both the divinity of Christ and the gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone.⁴⁶⁸ Those teachers who challenge these articles are not to be tolerated because they are not only heretics but also “public blasphemers” whose blasphemies “desecrate God’s name and deprive the neighbor of his honor before the world.”⁴⁶⁹ But these false teachers ought to be given a hearing so that they can be convicted by God’s word, lest their false teachings be opposed by physical force alone.⁴⁷⁰

Moreover, if there is religious division in a community where both sides claim support of Scripture, Lutherans should be the ones who “gladly step back and be silent when they realize that they are not heard gladly.”⁴⁷¹ But if neither party is willing to be silent, the government should decide the matter, lest there be contradictory preaching within one community.⁴⁷²

Additionally, if the controversy is only about human traditions that are conceded without scriptural basis, these issues should not be the subject of public disputes at all, “for love and peace rise far above all ceremonies.”⁴⁷³ “For the rest, anyone may read what he likes and believe what he likes. If he will not hear God, let him hear the devil.”⁴⁷⁴

Already in Luther’s day, the possibility of abuse of the government’s power over religion was an obvious objection to teaching this governmental virtue: Is not Luther here “confidently strengthening and welcoming in the tyrants who persecute the gospel”?⁴⁷⁵ His blunt answer? “What do I care?”⁴⁷⁶ He explained that, “[i]f we should omit necessary instruction because of tyrants, we should have also long since omitted the entire gospel.”⁴⁷⁷ Put differently, the abuse of a biblical teaching is no reason to discard that teaching.⁴⁷⁸

Another objection is that the first virtue of government Luther established based on Psalm 82 seems to do what Luther constantly opposed—“cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into each other.”⁴⁷⁹ Luther responded by distinguishing “commanding and obeying,” where “[t]he one means being the government (*Oberkeit*), the other we may call being a subject (*Unterkeit*).”⁴⁸⁰ Luther explained that, “when a preacher exercises his office by telling kings,

⁴⁶⁷ SLE 5:718; see AE 13:61.

⁴⁶⁸ AE 13:61-62.

⁴⁶⁹ SLE 5:718; see AE 13:61.

⁴⁷⁰ AE 45:114-15.

⁴⁷¹ SLE 5:719; see AE 12:62; Matt. 10:14.

⁴⁷² AE 13:62-63.

⁴⁷³ SLE 5:720; see AE 13:63. What is true for disputes about human ceremonies in the political community applies with even greater force in the visible church, as Luther noted: “To be sure, the external manners or orders [of worship] are free and, as far as faith is concerned, can be changed in any place at any time by anybody. But, as far as love is concerned, you are not free to act on this freedom but are bound to consider what the poor people can tolerate and what improves them.” SLE 10:260 (AE 53:47); see Sonntag & Strawn, *Christian Worship*, pp. 43-49.

⁴⁷⁴ AE 13:64.

⁴⁷⁵ SLE 5:724; see AE 13:67.

⁴⁷⁶ SLE 5:724; see AE 13:67.

⁴⁷⁷ SLE 5:724; see AE 13:67. In AE 33:51-57, Luther rejected Erasmus’s advice that the gospel should not be preached outside the circles of learned people because it might lead to immorality and tumults among the common people, reasoning that is the nature of God’s word to cause tumults.

⁴⁷⁸ LC IV, 59.

⁴⁷⁹ SLE 5:853; see AE 13:194.

⁴⁸⁰ SLE 5:854; see AE 13:195.

princes, and the whole world: ‘Thank and fear God and keep his commandments!,’ he does not insert himself in worldly government, but serves and obeys the highest Government.”⁴⁸¹ In the same way, “when David or a prince teaches or commands to fear God and to hear his word, he is not a lord of that word but a servant and one who obeys. He is not inserting himself in spiritual or divine Government but remains a humble subject and a faithful servant.”⁴⁸²

For toward God and in service of his Government, everything is to be the same and mixed together, whether it is called spiritual or worldly, the pope as well as the emperor, the master as well as the servant. There is no distinction or consideration of differences among persons. Before God, one is as good as the other. For he is one single God, equally Lord of all, of one as well as the other. Therefore, they all should be in the same obedience and completely mixed together like a single cake. They should help each other to be obedient.⁴⁸³

This must be distinguished from *improperly* “confusing and mixing the worldly and spiritual government,” which occurs in two ways: It happens in one way “when the lofty, meddling spirits want to change and rule over governmental laws in an imperious and domineering manner, although they have no command or authority to do so from God or from other people.”⁴⁸⁴

Yet this improper mixing of the two kingdoms also happens in a second, even more consequential way:

[W]hen spiritual or worldly princes and lords want to change and master God’s word in an imperious, domineering manner—when they themselves want to command what should be taught and preached, although they are forbidden to do so just as the lowliest beggar. This [interference] means that they themselves want to be God instead of being subject to God’s word and serving it. Thus, they, like Lucifer, want to be equal to God, even above God. In this way, they want to extricate themselves from being subject to God and interfere in God’s Government. Ultimately, they want to sit above him.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸¹ SLE 5:854; see AE 13:195.

⁴⁸² SLE 5:854-55; see AE 13:195.

⁴⁸³ SLE 5:855; see AE 13:195-96.

⁴⁸⁴ SLE 5:855; see AE 13:196. In the context, Luther also noted that “the false clerics and schismatic spirits always want to be masters and teach—though not in God’s name—how worldly government should be ordered.” SLE 5:853; see AE 13:194. In SLE 5:696 (AE 13:42), Luther observed: “In former times, popes, bishops, priests, and monks had established the following government: Using their little letters of excommunication, they could force kings and princes and drive them wherever they wanted, without any resistance or opposition. . . . [Rulers] additionally had to put up with it when some dumb ass reamed them out from the pulpit and vented his anger on them to his heart’s content.” This claim to clerical power over political authorities was rooted in the notion that, when Christ granted St. Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:19), he authorized the pope to make and annul laws, to grant and withdraw political power at will, and to judge all laws and doctrines. AE 40:353-54; AE 41:153, 202, 296-97. A concrete exercise of this papal power was the “transfer” of the Roman Empire from the Byzantine Emperor to the German king, Charlemagne in 800, resulting in the Holy Roman Empire. AE 41:371-76; AE 44:207-08; see Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 26-27. According to SA III, VIII, 3-4, this is one example of papal enthusiasm, that is, a claim to the Holy Spirit and power apart from God’s “external, spoken Word.”

⁴⁸⁵ SLE 5:855; see AE 13:196. In SLE 5:853 (AE 13:194), Luther noted: “In the devil’s name, the worldly lords always want to be Christ’s masters and teach him how he should lead his church and spiritual government.” See also AE 13:42-43 where Luther traces this ungodly boldness to the rediscovery of the divine origin of worldly government. Luther also referred to this transgression when he stated in his 1523 treatise on government that, when

Confusion of the two kingdoms on either side based on human whim—“false clerics” trying to change civil laws governing the kingdom of the world according to their own ideas or tyrannical rulers *or church officials* trying to change God’s word governing Christ’s kingdom—must be called out by faithful teachers, as modeled by Luther here and elsewhere. Yet if this fails to change the confusion, the proper response by Christians subject to improper commands restricting, even prohibiting, God’s word is not armed resistance (as done by the knights and the peasants in the 1520s) but acts of civil disobedience and non-cooperation limited to the specific unlawful demands under Acts 5:29.⁴⁸⁶ Moving to a place where God’s word sounds forth freely may also be required.⁴⁸⁷

Whatever the specific response, it presupposes on part of the Christian the willingness to suffer and even die for the gospel.⁴⁸⁸ As seen earlier, superficial, “words-only” Christians will misunderstand the freedom of the gospel as freedom from physical suffering.⁴⁸⁹ But those who endure punishment *as Christians*—that is, not as those who deserve punishment *as criminals*—will “thank God that [they] are worthy to suffer for the sake of the divine word.”⁴⁹⁰

In sum, the distinction of the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God taught by Luther is not to be confused with the institutional distinction, or even separation, of church and state. Rather, an important aspect of the distinction of the two kingdoms is that the kingdom of God may not be ruled by human ideas, just as the kingdom of the world may not be ruled by the human ideas of power-hungry clerics. Rather, both kingdoms are ruled in their specific ways according to God’s word. If this distinction is kept in mind, the government will properly check sin outwardly also when it comes to the first three of the Ten Commandments. This is done when the government supports those who teach the truth of God’s word and outwardly restrains those who would cause rebellion or publicly blaspheme the one true God by their false teachings concerning Christ and his gospel.

But because of original sin’s desire to be like God, it is inevitable that this distinction of the two kingdoms will not be maintained. Inevitably, Christians will suffer when the two kingdoms are confused this way. But in the face of these real and painful confusions of the two kingdoms, Christians have every reason to rejoice in suffering as they live out their baptism by following their crucified yet risen Savior through suffering and death into eternal glory.

a prince *or a bishop* “dares to make laws for the soul, [he] interferes with God’s government and only misleads and destroys the souls.” SLE 10:395; see AE 45:105. Exalting oneself above God and his word—and the resulting confusion of the two kingdoms—is not only the origin of all sin in all humans according to Gen. 3:5. See 13:196; AE 69:230-31. When done by church leaders, it is also a key identifier of the Antichrist according to 2 Thess. 2:4. See AE 33:139; SA II, IV, 10-11.

⁴⁸⁶ AE 45:112-13; see SLE 10:1372 (AE 44:100): “St. Peter said to the leaders of the Jews, ‘One must obey God more than men’ [Acts 5:29]. He did not say, We must not obey men, because that would be wrong. Rather, ‘God more than men.’”

⁴⁸⁷ SLE 16:64 (AE 46:36-37): When leaving a city to follow the gospel, “you put up with suffering injustice and being driven out. At the same time, however, you do not put up with having the gospel taken or kept from you.” See Matt. 10:23.

⁴⁸⁸ AE 21:338. See SLE 16:56 (AE 46:29): “Suffering, suffering, cross, cross is the Christian law—this and nothing else.”

⁴⁸⁹ AE 23:397-99.

⁴⁹⁰ SLE 10:401; see AE 45:112. See also AE 30:126-31 (on 1 Peter 4:12-19).

9. God's Rare Miracle People and Ordinary People

As noted above, God is the giver of all success in the administration of both the household and the government. This is also true in the church.⁴⁹¹ But success can also be a gift that God gives through special people. They are those who “have a special star before God. He himself teaches and raises them up the way he wants them to be. These then also have smooth sailing on earth, as well as fortune and victory, as the saying goes. Whatever they undertake succeeds. Even if the whole world strove against it, their undertakings must go unhindered.”⁴⁹² God gives this “special star” not just to Christian rulers such as David and Frederick of Saxony, but also to people of all social classes and professions, believers and unbelievers such as Cyrus, Hannibal, and Augustus.⁴⁹³ To the extent these individuals are raised up by God to rule others, they also have reason, intelligence, and an intuitive knowledge of the natural law to the point that they embody and, in fact, are the law.⁴⁹⁴ These individuals are the extraordinary people of God,⁴⁹⁵ healthy heroes in a sick world—God’s miracle people.⁴⁹⁶ But no matter how special they are, God’s word must still tell them that God is the Giver of their extraordinary abilities and achievements, lest these special people become presumptuous and perish.⁴⁹⁷

Since most people and government officials are not such extraordinary people, what should they do? Most importantly, ordinary people should not try to be “apes and cuckoos” of God’s special heroes and pretend to be what they are not.⁴⁹⁸ Those who nonetheless try to do so may talk a good game but will fail miserably when push comes to shove because they lack the required extraordinary gifts and hence cannot do the deeds they have “not been made to do,” as Luther illustrated with several examples.⁴⁹⁹ Evidently, these apes “are not the people through whom God wants to bring fortune and prosperity.”⁵⁰⁰

Instead, those placed in offices of authority without being miracle people must, first of all, embrace Solomon’s example and “follow only God, pester him, and ask him for right reason

⁴⁹¹ SLE 20:20-21 (AE 51:77): “Take me as an example. I resisted pope, indulgences, and the papists, but without physical force, without blasphemy, without waging war. All I did was study, preach, and write the word. That word—while I was asleep or had some fun—rendered the papacy so weak and powerless! No prince or emperor ever accomplished this much against it. I did not do this. The word, preached and written by me, accomplished and did all this.”

⁴⁹² SLE 5:810; see AE 13:154.

⁴⁹³ AE 13:155, 157.

⁴⁹⁴ AE 13:157, 160-61. In SLE 10:407 (AE 45:119), Luther noted: “[A] prince must have the law as firmly in hand as the sword and determine by his own reason when and where the law is to be applied strictly or with moderation.”

⁴⁹⁵ AE 13:161.

⁴⁹⁶ AE 13:164; see AE 73:376-78, 392-93, where Luther distinguished *justifying faith* in Christ that overcomes sin, the world, and the devil, and that bears the fruit of loving the neighbor from *miracle working, civic, or heroic faith* that moves mountains out of love. While the latter is also a gift of the Holy Spirit, it can be present in those who have no saving faith in Christ and therefore hate the neighbor (see 1 Cor. 13), even as they perform heroic deeds out of love for their neighbor in their respective public offices.

⁴⁹⁷ AE 13:155, 162, 200-01.

⁴⁹⁸ SLE 5:814-15; see AE 13:158-59.

⁴⁹⁹ For instance, in SLE 5:815-16 (AE 13:159-60) Luther provided the example of one such apish person—aptly nicknamed “Dr. Spear” because he was a knight—who, “when the discussion came to war, had killed who knows how many Hannibals; when the discussion came to law and wisdom, he had fifteen Solomons in his mouth but a whole swarm of fools in his heart.”

⁵⁰⁰ AE 13:159.

above all books and teachers, to rule his subjects wisely.”⁵⁰¹ Additionally, they should carefully study the examples of the healthy heroes and see what regular people—given their much more limited wisdom, reason, insight, strength, and skill—can implement of the example of the miracle people where God has placed them in life.⁵⁰² Indeed, what extraordinary people know without much, or any, study, ordinary people need to try to learn by carefully studying the pertinent books the former left behind—whether that involves St. Augustine’s sermons for pastors or some law books for those holding government offices—to “crawl after the heroes.”⁵⁰³

The healthy heroes are rare, and God gives them at a high price. Still, people must be governed, unless people are to become wild animals. This is why things in the world generally remain nothing but patchwork and misery. It is a veritable hospital, where princes and lords and all rulers lack wisdom and courage—that is, fortune and urgency from God—just as the sick lack power and strength. As a result, one must patch and mend here, make do with the laws, words, and examples of the heroes found in books. In this way, one must be and remain a student of the silent masters, that is, of the books.⁵⁰⁴

These “silent masters,” along with advice from the best people alive, will have to do until God once more raises “a healthy hero or miracle person” to bring about prosperity “with peace, discipline, protection, and punishment, so that it may be called a healthy government.”⁵⁰⁵

Thus, while the heroic rulers embody the law and are therefore able to govern without many or any written laws—the ideal form of government—ordinary rulers will not be able to govern their mostly unbelieving subjects without many laws.⁵⁰⁶ And since the ordinary rulers are not heroic rulers, any attempt by ordinary rulers to govern without written laws like the heroic rulers would be a pish imitation and turn their subjects into wild beasts. Similarly, attempting “to govern the world according to the gospel and abrogate all worldly law and sword because all are baptized and Christian among whom the gospel tolerates neither law nor sword, which are also unnecessary among them,” would have the same disastrous result because *perfect* Christians who need no external coercion by the law at all will always be a minority.⁵⁰⁷

In sum, from time to time, God graciously raises up extraordinary people who intuitively and successfully carry out whatever they put their hand to, even in the face of great outward difficulties or resistance. God gives these individuals among believers and unbelievers alike. If these individuals are believers who are called to govern, they will accomplish much in terms of governing justly and even returning entire countries to God’s will. But as extraordinary gifts, these miracle people are, by definition, very rare. The vast majority of people, including pastors and government officials, are not such miracle people. And they should not pretend to be, as that would be catastrophic for them and for those entrusted to their care. Rather, the vast majority of people must humbly make do with the lesser gifts God’s wisdom has given them. They must therefore pray, work, and study hard—including learning from the true masters of their specific

⁵⁰¹ SLE 10:408; see AE 45:119; see also AE 45:126; 1 Kings 3:9.

⁵⁰² AE 13:162.

⁵⁰³ SLE 5:819; see AE 13:163.

⁵⁰⁴ SLE 5:820; see AE 13:164.

⁵⁰⁵ SLE 5:820; see AE 13:164.

⁵⁰⁶ AE 35:79-80; AE 44:34-35, 203-04; AE 45:89-90.

⁵⁰⁷ SLE 10:382-83; see AE 45:91-92.

calling—to gain at least a fraction of the knowledge and ability of those rare miracle men. Yet they may engage in their hard and often frustrating piecemeal work every day knowing that it is God who graciously grants success in their divinely instituted offices, regardless of whether they have been given much or little to work with.

10. Christ as King over Believers and All Creation

At its core, the two-kingdoms doctrine distinguishes the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God on the basis of trust in Christ as the Savior. The members of the former are the unbelievers ruled by the government according to God’s moral law to achieve a measure of outward discipline and peace for this life. In this life, the latter is coextensive with the Christian Church on earth, that is, the sum total of those who believe in Christ and are therefore ruled by the Spirit through the gospel unto life everlasting.⁵⁰⁸

As it is Spirit-wrought faith in the gospel alone, rather than obedience to God’s moral law, that turns sinners into Christians and members of Christ’s kingdom there can be no “Christian government” or a “Christian nation” in the world, because that would mean trying to govern unbelievers by the Spirit they do not possess because they do not believe the gospel. This would only lead to hypocrisy, chaos, and bloodshed.⁵⁰⁹ This remains true even though those who believe in Christ will—as “persons of the world”—hold all sorts of offices in the world, including (high) government offices where they, like all people, are called to obey God’s moral law by loving their neighbors as themselves. Because genuine faith in Christ cannot remain without the fruit of serving the neighbor, those who believe in Christ will begin to follow Christ’s example of selfless service in their worldly callings.⁵¹⁰

Just as those who believe in Christ are members of God’s kingdom while being active in the kingdom of the world as persons of the world—i.e., as neighbors, not as Christians—so Christ’s kingly reign is not limited to believers. Just as these believers are in Christ’s “kingdom of grace, righteousness, peace, joy, life, salvation, and eternal glory”⁵¹¹ and in the kingdom of the world by loving their neighbors, Christ’s kingly rule effectively, though invisibly, embraces all of creation, that is, the entire universe, including the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of the world.⁵¹²

Commenting on Col. 1:15, Luther noted that God’s government in the here and now is twofold. “The first government is the visible government of God, which concerns us Christians.

⁵⁰⁸ AE 45:88-89, 105-06, 117.

⁵⁰⁹ AE 45:91-92.

⁵¹⁰ See AE 73:147, where Luther pointed out that following Christ and obeying the natural law are not mutually exclusive, because the law teaches what Christ’s example teaches. Yet following Christ’s example without faith in Christ who, as Savior, vicariously fulfilled the law in his life, suffering, and death does not make one a Christian. AE 4:191-92; AE 73:146; AE 75:8-9.

⁵¹¹ SLE 9:226; see AE 26:167. According to LC III, 52, the prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom in the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer means to pray that “that many may find entrance into the Kingdom of Grace, be made partakers of redemption, being led thereto by the Holy Ghost, in order that thus we may all together remain forever in the one kingdom now begun.” See SC III, 6-8; see also AE 28:123-34 (on 1 Cor. 15:24).

⁵¹² SLE 19:996-97 (AE 31:353-54): Because Christ is God’s firstborn, “he is a King and Priest, but spiritually. For his kingdom is not earthly, nor does it consist in earthly goods. Rather, it consists in spiritual goods, such as truth, wisdom, peace, joy, salvation, etc. Yet this does not exclude temporal things from his rule. For all things are subject to him in heaven, earth, and hell, Psalm 8:6, although he is not seen because he rules spiritually, invisibly.”

It is called the kingdom of Christ, who rules in his church and Christendom through the word of his gospel and the Holy Spirit, who preaches, baptizes, absolves, gives the sacrament.”⁵¹³ Indeed, these works—not wielding a physical sword as a new Moses—were the visible works Christ performed during his earthly ministry in service of this kingdom.⁵¹⁴

The other government of God is invisible and hidden from us. It is about the following matters: How God has created heaven and earth and everything therein and how he still governs the world according to his secret and hidden will and counsel; how it is that one person lives and acts in a particular way, while the other person does not live or act like that; how it is that two go to war together and one is killed while the other survives; when famine, plague, war, bloodshed, the Turk, or some other punishment comes, etc. No human knows any of this. Only God knows. When it comes to this invisible government, Christ is completely equal to the Father, as he governs not only in the visible government where God has revealed himself but also in the invisible and hidden government where God has not revealed himself.⁵¹⁵

Christ exercises his visible and invisible rule according to his divine and human natures.⁵¹⁶ And he does so as the one who fills all things, also according to his ascended human nature (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:10, see Ps. 110:1).⁵¹⁷ Put differently, Christ is not like an absentee landlord, locked into a remote heaven according to his human nature. Rather, Christ rules as the one who, according to *both* natures, “is present everywhere.”⁵¹⁸

However, “Christians cling to the visible God and the visible government of God . . . Christians leave the invisible God and the invisible government of God uninvestigated.”⁵¹⁹ And yet, while they do not understand *how* Christ presently and invisibly rules all things, Christians nonetheless take comfort in the fact that Christ—according to his divine *and* human natures—is

⁵¹³ Martin Luther, *Von Jhesu Christo / Warem Gott und Menschen / und von seinem Ampt und Reich / so er führet in der Christenheit*, ed. Andrew Poach (Mühlhausen: Hantzsch, 1579), sig. D4v; see AE 57:290. Christ’s visible rule by the proclamation of God’s word is referred to as a “scepter” in Ps. 110:2 (AE 13:264-66, 272), as an “iron rod” in Ps. 2:9 (AE 12:64), and as a “straight scepter” in Ps. 45:6 (AE 12:239, 243, 247). This is how Christ’s kingdom of grace is contrasted from the governments of the world that govern by threats and terror (AE 13:266-67) and by using imperfect laws (AE 12:239-41).

⁵¹⁴ AE 45:100-01. It was therefore “a strange spectacle to see [Christ] make a whip of ropes and intervene with the fist” in the temple (John 2:15). SLE 7:1792; see AE 22:228. This scene “surprised” the disciples because it “gave the impression as if he wanted his followers to intervene in government with the fist, although it was written of him . . . that he would govern through the Spirit or the sword of his mouth; for he did not want to establish a kingdom consisting in slashings of the sword, but a kingdom of the word and the Spirit.” SLE 7:1793; see AE 22:228. As Luther explained, Christ followed “the example of Moses” when cleansing the temple by physical force and may well have put the moneychangers to death. SLE 7:1792; see AE 22:227-28. Yet noting that the end of *this* example of Moses coincided with the abolition of the law of Moses for the Christians (AE 35:164-74; AE 40:96-98), Luther warned that “we should not rely on his action as an example, because we—unlike Moses—do not possess both swords, the sword of the mouth and the sword of the fist. Rather, *once the law was abrogated, the sword of iron was handed over to worldly emperors, kings, and princes, but the oral sword was assigned to the apostles and us preachers*. This distinction is to remain in place. Let all who can help to keep this distinction in place do so.” SLE 7:1792; see AE 22:228. Accordingly, the two swords of the disciples in Luke 22:38 are figurative swords, not swords of iron. AE 32:168.

⁵¹⁵ Luther, *Von Jhesu Christo*, sig. D4v-E1r; see AE 57:291.

⁵¹⁶ AE 36:342; see AE 12:130-34; AE 43:26-27; AE 57:301.

⁵¹⁷ See AE 13:233-37.

⁵¹⁸ SLE 20:742; see AE 36:342.

⁵¹⁹ Luther, *Von Jhesu Christo*, sig. E1r; see AE 57:291; see also AE 33:139-40; AE 36:342-43.

“God, Creator, and Lord over all things—over all angels and humans; over emperors, kings, tyrants; over all creatures; and over the whole world.”⁵²⁰ Luther explained this comfort as follows:

Although the devil wages war against the Christian Church; although the ancient Romans shed the blood of the holy martyrs; and although our tyrants shed the blood of Christians in our time (why and according to what counsel this happens pertains to the invisible God), it is our comfort to know and believe that Christ is God, Creator, and Lord over all things and that all creatures—angels, devils, and humans—are under Christ. This is why it is impossible for them to harm us in the least, unless it happens according to the counsel, will, and permission of Christ our Lord. This is the kind of Lord we have in him who has all our enemies and persecutors in his hand and power.⁵²¹

While Christians ought not to try to understand how Christ invisibly yet almightily rules in the midst of his enemies for their good (Ps. 110:2),⁵²² they participate in Christ’s universal rule by faith. As *spiritual* kings—that is, as those who do *not* exercise dominion over the world in the way of the world simply because they are Christians⁵²³—they participate in Christ’s universal kingship by faith in him. As a result, they spiritually possess all things “as lords and gods of the world,” on whose account everything that is good happens on earth (1 Cor. 3:21; 2 Cor. 6:10).⁵²⁴ In the end, all things must serve them, not to their *earthly* prosperity, but to their *eternal* salvation (Rom. 8:28).⁵²⁵

This comforting assurance is necessary because Christ’s kingdom of grace causes unrest and turmoil in this world—especially among the wise, the high, and the mighty (Ps. 2:1-3; Ps. 110:5)—because the devil, the world, and our sinful nature hate the gospel and oppose “this kingdom and this King.”⁵²⁶ Those who are controlled by this triad of darkness are internally divided when it comes to their own “religion, laws, and customs,” but they nonetheless join forces “in order to suppress this kingdom.”⁵²⁷

Luther identified two key reasons for this unholy unity against Christ’s spiritual kingdom of grace, righteousness, freedom of conscience, and eternal glory. First, the world “does not wish to lose its own righteousness.” It must therefore violate the First Commandment by opposing the gospel which proclaims Christ’s righteousness as a gift to all who believe in him.⁵²⁸ Because God’s law is implanted in human reason, the world’s main problem is therefore not that it wants

⁵²⁰ Luther, *Von Jhesu Christo*, sig. F4v-G1r; see AE 57:301; see also AE 12:130-34; AE 36:342.

⁵²¹ Luther, *Von Jhesu Christo*, sig. G1r; see AE 57:301. In SLE 10:163-64 (AE 43:27), Luther taught that Christ, now sitting at God’s right hand after his ascension, “is a King and Lord over all of God’s things in heaven, hell, and on earth. This is why he can help me and all believers in all our needs against all our adversaries and enemies.”

⁵²² AE 13:246-48, 255, 273-84.

⁵²³ AE 21:107-08; AE 45:104. As Christians, they do not need worldly government for themselves. AE 45:94-95.

⁵²⁴ SLE 8:354; see AE 24:82-83.

⁵²⁵ AE 31:354-55.

⁵²⁶ SLE 5:93; see AE 12:16-18; see also AE 13:274, 335-36. In AE 33:44-64, Luther addressed, and rejected, the arguments made by Erasmus that the gospel should be suppressed for the sake of outward peace and morality.

⁵²⁷ SLE 5:94-95; see AE 12:18-19.

⁵²⁸ SLE 5:96; see AE 12:19-20. In LC I, 22, Luther denounced “a false worship and extreme idolatry, which . . . is still prevalent in the world . . . that seeks in its own works help, consolation, and salvation, [and] presumes to wrest heaven from God.”

to be immoral but that it wants the morality and culture it promotes in the kingdom of the world to count as righteousness in God's heavenly kingdom.⁵²⁹

Luther identified a second reason for the enmity between the world and Christ's kingdom by noting that Christ's kingdom appears to the world to be "something feeble, powerless, and trivial" when compared to the seemingly impressive material, intellectual, moral, and spiritual resources found in the kingdom of the world.⁵³⁰ This is why the world even praises the government of the pope because "things proceed smoothly, and [he] governs in peace and obedience, as one who is feared and honored by the subjects."⁵³¹ In light of the gospel, however, this worldly praise is completely misplaced because "it was first the pope who made the best contribution and took the right action to weaken the kingdom of Christ and to strengthen and grow the kingdom of the devil, while acting under the name of Christ and the Church."⁵³² Moreover, those who wish to belong to Christ the crucified King "must become like his image" and therefore "follow the path to glory and life through hardship, persecution, shame, and death" (Acts 14:22; Rom. 8:17).⁵³³

The outward weakness of Christ's kingdom on earth—made even more glaring when it is contrasted to the assertion that the divine-human Ruler of this kingdom sits in glory at God's right hand (Ps. 110:1)—is "the great offense" to "human reason and all the wisdom of the world."⁵³⁴ For, so the world reasons, if Christ were such a mighty, wise, good King, "he would not rule in this way; . . . he would not allow his Christians to be so weak, nor would he tolerate that anyone could attack and plague them . . . How does he allow the good ones to be oppressed while the evil ones are on top?"⁵³⁵ Human reason can only conclude from this that "[e]ither there is no God, or he does not care about humans on earth at all."⁵³⁶

In its foolishness, fallen reason is therefore unable to understand why Christ's kingdom does not resist its enemies "with the fist or with armed power."⁵³⁷ Fallen reason cannot see that this kingdom lacks outward power because it "is to be a kingdom of faith where God rules strangely and in a way humans do not understand and comprehend, namely, by hiding his wisdom, power, and might and by revealing them under their opposite, which all humans call foolishness and weakness, or even nothing at all."⁵³⁸ The Christian faith, however, enables us to "learn something no other faith or teaching knows, namely, that this God is simultaneously the

⁵²⁹ See AE 57:25-26.

⁵³⁰ SLE 5:945; see AE 13:248-50.

⁵³¹ SLE 5:973; see AE 13:273.

⁵³² SLE 5:982; see AE 13:281-82; see also AE 13:286; Luke 12:32.

⁵³³ SLE 5:1054; see AE 13:347. In SLE 9:937 (AE 57:25), Luther emphasized that "we are also not baptized to remain here on earth and to establish for ourselves a paradise and heaven on earth. And the gospel is also not preached to us for the sake of this worldly existence and life but to open heaven for us and to help us to eternal life."

⁵³⁴ SLE 5:949; see AE 13:252.

⁵³⁵ SLE 5:950; see AE 13:252.

⁵³⁶ SLE 5:950; see AE 13:253.

⁵³⁷ SLE 5:952; see AE 13:255.

⁵³⁸ SLE 5:950-51; see AE 13:253; see also Rom. 1:22; 1 Cor. 1:25; 2 Cor. 12:9. In SLE 18:1715-16 (AE 33:62), Luther observed based on Hebr. 11:1 that, "for faith to exist, it is necessary that everything that is believed be hidden. But something cannot be hidden more completely than when it is just the opposite of how it appears to us, how we feel it, and how we have experienced it. For example, when God makes alive, he does it by killing; when he justifies, he does it by making guilty; when he brings to heaven, he does it by leading to hell."

weakest of all and yet alone the Almighty One.”⁵³⁹ Even as the King and Lord of glory who now sits in heavenly glory at God’s right hand, Christ “for our sakes puts up with being treated ingloriously both on the cross and on the altar” (Ps. 24:8; 1 Cor. 2:8; 11:27).⁵⁴⁰ Indeed, “it is the glory of God to lower himself most deeply into the flesh, into the bread, into our mouth, heart, and bosom.”⁵⁴¹ “Even as he is seated in his glory, he unceasingly tolerates it when, before his divine eyes, his word, his works, and everything he has is persecuted, blasphemed, desecrated, and abused.”⁵⁴²

While this conflict rages on, Satan tries to tear out of our hearts faith in the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake.⁵⁴³ To remain unshaken and even laugh at the devil in the midst of these terrifying circumstances, it is necessary to turn the eyes from what is visible and to take, by faith in God’s word, the perspective of God who laughs at the devil and his allies (Ps. 2:4). The reason for this laughter is faith’s knowledge that, “at God’s right hand sits the one who has made satisfaction for my sins and who has overcome and cast down [the devil] in his flesh.”⁵⁴⁴

Those who believe this perceive what is true, although the truth of God’s word is contradicted by their daily experiences of helplessness, anxiety, and being overwhelmed and even sinful. For those who believe in God’s Word, Christ is the kind of Lord who does not waste his time playing idle games with angels in heaven. Rather, *having exalted our common human nature to the right hand of God*,⁵⁴⁵ Christ “powerfully exercises his government everywhere, has every heart in his hand, and truly rules and guides, saves, protects, and preserve his Christendom.”⁵⁴⁶

Yet the devil is not so easily defeated. He tries to confuse the two kingdoms and turn Christ—the divine-human King placed on God’s holy hill (Ps. 2:6) from where he prepares consciences for the life to come by teaching his word in law and gospel—into “a worldly king” whose followers (including Zwingli and Karlstadt) are eager to “make Christianity a matter of changing some outward things.”⁵⁴⁷ As a result, these people may even, like Müntzer, “fall into the folly of thinking that all worldly kingdoms are either not legitimate dominions or loot” and seek to eliminate all the enemies of God from the earth by the sword as “the instrument of God’s power.”⁵⁴⁸ Instead, they should consider that even the “worldly government of the godless” is

⁵³⁹ SLE 5:951; see AE 13:254.

⁵⁴⁰ SLE 20:818; see AE 37:72. Luther made this important point responding to Oecolampadius who argued at length against the presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper based on the glory of the ascended Christ, claiming that it “is not glorious, but shameful, for Christ to be in the Supper.” SLE 20:817; see AE 37:71-72.

⁵⁴¹ SLE 20:818; see AE 37:72.

⁵⁴² SLE 20:818; see AE 37:72.

⁵⁴³ AE 12:27. In SLE 5:948-49 (AE 13:251), Luther observed: “[The enmity against Christ] is properly the work and activity of the devil; for he truly is also the chief archenemy of Christ and his kingdom, as God himself says in Gen. 3:15.”

⁵⁴⁴ SLE 5:106; see AE 12:27-28.

⁵⁴⁵ AE 13:243; see Eph. 5:30.

⁵⁴⁶ SLE 5:937; see AE 13:241; see also AE 13:242, 244-45, 263.

⁵⁴⁷ SLE 5:123-24; see AE 12:41-42, see also AE 12:45-47; AE 13:237-38. The disciples and the Jews were expecting the Messiah to be a worldly king who would not die on a cross but appear in external pomp and bring physical freedom. AE 75:45; see AE 67:288.

⁵⁴⁸ SLE 5:142 (AE 12:56); Brecht, *Martin Luther 2*, p. 153. In SLE 3:12 (AE 35:169-70), Luther observed that “[o]ur dear prophets have chattered thus among the people, ‘Dear people, God has ordered his people to kill

God's order and creation which he—despite their abuse of this order—preserves “most gloriously and most powerfully,” even “without establishing God's word and service among them.”⁵⁴⁹

Yet neither Christ nor his kingdom are of this world (John 8:23; 18:36). As King, Christ therefore does not seek to “change or abrogate the course or order of the world” but wishes to bring to all earthly kings and kingdoms the “new word and new teaching that testifies about him that all who believe in him and are baptized will have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This is the kingdom of this King, this is his dominion, this is his empire.”⁵⁵⁰

In fact, “everything that is subject to God is also subject to [Christ], who rules in such a way that he redeems from devil, sin, and death—all humans are subject to them and cannot be freed from them by any creature—and instead gives them heavenly, imperishable possessions, eternal life, and eternal peace.”⁵⁵¹

When other kings and lords want to rise up in this world, they bring lands and people under their control by force and might. They themselves are the ‘waters’ and ‘streams’ that flow over others. Yet this King is to go about it in such a way that he allows all the force and might of the world to go over him, while he does nothing; for he allows himself to be crucified and killed. That is his walk on the way.⁵⁵²

It is therefore not surprising that Luther—in response to the question, “What is it to become Lord?”—stated this: “It is this, that He has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and all evil. For before I had no Lord nor King, but was captive under the power of the devil, condemned to death, enmeshed in sin and blindness.”⁵⁵³

Amalek' [Exod. 17:8–16; Deut. 25:17–19]. . . . Their loose talk has caused sorrow and misery. The peasants have arisen without knowing the difference [between God's word in general and God's word *addressed to them*]. They have been led into this error by those insane factious spirits.” In a programmatic sermon on Dan. 2 preached at Allstedt in July 1524, Müntzer, one of those “dear prophets,” demanded that the princes—lest they be deposed and strangled themselves—must eliminate all the godless from their lands by the sword under Rom. 13:4, i.e., by undertaking “a holy war for the gospel” because “the godless have no right to live;” Müntzer there also denounced Luther as a softie who lacked the Holy Spirit and the prophetic “visions” to see what needed to be done. Brecht, *Martin Luther* 2, p. 153; see also Scott, *Müntzer*, p. 70-76, for a more extensive summary of this sermon. When the princes proved to be unwilling to heed this call he had issued as a new Daniel, Müntzer eventually cast himself as a new Gideon who, with a small band of righteous “Israelites,” prepared himself to smite the princely “Midianites.” Scott, *Müntzer*, p. 161. Similarly, in 1534, (Dutch) Anabaptists in Münster set up “a militant community . . . which soon aspired to prepare the way for the promised lordship of the returned Savior through the kingdom of Jan van Leiden” by forced re-baptisms, obligatory polygamy, and punishing the godless with the sword under the banner of righteousness. John D. Roth & James M. Stayer, *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521-1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 217-56. On Luther's response to the events in Münster, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 34-36 (abbreviated as Brecht, *Martin Luther* 3).

⁵⁴⁹ SLE 5:852; see AE 13:193; Matt. 5:45.

⁵⁵⁰ SLE 5:142; see AE 12:57; Mark 16:15-16; see also AE 69:191-93, 210-15, where Luther, distinguishing the two kingdoms, noted that the gospel brings a kind of spiritual rebellion that coexists with working to support worldly kingdoms.

⁵⁵¹ SLE 5:935; see AE 13:239.

⁵⁵² SLE 5:1053; see AE 13:346; Is. 8:7; Ps. 110:7.

⁵⁵³ LC II, 27. In LC II, 31, Luther summarized the meaning of the entire Second Article of the Creed in “the little word Lord,” which “signifies simply as much as Redeemer, i.e., He who has brought us from Satan to God, from

As Christ's sacrifice on the cross was therefore a key exercise of his office of King, Luther intertwined the offices of King and High Priest when it comes to Christ's redemptive work on earth, including his sacrificial death on the cross.⁵⁵⁴ This is consistent with the fact that Christ is a biological son of King David through his virgin mother Mary (Matt. 1:1; Rom. 1:3)⁵⁵⁵ who was crucified as "King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:11, 37). Christ as priestly King was foreshadowed in the priest-king Melchizedek,⁵⁵⁶ the king of righteousness and priest who blesses those who believe in him⁵⁵⁷ and whose priesthood predates that of Aaron and the Levites (Gen. 14:18-19; Ps. 110:4; Hebr. 5-7).⁵⁵⁸ Thus, as "the true King of righteousness," Christ "rules us through his priestly office, so that we—redeemed by him from sin and the power of the devil—may come to eternal righteousness before God."⁵⁵⁹

As noted earlier, Christians participate in Christ's kingly office by faith, spiritually ruling all things so that all things must serve their eternal salvation.⁵⁶⁰ By faith in Christ, Christians also

death to life, from sin to righteousness, and who preserves us in the same." See also LC III, 51: "But what is the kingdom of God? Answer: Nothing else than what we learned in the Creed, that God sent His Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil, and to bring us to Himself, and to govern us as a King of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience, for which end He has also bestowed His Holy Ghost, who is to bring these things home to us by His holy Word, and to illumine and strengthen us in the faith by His power."

⁵⁵⁴ Luther distinguished primarily between Christ's priestly and kingly offices to capture his works on earth, see, e.g., AE 4:175-77; 22:199-200; 30:62-65; 31:353-54; 52:278-83. Luther additionally recognized, but did not emphasize, Christ as a prophet like Moses whose proclamation focuses on the gospel (Dtn. 18:18; Acts 3:22). See, e.g., AE 9:176-80; 22:285-86; 308-09. But while Luther apparently did not draw these three offices together, later Lutheran theologians systematized Christ's prophetic office as a subcategory of his priestly office. E.g., Johann Gerhard, *On the Person and Office of Christ: Exegesis (1625)*, tr. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: CPH, 2009), p. 318; see generally Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics 3*, tr. James Langebartels (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003), p. 163-68.

⁵⁵⁵ AE 61:463-504.

⁵⁵⁶ Agreeing with Jerome on this point, Luther identified Melchizedek as Shem, Noah's son, who outlived his distant relative, Abraham, by over 30 years. (Gen. 6:10; 11:10-26). AE 2:230, 383, 393; AE 13:310.

⁵⁵⁷ Because Christ's priesthood is eternal, the Christian Church "is to remain on earth always" and "the preaching office of the gospel, baptism, and the sacrament, and their power are to proceed for as long as the world exists," because, as an eternal Priest, Christ "must always have a people or small flock, among whom his priesthood is recognized and exercises its power." SLE 5:1028-29; see AE 13:324.

⁵⁵⁸ See SLE 1:901 (AE 2:383-84): Christ, as an eternal Priest foreshadowed by Melchizedek, "is not mortal like the Levites but is an eternal Son of God, who lives eternally, rules his Church eternally, and who, as a Priest, teaches, atones, prays, has nothing temporal about himself, and also does not belong to the sinners. Although he bore our weaknesses and sins in his body, he nonetheless dies no more." See also SLE 1:905 (AE 2:387-88): Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham signifies "the priesthood of Christ, which is eternal and is only about blessing, so that he may forgive sins and help from death all who believe in him." In SLE 5:1020-21 (AE 13:317), Luther noted: "The reason why [the Levites] were called priests to show by means of such images and shadows that the true Priest, the promised Christ, should come who would reconcile all people by his sacrifice and who would preach and publish this in the whole world through the gospel. . . . [P]roperly understood, the true priestly office is to preach the gospel." See furthermore AE 13:304-13, 317-24, 335-48; AE 26:182, 288.

⁵⁵⁹ SLE 5:1014; see AE 13:311. As noted above, Christ's kingly office is exercised by the means of grace. E.g., AE 12:64; 13:264-67; 57:290. But so is his priestly office, see SLE 5:1029 (AE 13:324): "In [his Christendom], he rules as a Priest or true pope by means of the preaching office and the power of the Holy Spirit." This is tied together in SLE 5:123 (AE 12:41): "Our King . . . is the kind of king who has been ordained and appointed to teach by God, the eternal Father. He is therefore at the same time Priest, Teacher, and Theologian, who is to teach and instruct those who are his concerning God and who is to rule the consciences only." See furthermore Rom. 15:6; 1 Peter 2:9.

⁵⁶⁰ AE 31:354-55.

participate in Christ's priestly office, being worthy to appear before God to pray and teach others what pertains to salvation.⁵⁶¹

Thus, Christ is King over all nations (and all their possessions) in that he saves those from all nations who believe his gospel and allows all others who oppose it—including kings and mighty lords—to be destroyed by their sins.⁵⁶² This again is comforting for the believers as they go through their daily afflictions: Christ is a “King over all the peoples on earth” and “the Ruler for the salvation of the believers and the damnation of the unbelievers,” which is a “glorious consolation” in that “we have him as Lord who is Lord of the whole world, whom the kings and all the Gentiles, even the devil himself, must serve and obey or go down and perish.”⁵⁶³

Those who believe in this King (commoners and kings alike) will serve him, but they will do so not by setting aside their callings in the world or by leading a life of ease and material riches. Rather, those who believe in Christ will serve him by carrying out their callings according to his word.⁵⁶⁴ They do so while being greatly afflicted both inwardly and outwardly “in this miserable, mortal existence.”⁵⁶⁵ Thus, joining Christ's kingdom means in general terms to “believe His holy Word and lead a godly life here in time and yonder in eternity.”⁵⁶⁶ For earthly kings, this means specifically to “revere and hear this King, and arrange their laws according to his word, that is, order nothing that is contrary to Christ's word. And so the Holy Spirit does not abrogate or change worldly laws, but subordinates them to this King so that they are not contrary to him.”⁵⁶⁷ And it means to follow Christ's example of selfless service laid out in Phil. 2: “[A] prince is to empty his heart of his power and authority and take on the needs of his subjects and act as if they were his own needs. For this is what Christ did for us, and these are properly the works of Christian love.”⁵⁶⁸

Even as they begin to lead godly lives “here in time,” the new heavenly lives of the believers are hidden with Christ in God until Christ returns in glory (Col. 3:3-4; 1 John 3:1-2)—hidden both from the world and from their own experience.⁵⁶⁹ These new lives are hidden from themselves under sin, weakness, “all kinds of sadness and misfortune,” “death and terror,” and are therefore ultimately only known by faith.⁵⁷⁰

Yet they are also hidden from the world because the “life and glory of the Christians in the risen Christ does not glisten before the world.”⁵⁷¹ For one, the world “cannot tolerate that you

⁵⁶¹ AE 31:355-56; see 1 Peter 2:9: “you are . . . a royal priesthood . . . that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you.”

⁵⁶² AE 12:58.

⁵⁶³ SLE 5:145-46; see AE 12:59-60.

⁵⁶⁴ AE 12:74.

⁵⁶⁵ SLE 5:936; see AE 13:240-41.

⁵⁶⁶ SC III, 8; see AE 13:284-97 (on Ps. 110:3).

⁵⁶⁷ SLE 5:164; see AE 12:74.

⁵⁶⁸ SLE 10:409; see AE 45:120.

⁵⁶⁹ AE 77:111.

⁵⁷⁰ SLE 12:523; see AE 77:111. In SLE 5:376 (AE 12:225-26), Luther provided the following fundamental rule for the interpretation of Scripture: Whenever Scripture uses images of physical weapons, warfare and glory concerning Christ or his people, “they should be transferred from the flesh to the spirit in which this glory can be seen. For outwardly, things go quite differently. There, the subjects of this King are very miserable, not only as to the members of their bodies but also as to entire flesh, which is plagued by terrors, sadness, grief, despair, and other torments of the devil.”

⁵⁷¹ SLE 12:523; see AE 77:111.

believe in Christ, that you do not want to side with it, and that you do not want to live as it lives, according to earthly desires.”⁵⁷² Additionally, the Christians’ humble works of kindness, love, and service—including their simple yet glorious acts of remembering Christ in worship by preaching the gospel and praising Christ for his grace—are their simple yet glorious apparel seen by their heavenly Father (Matth. 6:1-4) because they are done in faith according to the Ten Commandments. Yet this life is also hidden from the world, because the world and fallen reason conceive of moral perfection, austere living, energetic worship, profound speculation about hidden divine matters, mystical silence, elaborate rituals, splendid vestments, grand religious buildings, as well as worldly power, success, and prosperity as the hallmarks of a religion worthy of, and favored by, Christ as heavenly King.⁵⁷³ Done without faith, however, these works are nothing but hypocrisy, no matter how splendid they seem to fallen reason.⁵⁷⁴

The tumults and attacks on Christ and his Christians will not cease until the Last Day, when God will finally make his enemies, including death, Christ’s footstool (Ps. 110:1; 1 Cor. 15:25-26).⁵⁷⁵ Importantly, God will do so “without means from heaven,” without any “might and power of any human or creature,” that is, in the same way he protects this kingdom while the earth lasts.⁵⁷⁶

But why does God not act sooner to deliver the believers from their suffering? Luther gave the following answer based on Rev. 6:10-11:

[L]et us joyfully consider and expect that Christendom must always be attacked and persecuted by enemies. There must always be one enemy after another until the Last Day. This happens not for our sake but the sake of our dear brothers who are to be born after us and who are also to come to Christ. Our fathers before us also had to suffer for our sake and take comfort in the fact that we should come after them, lest Christendom perish. This is also why they still must lie in the ground and wait for their final redemption, until we too come to them [Rev. 6:11]. Why do we want to fare better than they? Why do we not also want to suffer for the sake of our brothers, even our own children and grandchildren? It is better that we suffer for a little while and let the Turk, the pope, the tyrants, and the whole world have their way with us than that one of our brothers should be lost or left behind.⁵⁷⁷

In sum, Christ is King over his believers and all of creation. Foreshadowed by the royal priest Melchizedek, Christ presently rules his believers as King and Priest by revealing himself in the means of grace, where he along with his gifts—grace, forgiveness, life, and eternal glory—wishes to be found by faith. During his earthly life, Christ exercised his kingly and priestly offices by proclaiming his kingdom of grace and obtaining his spiritual gifts as the world’s divine-human Redeemer, that is, by offering an almighty sacrifice in his life, suffering, and death.

⁵⁷² AE 77:111.

⁵⁷³ AE 3:272-77; AE 4:28-30; AE 21:163-64; AE 26:458-59; AE 38:107-08; AE 76:289-97; LC I, 312-314.

⁵⁷⁴ SLE 10:384 (AE 45:92): “Now where worldly government or law alone rules, there must be sheer hypocrisy, even if the commandments were God’s own. For without the Holy Spirit in the heart, no one becomes truly good, no matter how fine his works may be.”

⁵⁷⁵ AE 13:259-62.

⁵⁷⁶ SLE 5:953; see AE 13:255.

⁵⁷⁷ SLE 5:958; see AE 13:259-60.

Yet this Redeemer also rules all of creation—angels, demons, humans, and all the rest—invisibly and incomprehensibly, for the good of his believers without the usual means of human domination, fists and weapons, but also without the means of grace. For he does so according to his divine and human natures, spiritually, omnipotently, while being present everywhere.

Although Christ is the King of glory, he paradoxically lived a humble life and died on the cross at the hand of sinners, abandoned by almost all his followers. Likewise, the visible earthly kingdom of this almighty King of creation—the Christian Church—is paradoxically beset by constant weakness and doubt and finds itself in the midst of Christ’s enemies. Because the moral law is written on the hearts of all people, even though it is obscured by sin, the reason for this implacable enmity is ultimately not this or that moral position the Church takes based on that same law. Rather, the Church exists, like Christ, in the midst of enemies because the flesh, the world, and the devil hate the *gospel* of forgiveness, righteousness, and salvation acquired by Christ the priestly King for all humans.

The existence and fate of the believers on earth, therefore, is a continuation of the existence and fate of Christ on earth, despite the resurrection and ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father. The servant existence of the crucified Christ, not the kingly existence of the ascended Christ, is the model for their life on earth, even as they spiritually possess and rule all things by faith in Christ. While the believers are the siblings of their heavenly King by faith, this glorious reality remains hidden from the world’s view under their humble works of kindness, service, and worship they perform as persons of the world. It remains hidden under conflict, suffering, and even sins of weakness. Likewise, the visible instruments of Christ’s gracious rule and priestly extension of his Church on earth are not gilded scepters, crowns, vestments, or political and military means of power, but the revelation of his grace in humble human words, water, bread, and wine.⁵⁷⁸ As discussed in a previous section, the means of grace and the cross are the preeminent and indelible marks of Christ’s Church on earth.⁵⁷⁹

This is why the hidden life of the believers must continue until the Last Day, when the number of believers who have followed their crucified Lord on earth will be completed. Then God himself—with no human assistance—will visibly crush those who have not believed in Christ as their only Savior. Then God will reveal the true glory of those who have believed in Christ on earth.

In the meantime, the spiritual glory of the ascended Christ, of the gospel, and of the Christians will not become visible in terms of earthly power and glory, because Christ’s omnipotent rule in the church is hidden under its opposite, i.e., weakness and confusion. Additionally, Christ is not a worldly king but rules his whole creation *invisibly*. There is, therefore, only a Christian *Church* on earth. There can be no Christian *world* or even just a Christian *nation*. Indeed, even those believers who serve their neighbors in positions of worldly authority in the three holy orders—as parents, government officials, or pastors—do so not openly as Christians but invisibly as persons of the world. They, moreover, will soon find that, as they humbly and faithfully discharge their duties in prayer, love, and service to their neighbors, their

⁵⁷⁸ See Sonntag & Strawn, *Unchanging Forms and Christian Worship*.

⁵⁷⁹ See AE 41:148-54, 164-65.

life is not one of enjoying earthly glory, success, and privilege but one of enduring envy, sorrow, and the cross.⁵⁸⁰

This glaring contradiction between the omnipotence and ineffable glory of Christ the ascended King of creation and the outward weakness, suffering, and insignificance of his kingdom on earth causes great offense and confusion to fallen reason, even among well-meaning Christians. It is therefore unsurprising when weak or false Christians seek to make Christ's heavenly glory visible on earth in a way human reason can understand, even if this involves making peace with the world by falsifying the biblical gospel. Yet this attempt to eliminate the indelible marks of the Church—including the cross—accomplishes no more than turning Christ into a worldly king who rules over temporal things, as if Christ were the pope or a new Moses wielding both the physical and spiritual swords. This falsification of Christ turns the Church into a worldly organization for moral and cultural improvement that does not produce disciples but hypocrites. These major changes to Christ and his Church inevitably hide from sinners what Christ's kingly rule is at its core—the forgiveness of sins—and must lead to despair, chaos, and bloodshed.

⁵⁸⁰ AE 5:163-66; AE 45:126; AE 46:255.

E. Love as Queen of the Law—Living and Governing Prudently and Equitably in a Fallen World

At the end of his 1523 treatise on government, Luther provided practical advice for those who wished to (or had to) govern others and yet desired to remain Christians.⁵⁸¹ Luther prefaced his concrete advice by recognizing that, given the proliferation of law books, princes could easily lose sight of the fact that reason is to be the law above all laws, providing for a strict or lenient application of the law, as required by concrete circumstances.⁵⁸² In the context, Luther explained that the concrete aspect of reason he had in mind here was prudence,⁵⁸³ quoting Prov. 28:16 as follows: “A prince who lacks prudence will oppress many with injustice.”⁵⁸⁴ As Luther implied, the imprudent prince will not recognize when necessity requires him to make exceptions instead of rigidly enforcing the laws, no matter how good and equitable they may be.⁵⁸⁵

Alluding once more to the virtue of prudence insofar as it concerns the proper application of general rules or virtues in individual situations,⁵⁸⁶ Luther explained what government officials ought to do by pointing to the household as an analogy:

[T]he head of the household, although he determines set times and amounts when it comes to work and food for his servants and children, must nonetheless have this determination under his control, so that he may change or relax it if his servants are sick, imprisoned, held up, deceived, or otherwise impeded, and so that he might not deal with the sick as strictly as with the healthy. I say this lest people think it is enough and something precious, if they follow the written law and the advice of the lawyers.⁵⁸⁷

In this context, Luther also considered the common scenario where the prince does not have the requisite prudence because he is not one of the few extraordinary rulers who, as discussed above, can govern properly without being tied to law books. Luther advised that this prince should recognize the gravity of the situation, as a prince without prudence essentially results in a child on the throne (Eccl. 10:16; Is. 3:4).⁵⁸⁸ But then the prince should do what Solomon did (1 Kings 3:9)—despair of the dead law books and of the living heads of his

⁵⁸¹ AE 45:118-26.

⁵⁸² SLE 10:407 (AE 45:119): “[A] prince must have the law as firmly in hand as the sword and determine by his own reason when and where the law is to be applied strictly or with moderation, so that reason may rule over all laws and remain the highest law and master of all laws.”

⁵⁸³ See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 47, art. 1, where he concluded that prudence is part of reason, not the will.

⁵⁸⁴ SLE 10:407: *Klugheit*. Luther here appears to follow more closely the Vulgate version of this verse: “Dux indigens prudentia multos opprimet per calumniam” (the leader who lacks prudence will oppress many by the perversion of justice).

⁵⁸⁵ AE 45:119.

⁵⁸⁶ See, e.g., Michael P. Krom, *Justice and Charity: An Introduction to Aquinas’s Moral, Economic, and Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), p. 37: “Prudence is that intellectual virtue by which reason determines the means to acting in conformity with the ends of the moral virtues, thus dictating to the will what is to be chosen in the concrete situations; the object of prudence, then, is not theoretical truths but truth concerning ‘things done.’”

⁵⁸⁷ SLE 10:407; see AE 45:119.

⁵⁸⁸ AE 45:119.

advisers and pray to God for wisdom to govern the people prudently; then God will graciously grant what the prince lacks.⁵⁸⁹

Luther's own times provided plenty of examples of rulers who showed that they lacked prudence, for instance by ruling in a way that was dangerously out of step with the times. Luther did not hold back when warning these rulers, noting that they were held in contempt by the people because these rulers tried to control their subjects by an outdated governing style that treated people like animals and therefore only agitated the people.⁵⁹⁰ Applying Ps. 107:40,⁵⁹¹ Luther warned those rulers of God's impending judgment that was gathering in the increasing restiveness of the people:

I swear to you by God, if you ignore that this little verse [Ps. 107:40] is gaining momentum over you, you are lost, even if each of you were mightier than the Turk. Your snorting and raging will not help you. It has already advanced by a lot. For there are few princes whom the people do not consider to be fools or scoundrels. This is because of the way the rulers act. And regular people are catching on to what is going on. And the plague of princes, which God calls contempt, is making mighty strides among the masses and the regular people. I am concerned that nothing will stop this, unless the princes start to act in a princely way and begin once more to govern reasonably and correctly.

The people will not, cannot, and do not want to put up with your tyranny and recklessness indefinitely. Dear princes and lords, change your conduct accordingly. God will no longer put up with it. The world is now no longer the way it was in the past, when you hunted and chased the people like game. Therefore, stop acting with temerity and violence, give thought to acting justly, and let God's word have its way which it wants, must, and ought to have. You will not hold it back.⁵⁹²

The following pages will expand on the critical practical advice on governing prudently Luther outlined in his 1523 treatise. Doing so will show that when Luther talked about prudence, he was talking about a key aspect of love itself. What follows will therefore highlight love as the often overlooked yet essential practical link between the moral law and the daily lives of the people—including Christians—lived in their various vocations among fellow sinners in the kingdom of the world.

1. Distinguishing Doctrine and Life, Faith and Love

As noted above, Luther refused to change a biblical doctrine regarding a governmental virtue, even though it may be abused by tyrants.⁵⁹³ Luther recognized that this firmness regarding this and other doctrines may offend some.⁵⁹⁴ In fact, he emphasized that the doctrine of the gospel will be hated by the world and cause constant conflict in the world until the Last Day.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁸⁹ AE 45:119.

⁵⁹⁰ AE 45:116-17.

⁵⁹¹ "He pours contempt on princes."

⁵⁹² SLE 10:405; AE 45:116-17.

⁵⁹³ AE 13:67.

⁵⁹⁴ AE 27:39.

⁵⁹⁵ AE 13:259-62.

In response to these concerns and even charges of rigidity, Luther explained the fundamental distinction between doctrine and life, faith and love, that lies behind his insistence of defending doctrine and his flexibility when it came to addressing concrete situations and challenges in daily life. Directly responding to those “Sacramentarians” who said that the Lutherans’ insistence on the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper destroyed love and harmony in the community, Luther remarked:

In philosophy, when a small error is made in the beginning, a big error results in the end. In theology, a small error similarly overthrows the entire doctrine. This is why doctrine and life are to be distinguished as clearly as possible. Doctrine is not ours but God’s; we are only his called servants. This is why we cannot give up or change even one tittle of doctrine. Life is ours. This is why, as far as it is concerned, there is nothing the Sacramentarians may require of us that we would not and should not gladly take on, excuse, and tolerate, if only doctrine and faith remain inviolate. . . . On this point, we cannot yield even a hairbreadth. For doctrine is like the mathematical point and can therefore not be divided, that is, it cannot tolerate that something is taken away or added. By contrast, life, which is like the physical point, can always be divided, can always yield some.⁵⁹⁶

Luther restated the distinction between doctrine and life as the distinction between faith and love in a way that echoes St. Paul in 1 Cor. 13:

In a concrete situation, love can be neglected without danger in a way that the word and the faith cannot. The duty of love is to tolerate everything and to yield to everyone. By contrast, it pertains to faith not to tolerate anything and to yield to no one. Love, which yields gladly, believes, excuses, and endures everything, is often deceived. But when it is deceived, its damage is the kind that cannot truly be called damage, that is, it does not lose Christ. This is why it does not get angry but remains what it is, constant in doing good even to those who are ungrateful and unworthy.⁵⁹⁷

Because God’s “doctrine must be one continuous and round golden circle,” it follows that, “if you deny God in one article of the faith, you have denied him in all of them, because God is not divided into many articles but is everything in each individual article and is One in all the articles.”⁵⁹⁸ The indivisible oneness of God and his doctrine requires the indivisible oneness of God’s biblical word: “There is only one God who does not let himself be divided or be praised at one place and chided at another, honored in one word and despised in another.”⁵⁹⁹ The unity of the church in the Spirit, therefore, consists in being in accord with what God’s indivisible word and doctrine provide.⁶⁰⁰ Life, on the other hand, is very much divisible, as noted.⁶⁰¹

Luther applied these distinctions to the exercise of church discipline or excommunication, again distinguishing between doctrine and life: While it is impossible to carry out excommunications based on persistent sinful living where the people are not yet aware that they

⁵⁹⁶ SLE 9:644; see AE 27:37; see also AE 37:23-28; Gal. 5:9; Matt. 5:18.

⁵⁹⁷ SLE 9:646; see AE 27:38.

⁵⁹⁸ SLE 9:645, 646; see AE 27:38, 39; see also Jam. 2:10.

⁵⁹⁹ SLE 20:775; see AE 37:26. There, Luther also noted that believing the gospel while denying God commanded Abraham to be circumcised is of no use. That is why it is impossible to follow Jesus, while being ashamed of (some of) his words, as stated in Luke 9:26.

⁶⁰⁰ AE 37:27; see Eph. 4:4-6.

⁶⁰¹ AE 27:37; see AE 27:41; AE 37:27.

live sinfully, excommunications based on persistent false teaching should still be carried out.⁶⁰² “For where doctrine is false, life cannot be helped. But where doctrine remains pure and is preserved, there life and the sinner can still be helped.”⁶⁰³ This is because “what is lost [with pure doctrine] is not merely a good deed done for someone who is ungrateful, but the word, faith, Christ, eternal life, etc.”⁶⁰⁴ Indeed, when pure doctrine is lost, “everything is lost.”⁶⁰⁵

In sum, God’s word and God’s doctrine are like God in that they are eternal, unchanging, and indivisible like a mathematical point. This is why it is impossible to make concessions when it comes to this doctrine. This is why the unity of the church in the Spirit consists in agreeing with all of God’s indivisible word and doctrine (Eph. 4:4-6). Without God’s doctrine, there can be no genuine human life or love. Life, on the other hand, is ours to live in love. And love, while rejoicing only in the truth, is patient, bears and tolerates everything, and yields to everyone (1 Cor. 13:4-7). As a result, it can be divided like a physical point—observed here, neglected there—to preserve outward peace in the community without losing Christ who is grasped by faith, not love.

2. Love Moderates the Law and Overlooks Sin—How to Govern and Live in the Fallen World

a) Love as Queen and Moderator of the Law

Love follows the example of Christ’s wholly self-giving life, even as he perfectly followed the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12) God wrote in the hearts of all human beings.⁶⁰⁶ Love is therefore the summary of the law.⁶⁰⁷ Yet according to Scripture, love—not, e.g., justice—summarizes the law precisely because it serves as the law’s queen and moderator when it comes to the individual commandments, preventing harm to the neighbor by directing interactions among people in this fallen world toward what is beneficial to the neighbor in a given situation (Rom. 13:10).⁶⁰⁸

[A]ll laws, divine and human, do not bind further than love extends. Love is to be the interpretation of all laws. Where love is not, all is already lost. Then the law, no matter what it is, will soon do harm, as it is also written in the pope’s book: “If a law wants to militate against love, it should soon cease.” And in short, this is said about divine and human commandments. Why? Because all laws are given only to establish love, as Paul says in Rom. 13:8, 10: “Love is the fulfillment of the law,” and that we are to owe nothing but to love each other. For when I love my neighbor, I help him, protect him, defend his honor, and do what I would have done unto me.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰² AE 67:398.

⁶⁰³ SLE 7:932; see AE 67:398.

⁶⁰⁴ SLE 9:646; see AE 27:39.

⁶⁰⁵ SLE 7:932; see AE 67:398.

⁶⁰⁶ AE 21:235-40; AE 27:56-58; AE 73:147; AE 75:41-47; AE 76:280.

⁶⁰⁷ Matt. 22:37-40; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; AE 76:270, 274.

⁶⁰⁸ AE 76:270-71, 274-75. Apparently unaware of this important aspect of Luther’s theology, Franz Lau, “Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms,” in Harrison & Pless, *One Lord*, p. 39, opines that “Luther and the other reformers did not become conscious of anything more than the necessary harshness of all political action.”

⁶⁰⁹ SLE 11:1677-78; see AE 79:155-56. In AE 31:108, Luther seeks to support of the eighth of his *Ninety-Five Theses* by arguing for a *prudential* application of canon law (specifically the penitential canons), i.e., an application

Luther explained love's moderating role by observing that God's commandments are not given to be performed for their own sake or to advance works, but to exercise love, that is, to benefit one's neighbors by providing them with what they actually need.⁶¹⁰ "Even if God had given more commandments, he does not want them to be kept while injuring and damaging love. Indeed, when they are contrary to love of neighbor, God wants us to tear them up and knock them down."⁶¹¹ "For if a law is against love, it is no law. For love is a mistress of the law. As soon as someone wants to follow the law without moderation, love commands the law to be silent as something that teaches to act unjustly, not justly, in some cases."⁶¹²

Luther pointed to the biblical example of God's people in the desert where they, to spare them in the physically harsh environment, were not circumcised for 40 years, despite the commandment to circumcise every male on the eighth day.⁶¹³ And Luther pointed to the example

that takes times and places and persons into consideration. There, Luther attributes the above quote from the "pope's book" to Pope Leo. It appears that this attribution may be owed to a medieval theologian Luther greatly appreciated, namely, Bernhard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), as follows: Dominican friar and teacher of Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus (c. 1200-1280), in his commentaries on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (c. 1096-1160), attributes a very similar expression—*quod pro charitate institutum est, contra charitatem non debet militare* (what has been instituted for love may not militate against love)—to Bernhard of Clairvaux. Albertus Magnus, *Opera Omnia* (Paris: Vivès, 1894), 30:375. Albert's student, Henry of Ghent (c. 1217-1293), offered the same quotation and specifically attributed it to Bernhard's work *On the Precept and the Dispensation* to answer in the negative the question of whether the member of a religious order should do a lesser good in obedience to the command of a superior, as obedience was instituted for love, and love requires that the greater good be done. Henricus a Gandavo, *Quodlibeta* (Paris: Jodocus Badius, 1518), fol. 328r-328v (Quodlibet VIII, qu. 16). Bernhard himself, in the work referenced by Henry, discussed when one may grant a dispensation from certain ecclesial rules. The quote attributed to him by Albert and Henry is not found verbatim in this work, but several statements express the substance: "As long as [these rules] serve love, they are immovably fixed and may not be changed. . . . But if, by contrast, these rules have perhaps ever seemed to be contrary to love . . . , is it not clear that it is most just that those things that have been devised for love should, where it seems expedient, for love be omitted or discontinued or changed to something perhaps more convenient? . . . [I]t would no doubt be unjust if things established for love alone would be upheld against love." Wondering if he is the first to say this, Bernhard then attributes the following supporting quote to Pope Leo I (d. 461): "Where there is no necessity, the ordinances of the holy fathers should not be violated, but where there is necessity, let him who has the power change them for the good of the church. For a change of the law results from necessity." MPL 182:863-64. Bernhard's use of the Leo quote to support his position on love as the modifier of rules may have caused Luther to remember love as modifier of rules as a papal statement. Moreover, Luther referenced Bernhard's treatise in his 1521 discussion of monastic vows (see AE 44:434), although it is not clear whether Luther read this work himself or knew it only from the works of others. See Franz Posset, *Pater Bernhardus: Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2018), p. 109. In any event, near the end of his treatise on monastic vows, Luther discussed the connection between law, love, and necessity along the lines of Bernhard without mentioning him by name. AE 44:393-94.

The fact that Luther applied a rule to all laws—divine and human—which the theologians mentioned above appear to have only applied to human rules is worth noting. It is an instance of how the rediscovered gospel of justification by faith without the works of the law freed love to serve the neighbor by doing what the neighbor needs in a given situation, even against a strict, loveless reading of God's own law. Unlike Luther, canon lawyer and abbot Ivo of Chartres (c. 1040-1115) distinguished between laws that could be dispensed with, if necessary, and those that could not be determined whether their observance conferred salvation (essentially, the Ten Commandments) or merely guarded salvation (essentially ecclesial precepts like the ones discussed by Bernhard). MPL 161:50. Importantly, as discussed above, mitigation of the law by love is itself required by the summary of the law, love.

⁶¹⁰ AE 76:273.

⁶¹¹ SLE 11:1690.

⁶¹² SLE 1:847; see AE 2:340; see also AE 27:55.

⁶¹³ AE 79:157.

of Christ whose disciples plucked the ears of grain on a Sabbath. In their defense, Christ pointed to the example of David who ate the bread reserved for the priests in the temple because he was hungry.⁶¹⁴ In this example, “Christ issues a reliable rule of equity applicable to all laws” that serves as “a general rule” for all such cases.⁶¹⁵ In fact, as David and his men “broke the law . . . of the holy bread in that necessity allowed the exception and provided the interpretation of the law,”⁶¹⁶ the example of David follows the ancient legal maxim that, by Luther’s time, had become part of canon law, “necessity knows no law” (*necessitas non habet legem*) and therefore limits and interprets the law.⁶¹⁷

“This is why [God’s] commandments must always be understood in a way that you do not forget that God has created body, soul, and possessions and that he wants you to take care of them in such a way that, if one of these things is in jeopardy, you should know that his commandments are no longer commandments.”⁶¹⁸ When overruled by the chief commandment to love the neighbor, individual commandments therefore no longer bind consciences and may no longer be taught in such a way as to bind consciences because doing so would lead to “the highest idolatry” by turning the devil into god and heaven into hell.⁶¹⁹

While this is the teaching of God’s word, fallen human nature may be opposed to moderating the law by love and desires to rule by unmitigated law alone, although doing so harms the neighbor and destroys life (Rom. 13:10).⁶²⁰ Therefore—according to the Latin proverb *summum jus, summa injustitia*—“the strictest justice is the strictest injustice” in this life.⁶²¹ To avoid this type of injustice, Solomon advised to temper righteousness in daily life when he counsels, “Do not be overly righteous” (Eccl. 7:16).⁶²²

⁶¹⁴ AE 79:157.

⁶¹⁵ SLE 19:1652-53; see AE 44:389. In AE 35:240-41, Luther provides additional biblical examples where faith and love authorized the transgression of other laws.

⁶¹⁶ SLE 19:1654; see AE 44:391.

⁶¹⁷ Julien Le Mauff, “Un cas d’appropriation temporelle d’une doctrine canonique: l’argument de la *necessitas* comme justification de l’exception en matière fiscale,” *Le Moyen Age CXXXVI* (2020), p. 83-98. Luther applied this rule frequently. See, e.g., AE 36:255, where Luther noted that even though Christ commands the reception of both bread and wine in the Supper, the law of love constrains a Christian to forego to receive the wine if weak consciences are still ensnared in the contrary teaching, as necessity knows no law. In SLE 1654-55 (AE 44:391-92), he stated: “[I]f a necessity [= the risk of starvation] exists, [stealing] is permissible,” while murder or sexual immorality are never “necessary” in this way.

The protagonist of Victor Hugo’s 1862 novel, *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean, was initially thrown into prison because he stole bread to feed the seven children of his sister. Living a new life under the alias of Monsieur Madeleine after a kind bishop had shown him mercy (see Luke 7:47; AE 23:268), Valjean represents the principle of love and equity. His antagonist, Inspector Javert, represents the principle of strict legal justice that caused Javert to pursue Valjean relentlessly, even for an objectively minor excusable offense. In the end, Javert cannot set aside in love the law’s strict demand to reimprison Valjean without committing suicide.

⁶¹⁸ SLE 19:1654; see AE 44:390.

⁶¹⁹ SLE 12:366; see AE 76:270-72. Luther made these statements in a sermon from early 1525 that is closely related in time and substance to Luther’s two-part treatise against the “heavenly prophets”—Andrew Karlstadt and his followers—who, like the papal theologians, sought to murder consciences by making laws where God had made none, for instances when it came to retaining images in church, elevating the host during the Lord’s Supper, and using the post-biblical term “sacrament.” E.g., AE 40:80-82, 90-91, 127-28, 139-40, 149-52, 222-23.

⁶²⁰ AE 76:272-73.

⁶²¹ SLE 12:366; see AE 76:270-71.

⁶²² AE 76:271; see AE 15:122-23.

Luther illustrated the difference between ruling by law alone and ruling by law tempered by love by pointing to the example of a driver guiding a team of horses pulling a wagon:

[The driver] controls horses and wagon according to his will. Now, if he were content to have his horses wear a bridle while he pays no attention to the road to steer horses, bridle, and wagon along the road, the whole rig—horses, wagon, bridle, and driver—would soon be in a heap and perhaps drown in a puddle or break the neck by going over sticks and stones. But if he is so prudent as to steer the whole rig along the road and pays attention to where the road may or may not tolerate travel, he drives well. But the one who wants to go straight ahead, that's the 'smart' driver who wants to steer the road to follow the wagon, so that the road must follow where his wagon wants to go. He will certainly realize how nicely this will turn out. This is what happens when one tries to rule the people according to the law and works, not the laws according to the people.⁶²³

Thus, the people must “follow the law and works where they can do so and it is good for them. But again, where doing so is harmful for them, the law truly should bend and yield, and the ruler should be prudent to give room for love and abrogate the works and laws.”⁶²⁴

In this regulating function, love is equivalent to the virtue of prudence or discretion,⁶²⁵ which Luther, following an ancient tradition, called “the driver of all virtues” that “must be the mistress of all virtues.”⁶²⁶ In fact, “love is the driver and true discretion in divine good works, which always considers the benefit and improvement of the neighbor, just as discretion in worldly virtues looks to the common good and steers the laws accordingly.”⁶²⁷

⁶²³ SLE 12:370; see AE 76:274. Another pertinent illustration employed by Luther is that of a foolish individual lovelessly applying the commandment to feed and clothe his neighbor to the point of feeding and clothing the neighbor to death. The loveless fool counters any objections by replying: “You heretic, do you want to hinder good works? Food and drink and clothes are something good, which is why one should not cease and cannot do too much.” SLE 12: 369 (AE 76:273-74); see AE 2:338-39; AE 8:172-74, where Luther criticized the rules of the Carthusian monks regarding fasting that, because their application was not tempered by equity when necessary, ruined the health of many a monk. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics* II, 6, concluded that the nature and amount of food and exercise must be determined relative to the individual person eating and exercising, not based on the food and exercise in themselves. Taking this advice to heart, Luther did not reject fasting—primarily understood as the individualized and lifelong moderation in the enjoyment of physical comforts (food, drink, sleep, warmth, clothing, etc.)—so long as fasting proceeds from true faith in Christ, does not destroy the body, but merely prepares the body for serving the neighbor in love. AE 21:160-62.

⁶²⁴ SLE 12:370; see AE 76:274-75.

⁶²⁵ Augustine defined prudence as an aspect of love of God in that “prudence is love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it.” Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* XV.

⁶²⁶ SLE 12:370; see AE 76:275; WA 17.2:95-96. According to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 12.6, “Virtue ensures the rightness of the end we aim at, Prudence ensures the rightness of the means we adopt to gain that end.” Put differently, prudence properly applies universal principles to concrete situations. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 7.7. A prudent political leader is therefore one who is able to identify what a political community ought to do in a given situation in the pursuit of a proper goal. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 5.4-5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 47, art. 3, stated that “it is necessary for the prudent man to know both the universal principles of reason, and the singulars about which actions are concerned.” Bernhard of Clairvaux, *Sermones in Cantica*, Sermo XLIX, 5 (MPL 183:1018), observed that discernment (*discretio*) orders love and is therefore “not only a virtue itself but also a kind of moderator and charioteer of virtues.”

⁶²⁷ SLE 12:370; see AE 76:275; see also AE 8:174; AE 15:125. Similarly, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 50, art. 1 ad 1, noted that “the execution of justice in so far as it is directed to the common good, which is part of the kingly office, needs the guidance of prudence.”

Love is also equivalent to the virtue of equity.⁶²⁸ Love demands that, when necessary, the strict application of the law yield to an application of the law that takes into consideration the individual circumstances of those on whom it is imposed in order to preserve temporal peace or, theologically speaking, love, as love or peace is the purpose of laws.⁶²⁹ This is equivalent to equity because no law can be written to address every single situation and therefore may, in certain cases, have an effect opposite to its true purpose, that is, to be “beneficial and preserve the common peace.”⁶³⁰ “This is why all laws that apply to actions must and should be subject to equity as their mistress, because of the manifold, innumerable, uncertain contingencies which might occur but which no one can describe or conceive ahead of time.”⁶³¹

Where love as equity is not observed to moderate the law in the administration of God’s three orders according to individuals and their circumstances and where, instead, laws and other rules are rigidly enforced, death will ensue.⁶³² Justice will become injustice.⁶³³

Hence the German proverb says that a young physician needs a new cemetery; about a young and inexperienced jurist is said that he confounds everything in discord and war; about a young theologian is said that he fills hell with souls. For all these—because they lack the kind of experience that alone engenders prudence—judge and do everything according to their laws and rules. This is why they run into trouble and make mistakes causing great harm to the bodies and possessions of many people.⁶³⁴

⁶²⁸ See Althaus, *Ethics*, p. 32-35, 109-11, 134-36; Mathieu Arnold, “La notion d’*epieikeia* chez Martin Luther,” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 79 (1999), p. 187-208, 315-325; Jason Gehrke, “The Virtue of *Epieikeia*: A Study in Luther and His Sources,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 17 (2014), p. 68-101; Judith Hahn, “Recht, Reform, Reformation: Luthers Billigkeitsverständnis als Impuls für die aktuellen Debatten um Recht und Barmherzigkeit,” in Matthias Pulte & Rafael M. Rieger (eds.), *Ecclesiae et scientiae fideliter inserviens: Festschrift für Rudolf Henseler CSsR zur Vollendung des 70. Lebensjahres* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2019), p. 142-57; Judith Hahn, “Billigkeit bei Martin Luther,” in Matthias Armgardt & Hubertus Busche (eds.), *Recht und Billigkeit: Zur Geschichte der Beurteilung ihres Verhältnisses* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), p. 207-27.

⁶²⁹ AE 2:237.

⁶³⁰ SLE 1:874; see AE 2:339-40. This is the core concern in Aristotle’s discussion of equity, *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 10.6, where he defines equity as “a rectification of law where law is defective because of its generality.” See SLE 10:497 (AE 46:100): “[Laws] can never be given so certainly and fittingly” as to function properly without equitable exceptions. In the context, Luther therefore explained: “This virtue or wisdom—which can and must guide and moderate the severity of law depending on how individual cases go, and which judges the same work to be good or evil according to the difference of the motives and intentions of the heart—is called *epieikeia* in Greek; in Latin it is called *aequitas*, and *Billichkeit* in German.” SLE 10:499 (AE 46:102).

⁶³¹ SLE 10:499; see AE 46:103.

⁶³² AE 8:171-74.

⁶³³ AE 2:340.

⁶³⁴ SLE 1:847; see AE 2:340. Prudence is, as noted, “the driver of all virtues.” SLE 12:370; see AE 76:275. Or, as Luther put it in this context, “although a law has been prescribed and enacted, prudence and reason are needed which know how to apply and use it in all sorts of affairs.” SLE 1:846; see AE 2:340; WA 42:505: “posita lege relinquatur prudentia, quae eam moderetur in certis casibus.” In SLE 1:1235 (AE 3:261-62; WA 43:62), Luther noted: “In this way, mitigation or equity is to be sought in legal matters (Sic in iura quaerenda est *Epykia*). It is like a miracle of the jurists, because it deviates from the standard and rule of the law. Yet it remains true that where the law is strictest, it is no law at all but the greatest injustice. Similarly, physicians have their rules and canons. But how often do they happen upon diseases where they must deviate from these rules and try to heal a disease in a way that is different from their rules and laws. This is why those are unfit jurists and physicians who, without considering the specific circumstances, simply insist on their rule. In theology, the legalists similarly confine the whole world in a strict and rigid government, which causes great damage to body, possessions, and the salvation of souls.”

This is why those inexperienced in the faith must also be taught the virtue of equity, that is, “how to conduct themselves toward their brothers and neighbors, namely, that they . . . may yield their rights. For the purpose of all laws is love, peace, and unity. Toward this goal, all worldly rights and laws, of whatever kind they may be, should be aimed and directed.”⁶³⁵ The social divisions that emerge when this critical lesson is not learned—and when the divisive works of the flesh reign over the sociable fruit of the Spirit—can be seen in Paul’s letters, e.g., in Gal. 5:13-26.

At the same time, equity can easily become a loophole so that the exception swallows the rule.⁶³⁶ Equity must therefore not be confused with “a reckless relaxation of the laws and discipline” or their “destruction,” because “no abrogation of natural law and divine is to be permitted.”⁶³⁷ Put differently, granting an equitable exception out of love where necessary to preserve life and outward peace is not the same as changing the underlying rule.⁶³⁸ However, recognizing when and how laws are to be mitigated in a given situation is not something that is easily done but requires the heroic and extraordinary men discussed earlier.⁶³⁹ Yet when in doubt, mercy and grace in government, household management, and public order should prevail.⁶⁴⁰

Therefore, learn . . . that love and peace are the masters and rulers of all virtues and laws, as Aristotle nicely says concerning equity. Likewise, Augustine . . . says that, in a group of people, not everyone is to be clothed, fed, and ruled in the same way, because not everyone can be equally strong and receptive. This is spoken wisely and well.⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁵ SLE 1:844; AE 2:338. Note that Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 10.8, defined the equitable person as the one “who by choice and habit does what is equitable, and *who does not stand on his rights unduly, but is content to receive a smaller share although he has the law on his side.*” Luther noted that his emphasis on equity in dealing with the papacy had served to protect outward peace. He feared that, after his death, other preachers would arise who—following the example of Karlstadt, Müntzer, the Münster anabaptists, and Zwingli—may deal with the papacy more aggressively. AE 54:232.

⁶³⁶ AE 46:103-04.

⁶³⁷ SLE 22:1517-18; see AE 54:325; see also AE 8:174.

⁶³⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 120, art. 1 ad 1: “[Equity] does not set aside that which is just in itself but that which is just as by law established. Nor is it opposed to severity, which follows the letter of the law when it ought to be followed. To follow the letter of the law when it ought not to be followed is sinful.”

⁶³⁹ AE 2:338; see SLE 2:1877 (AE 8:171): “[T]his middle course or moderation is subject to human emotions or passions. This is why Aristotle adds: ‘As a wise man could adjudicate the matter.’” According to Luther, “as often as a law is considered, the counsel of a wise man is—according to the opinion of the theologians—necessarily included and kept in mind, as the one who can guide and rule the law in concrete cases so that the law may not be harmful but always remain focused on the purpose of the law, namely, to be beneficial and preserve common peace.” SLE 1:847; see AE 2:340.

⁶⁴⁰ In SLE 2:1880 (AE 8:174; WA 706), Luther called equity that keeps the middle course between a strict application of the law and a destruction of the law “a part of the grace that must have its place in government, household management, and public order” (*pars gratiae, quem oportet locum habere in magistratu, in oeconomia et politia*). In SLE 5:808 (AE 13:153), Luther noted: “Moderation is good in all things. To [strike the proper balance between mercy and justice] is a special ability; indeed, it is a matter of God’s grace. But because this balance is hard to achieve, giving mercy priority over justice comes closest to hitting the bullseye.” In SLE 10 (AE 45:104-05), Luther similarly observed that it is preferable if a government punishes too little over punishing too much because “the world has, and must have, scoundrels but has few good people.”

⁶⁴¹ SLE 1:847; AE 2:340. AE’s seemingly random translation of Luther’s *Epiikia* (WA 42:505) as “clemency” obscures Luther’s indebtedness to the ethical tradition. Aquinas, e.g., distinguishes the two, where equity is a

The preservation of outward peace by a loving moderation of the law is not an end in itself. Outward peace allows Christians to lead godly lives, raise their children in the faith, and share God’s word with others to extend Christ’s spiritual kingdom on earth, as Luther explained commenting on 1 Tim. 2:2.⁶⁴² Leading this life in a quiet, Christian way also has the promise that it will lead others to glorify the Father in heaven by believing in his Son (Matt. 5:16).⁶⁴³ In fact, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and other “Christian virtues”—which Paul “adorns with a worthier name by calling them ‘fruit of the Spirit’” in Gal. 5:22—“have an exceedingly great benefit and fruit. For those who are adorned by them glorify God and, by these virtues, attract others to the doctrine of Christ and to faith in him.”⁶⁴⁴

Luther applied these principles concerning love, prudence, equity, and necessity to provide counsel to government officials in difficult situations. One such example was usury, i.e., the lending of money in exchange for the payment of interest. While Luther rejected this practice on a doctrinal level as contrary to God’s law, he was willing, not to give up on this general rule altogether, but to let this strict rule be moderated by equity and amnesty for widows and orphans without an alternative source of income to allow them—not others who were not in the same predicament—charge a modest rate of five to six percent interest set by the government as “a little necessity usury” (*Notwücherlein*) to keep them from dying of hunger, becoming beggars, or despairing in sin.⁶⁴⁵ Luther analogized this exception to permitting a hungry person to steal bread from a baker in order to stay alive, while to do so outside this necessity would be theft.⁶⁴⁶ Luther summarized the rationale behind his equitable advice regarding usury as follows:

I am well aware of the kind of strict laws that can be enacted. But as necessity breaks iron, it can certainly break a law as well, because necessity and the absence thereof are very different and make a complete difference, as far as times and persons are concerned. What is just outside of necessity is unjust in necessity.⁶⁴⁷

A second example is Luther’s advice regarding divorce, where he implicitly applied equitable and prudential considerations by considering an exceptional situation and coming down on the side of mercy:

Certain strange, stubborn, and obstinate people who cannot put up with anything and are not at all suited for married life, if worldly government arranged for it, should be allowed to get a divorce. Because the people are wicked, one cannot rule differently. One must often permit something that is not good to prevent something worse from happening.⁶⁴⁸

(subjective) part of justice, while clemency is a (potential) part of temperance. E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 120, art. 2; q. 143, art. 1; q. 159, art. 1.

⁶⁴² AE 28:259.

⁶⁴³ AE 21:65-67; AE 29:57.

⁶⁴⁴ SLE 9:711; see AE 27:93.

⁶⁴⁵ SLE 10:882; see AE 61:303-04; see also WA 51:372.

⁶⁴⁶ AE 61:304; see AE 44:391-92.

⁶⁴⁷ SLE 10:883; see AE 61:304.

⁶⁴⁸ SLE 7:451-52; see AE 21:94.

This permission of divorce follows God’s own example in the Old Testament.⁶⁴⁹ But “[t]hose who want to be Christians should not get a divorce.”⁶⁵⁰ Put differently, precisely because “the people are wicked,” state laws that apply to all citizens need to account for this reality by granting permission to engage in sinful conduct where that is necessary to avoid “something worse.”

Another example where Luther counseled the application of equitable principles is set in the aftermath of the Peasants’ War (1524-26). Here Luther advocated for a case-by-case adjudication instead of lumping together all who got involved in the rebellion in some way. His appeal was based on love, i.e., the equitable attenuation of the law’s strict judgment, “so that the one who looks like an evil and harmful person but who is neither evil nor harmful because he acted involuntarily and unwillingly.”⁶⁵¹ Directly referring to the virtue of equity, Luther criticized the princes for throwing everybody who was connected to the rebellion on the same pile, without examining the underlying intentions of the individuals who participated.⁶⁵² Luther pointed to the example of Hushai the Archite—a friend of King David whom David had sent to advise his rebellious son Absalom—to illustrate the rule that outward collaboration with rebels by itself should not determine the appropriate punishment.⁶⁵³ Thus, in the appropriate case, “law ought to yield and equity rule in its place.”⁶⁵⁴

But Luther considered the idea that equity could ever justify the violent overthrow of the government—e.g., by the peasants—to be a “trick or deceit,” to which the Pagans fell prey because they did not know that government was a divine institution but “thought of it as a fortunate invention of humans.”⁶⁵⁵ “I have never seen a case where [tyrannicide] was equitable, and even now *I cannot imagine any*.”⁶⁵⁶ And while it is “equitable to depose and detain an insane prince, king, or lord,” Luther did not generally consider tyrants to be madmen.⁶⁵⁷

Luther’s counsel regarding resisting (not killing!) the emperor, Charles V (1500-1558), by military means after the 1530 Diet of Augsburg is another example of equity or necessity mitigating the strict application of the law to prevent greater harm in the appropriate situation. The need for this counsel arose when the diet, despite fervent prayer and promising signs during the proceedings, did not result in peace and “room for the gospel.”⁶⁵⁸ War or rebellion—or

⁶⁴⁹ AE 21:94; see AE 9:241 (on Deut. 24:1-4); Matt. 19:8.

⁶⁵⁰ SLE 7:452; see AE 21:94.

⁶⁵¹ SLE 3: 1540; see AE 9:193. In the context, Luther also described punishing the guilty without mercy as an act of love. Love, as seen earlier, is therefore what determines when the law is to be applied strictly and without mercy and when the law is to be applied equitably and with mercy. AE 9:193. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 157, art. 3 ad 1, taught: “[P]unishment should be mitigated in accordance with the lawgiver’s intention, although not according to the letter of the law; and in this respect it pertains to equity.”

⁶⁵² AE 46:100-01.

⁶⁵³ AE 46:102. Hushai’s presence among the rebels allowed him to warn David and his men. See 2 Sam. 15-17. Equity, according to Luther, considers Hushai and other like him “worthy of a twofold grace” because he was among the rebels “with good intentions.” SLE 10:499; see AE 46:102.

⁶⁵⁴ SLE 10:498; see AE 46:101.

⁶⁵⁵ SLE 10:500; see AE 46:103-04.

⁶⁵⁶ SLE 10:501; see AE 46:104.

⁶⁵⁷ SLE 10:501; see AE 46:105.

⁶⁵⁸ SLE 16: 1624; see AE 47:11-12. Brecht, *Martin Luther* 2, p. 411-15, offers a summary of the theological and political discussions regarding resisting the emperor that preceded Luther’s advice following the Augsburg Diet.

both—had become likely.⁶⁵⁹ Luther cautioned his opponents not to rely on his teaching against rebellion, including the requirement not to resist tyranny. While this was what he taught, he could not guarantee that others would follow this teaching.⁶⁶⁰ Luther, as a theologian, neither could nor would “wage war nor advise or incite war . . . but would rather advise peace instead of war.”⁶⁶¹ But if war came, Luther would also “not reprove those as seditious—nor allow them to be called seditious—who put up a fight against the murderous and bloodthirsty papists but [would] let it go and happen that they may call it a necessity defense,”⁶⁶² as understood in the law and by the jurists.⁶⁶³

Luther had concluded that this armed necessity defense was justified under the circumstances: Unlike Müntzer, Luther and his followers had gone the extra mile to keep the peace, both by teaching against rebellion and by enduring great abuse at Augsburg.⁶⁶⁴ Although the opponents’ cause was not just, they still itched for war because they could not prevail against God’s truth with the weapons of the Spirit.⁶⁶⁵ The opponents were manipulating the gentle emperor to go along with their bloodthirsty schemes.⁶⁶⁶ Those called to armed resistance were themselves in governmental office under Romans 13 and would act within the laws of the land.⁶⁶⁷ The opponents belong to the Antichrist whose chief goal is to eradicate the key doctrine of justification by faith.⁶⁶⁸ “If this doctrine is gone, the church is gone, and no error can be resisted, because the Holy Spirit neither wants to be, nor can he be, with us apart from this article; for he is to declare Christ to us.”⁶⁶⁹ As a result, the proper (understanding of) government must then disappear as well.⁶⁷⁰ Luther therefore concluded that the opponents were the true

⁶⁵⁹ AE 47:13.

⁶⁶⁰ AE 47:13; see AE 46:103-05.

⁶⁶¹ SLE 16:1631; see AE 47:18.

⁶⁶² SLE 16:1631; see AE 47:19. AE has “self-defense,” which is a valid translation but fails to convey the important theological foundation of Luther’s argument. Not to defend oneself against tyrants is the rule under the Fourth Commandment, as Luther taught consistently. Engaging in a “necessity defense” is the equitable exception to that rule within a very narrow set of circumstances, just as “necessity usury” or “necessity theft” is the equitable exception to the rule not to demand interest or not to steal.

⁶⁶³ AE 47:19. The legal instruction Luther received on this matter in the fall of 1530 is discussed in detail in Heckel, *Reformation*, p. 745-50. This instruction included the conclusion that the emperor, given the peculiar legal structure of the Holy Roman Empire, did not hold authority over the princes under Rom. 13.

⁶⁶⁴ AE 47:13-15, 54-55.

⁶⁶⁵ AE 47:17, 18-19; see Gal. 3:3.

⁶⁶⁶ While counseling his followers on what to do in case of a military attack conducted in the name of the emperor, Luther defended the emperor as someone who treated the Lutherans well at Augsburg but who was unable to break free from his bloodthirsty advisers. AE 47:30-35; see AE 45:121-23, where Luther warned the Christian prince against blindly trusting counsellors and other courtiers.

⁶⁶⁷ AE 47:19, 34.

⁶⁶⁸ AE 47:34, 53-54.

⁶⁶⁹ SLE 16:1664; see AE 47:54; see also John 16:14; LC II, 42-45.

⁶⁷⁰ AE 47:52. In the late 1530s, these discussions resumed in connection with the council planned by the pope. They are summarized in Brecht, *Martin Luther 3*, p. 199-203. Further expounding on the concept of necessity defense, Luther concluded that, because the pope was a bear-wolf worse than a tyrant—the son of perdition (2 Thess. 2:3), the fourth beast foretold by Daniel that would devour the whole world (Dan. 7:23)—and therefore not a legitimate authority in any of the three holy orders (he was rather their destroyer), resistance against him was not only permissible but *necessary* if he were to wage war against those among whom God’s word was preached purely. WA 39.2:42-44; see AE 41:177-78, 204-05. In 1545, on the eve of the council of Trent (1545-1563), Luther forcefully defended the emperor against papal attacks, after the emperor had made several concessions to the Lutherans to

insurrectionists because they, like Müntzer, sought to take over the legitimate government and make themselves rulers, while the resisters would merely act contrary to law within the exception of a necessity defense.⁶⁷¹

In sum, the commandment to love the neighbor summarizes the law. This summary also moderates the application of individual commandments when it comes to human life together in this fallen world so that the neighbor may be served and the law may not harm the neighbor. This moderation of the law in a concrete situation may be necessary because sin is an inevitable fact of all human life in this fallen world, even in the lives of Christians. Because of sin, experience teaches that a strict enforcement of individual commandments in the varied circumstances of this life may result in rebellion, suffering, and death. Love requires those who can do so to avoid these results that harm the neighbor.

On this point, Luther found the philosophical tradition of antiquity in agreement with Scripture. This should not come as a surprise because, as seen earlier, reason and the proper use of reason is not limited to Christians. Rather, these are good, divine gifts the Creator gives to believers and unbelievers alike along with sun and rain to make beneficial use of them to promote peace and protect life. Luther therefore gratefully used what reason had found unaided by the Holy Spirit to illustrate how to make God's law or Christian virtue "work" under the conditions of this fallen world by following a middle course that avoids the unacceptable alternatives of abrogating God's law and destroying individual life and societal peace by a rigid application of the law. Specifically, Luther drew on Aristotle's teachings on equity but also commended the virtues of prudence and discernment, as well as the common teaching on necessity as an exemption from the law's strict demands. Luther instructed government leaders, pastors, and parents—and all Christians in their interactions with their neighbors—to moderate the law to the extent they have the authority and ability to do so to do their part in serving the neighbor and preserving life and societal peace. This preservation of life and peace is not an end in itself but allows for the peaceful propagation of the gospel in this world.

Luther recognized that properly applying these moderating principles in a difficult situation—and knowing when to moderate the law in the first place—is almost impossible and requires exceptionally gifted people. Luther nonetheless ventured into this arena and provided advice based on these principles in several situations that presented no perfect options—the aftermath of the Peasants' War; the eve of a military campaign that could spell the end of the doctrine of the gospel; as well as the thorny issues of usury and divorce. What these examples

preserve the peace in the Holy Roman Empire. AE 41:284-89; Brecht, *Martin Luther* 3, p. 358-59. After several years of back and forth between the emperor and the Lutheran princes—including the Schmalkaldic War (1546-1547) and the Augsburg Interim (1548)—they signed the peace of Augsburg in 1555, agreeing to leave it to territorial rulers to set the religion of their subjects (either Catholic or Lutheran) and agreeing to settle the religious differences among these rulers (and with the empire) in a peaceful manner. Wilson, *Heart of Europe*, p. 113-17.

⁶⁷¹ SLE 16:1632 (AE 47:20): "*Aliud est inuasor, aliud transgressor*," which essentially means that it is one thing to invade government by rebellion and another to transgress its laws by committing a crime; see also AE 47:14; AE 41:177-78, 205. Another example of Luther's application of equitable principles is Luther's counsel to Philip of Hesse (1504-1567) regarding bigamy. In the 1539 letter to Philip, Luther and his associates clearly distinguished between the applicable general law—here, that marriage is between one man and one woman, Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4-6—and an exception granted due to necessity, as a concession to the weakness of the flesh, as God had done in Deut. 21:15. WA Br. 8:640-41. This advice is consistent with God's institution of marriage—Philip wished to *marry* a (second) wife—and the prohibition of divorce.

show is that even moderating the law follows certain rules and is therefore not an arbitrary exercise of power based on personal favoritism or preferences. For Luther, a key rule for advising and acting where love calls for a necessity-driven exception from the law is to err on the side of grace and mercy.

b) Love Overlooks Sin

A related practical effect of attenuating the law in love is that misconduct is not always called out or punished. Rather, prudence may require that misconduct is simply overlooked in the daily administration of the household, the government, and the church to avoid greater harm.⁶⁷² Importantly, just as practicing equity by tailoring the law to a specific situation, so practicing equity by overlooking misconduct in violation of the law is not the same as abolishing the law altogether.⁶⁷³

As Luther pointed out already in his 1523 treatise on government, the ability to overlook and ignore misconduct is an essential ability of any ruler.⁶⁷⁴ Luther illustrated what was required here by pointing to David's example in dealing with rogue military leader Joab.⁶⁷⁵ Realizing that he could not punish Joab for his crimes without risking an open rebellion before his imminent death, David entrusted the matter to his son and successor, Solomon, to handle it in his wisdom (1 Kings 2:5-6). Solomon had Joab killed when the time was right.⁶⁷⁶ Thus, as timing is an aspect of prudence,⁶⁷⁷ David and Solomon acted prudently by doing the right thing—overlooking misconduct and punishing misconduct—at the right time. As a result, these model kings did not make matters worse by causing a general uprising that would have caused death and destruction. The same course of action must be followed in the congregation, according to the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2) and the example of Abraham (Gen. 13:8-9).⁶⁷⁸

Commenting on Gal. 6:2 by drawing again on 1 Cor. 13, Luther explained what this aspect of love requires in church, state, and home:

⁶⁷² Overlooking sin is different from covering and excusing sin required by the Eighth Commandment. See LC I, 285.

⁶⁷³ SLE 22:370-71 (AE 54:43-44; WA TR 1:129): “In household management and in public order, there must be law to show that one does not want injustice to happen. But once it's happened, the remission of sins should be granted; otherwise, one destroys everything. A husband must overlook many things in his wife and children but may not lose sight of the law. This is true in all walks of life. In all creatures, the forgiveness of sins is depicted: The trees do not all grow straight. The rivers do not all flow straight. And the earth is not the same everywhere. This judgment is therefore true: Anyone who cannot overlook things is unfit for governing. That is equity. One must put up with much, overlook many things, and yet not tolerate everything. It is said: Not everything; not nothing.”—AE renders Luther virtually unintelligible by mistranslating the Latin term *dissimulare* as dissembling, instead of overlooking, and mistaking equity for clemency.

⁶⁷⁴ AE 45:123-24.

⁶⁷⁵ AE 45:123-24.

⁶⁷⁶ Joab joined David's son Adonijah who had tried to be king instead of Solomon (1 Kings 1:7). After Solomon became king, he initially spared Adonijah (1 Kings 1:53) but eventually killed him with Joab (1 Kings 2:24-25, 34).

⁶⁷⁷ WA 40.3:229-30.

⁶⁷⁸ AE:27:113-14; SLE 1:847-48 (AE 2:341): “One should note and retain this example so that we might also learn to yield our right to preserve unity. . . . Abraham does this as a holy and God-fearing man by yielding his right and considering how unity is to be preserved. For Paul admonishes us to do this in Eph. 4:31: ‘Be friendly to each other, cordial, and forgive one another.’ And in Phil 4:5, he says: ‘Let your equity be know to all humans.’ Now, equity properly means to yield one's right so that unity may be preserved, which is necessary always and everywhere in our lives. For where the strictness of the law is prevails, there is the greatest disunity.”

[Gal. 6:2] contains a most humane commandment and has the highest praise added to it as a summary. The law of Christ is the law of love. After redeeming and renewing us and making us his Church, Christ did not give us a law except that we should love each other [John 13:34]. . . . To love, however, is not the same as having goodwill toward others, as the Sophists foolishly claim, but it is to bear each other's burden, that is, it means to bear what is burdensome and what is not borne gladly.

A Christian must therefore have strong shoulders and strong bones, which are able to bear the flesh, that is, the weakness, of the brothers; for Paul says that they have burdens and burdensome things. This is why love is friendly, kind, and patient. It is not about taking but about giving. For it must overlook many things and bear them. In the congregation, godly teachers see many errors and sins, which they must bear. In worldly government, the obedience of the subject never measures up to the laws of the government. Therefore, if a government official cannot overlook [the subjects' shortcomings], he is not fit to rule a political community. In the household, many things happen that displease the father of the household. But if we are able to bear and easily overlook our own weaknesses and sins—of which we daily commit many—then let us also bear those of the others, according to the word: “Bear one another's burdens” and “You are to love your neighbor as yourself.”⁶⁷⁹

Adding to this exposition of Gal. 6:2, Luther cautioned that, “[w]ithout such equity, it is impossible that peace and unity can remain among Christians.”⁶⁸⁰

Luther drew the same practical conclusions from Tit. 3:2 where St. Paul instructs the Christians to be *epieikeis*, equitable. Luther interprets this word used here and elsewhere in New Testament tables of duties to mean that all Christians—as well as Christians serving as heads of household and rulers—must be gentle and patient, that is, they must overlook a lot of what goes wrong and not be strict with each other or their subjects.⁶⁸¹ This form of equity is one aspect of walking by the Spirit.⁶⁸² Without the virtue of equity, it is impossible to live with others.⁶⁸³

This precept is not only frequently given in the New Testament, e.g., Phil. 4:5; 1 Tim. 3:3. Luther also noted that the whole book of Ecclesiastes teaches equity.⁶⁸⁴ This equitable approach is critical for princes who may be tempted to lay waste to their whole country in the

⁶⁷⁹ SLE 9:734; see AE 27:113-14; Matt. 22:39.

⁶⁸⁰ SLE 9:679; see AE 27:66. See also SLE 7:371-72 (AE 21:24-25; Matt. 5:5): “[Christ] teaches us that whoever wants to rule in peace what is his—his possessions, house, and yard—must be meek, so as to overlook things, act reasonably, and endure whatever he can endure. It is inevitable that your neighbor will sometimes take too much from you and do too much, either accidentally or intentionally. . . . So choose one of the two, whichever you prefer: You can live among the people with meekness and patience and keep what you have with peace and a good conscience. Or, by blustering and rumbling, you can lose what is yours and have no peace besides.”

⁶⁸¹ AE 29:74-76. Unfortunately, AE again needlessly confuses things by translating Luther's *dissimulare* as “to dissemble.” See WA 25:58-60.

⁶⁸² AE 27:66; see Gal. 5:16.

⁶⁸³ AE 29:75.

⁶⁸⁴ AE 29:76. In SLE 5:1508 (AE 15:123), Luther commented on Eccl. 7:16-17: “It is better to tolerate a small rebellion than that the entire state collapses. This is what happens to the strict enforcers of the law. This is why the laws must be carried out, and they must be urged as far as possible, but not further.”

pursuit of justice instead of overlooking crimes that cannot be punished without causing greater harm to the people as a whole, according to David’s example.⁶⁸⁵

Conduct that overlooks the sins of our neighbors—and thus bears the burden they *are*, not just the burdens they *have*—follows the example of Christ himself (2 Cor. 10:1) and rejects the example of the carnal, hate-fueled, rebellious lifestyle of the world.⁶⁸⁶ Based on Tit. 3:4-5, Luther elaborated on Christ as example of equity: As Christ lived a life (and died a death) of kindness, love of humanity (φιλανθρωπία), and toleration and saved us out of his mercy, not because of our righteous actions, so we should engage in equity and deal with others mercifully, which includes overlooking the shortcomings of those who govern us.⁶⁸⁷

In sum, overlooking sin is a critical aspect of love and equity. It is, again, not the same as changing the law. In fact, it is obedience to the law, as applying this pro-social principle to the law is not only done in obedience to the commandment to love our neighbor. It also follows the example of Christ who treated people kindly and forgave their sins during his earthly life and who continues to do so even now. In the fallen world, the ability to overlook the wrongs committed by others is essential for all who hold offices of authority in the church, in government, and in the family. In fact, this aspect of love is essential in all our interactions with fellow sinners. Without this ability to let go of one’s rights and overlook the wrongs of others, community and peace quickly disintegrate.

c) Distinguishing the Two Kingdoms by Patiently Bearing with the Imperfections of those Holding Divine Offices of Authority in the Kingdom of the World

As seen, those governing the three holy orders should moderate the law’s harshness and overlook many transgressions among the people over whom God has placed them. This approach is guided by love, prudence, and equity. Practicing these virtues is necessary to preserve outward peace and make life together possible among sinners. This, in turn, allows for the peaceful spread of the gospel.

But as indicated at the end of the previous section, the people themselves must also follow Christ’s example of equity and overlook the many failings of the people whom God has placed in authority over them. As Luther explained, imperfect leaders in this world (or the necessarily imperfect rules enacted by them) must not be rejected simply because they fall short of the perfect standards of Christ’s rule over his kingdom and of God’s perfect law.⁶⁸⁸ That would be tantamount to rejecting God who commanded us to *honor* the holders of these offices. Honor, however, “comprehends not only love, but also modesty, humility, and deference as to a majesty there hidden.”⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁵ AE 45:123-24; see SLE 7:1421 (AE 21:337-38): “Justice and injustice are never a sufficient cause to punish or go to war indiscriminately.”

⁶⁸⁶ AE 29:74, 77-78; see AE 29:64, 66-67, where Luther taught that Christ is both an example and a gift and that, without the gift, it would be impossible to follow his example.

⁶⁸⁷ AE 29:79-80.

⁶⁸⁸ AE 29:79-80.

⁶⁸⁹ LC I, 106. In LC IV, 20, Luther likened the Fourth Commandment to the golden chain and crown of divine majesty for all humans occupying “ruling” offices, including parents. While Christians ought to be willing subjects according to Christ’s example, this obedience is limited by Acts 5:29. AE 29:72-74.

Thus, what Luther taught of parents in the Large Catechism is true of all those who hold authority in the three orders:

[Young people] should regard their parents as in God's stead, and remember that however lowly, poor, frail, and queer they may be, nevertheless they are father and mother given them by God. They are not to be deprived of their honor because of their conduct or their failings. Therefore we are not to regard their persons, how they may be, but the will of God who has thus created and ordained.⁶⁹⁰

Accordingly, when Christians encounter foolish people holding positions of authority, they should not be offended but practice equity and be mindful of a time when they, too, acted foolishly.⁶⁹¹

Luther explains this important point by again distinguishing the mathematical point of doctrine and the physical point of life.⁶⁹² As noted, the former is indivisible, while the latter is divisible.⁶⁹³ Christ's rule and God's law (as well as his doctrine) are "straight."⁶⁹⁴ They are therefore mathematical points that are free from any error and do not tolerate any accommodation to individual circumstances. As a result, this law convicts all people of all sins to drive all to the forgiveness of all sins offered in the gospel.⁶⁹⁵ Accordingly, human prudence—considerations regarding appropriate times, places, and persons—has no place in the kingdom of God and yields to God's prudence, especially when it comes to prayer.⁶⁹⁶ By contrast, the rule of men and their laws in this life are physical points and cannot succeed without the toleration, and

⁶⁹⁰ LC I, 108; see LC I, 158 where Luther described three kinds of fathers dealing with physical matters and "spiritual fathers" as comprehended in the Fourth Commandment.

⁶⁹¹ AE 29:77.

⁶⁹² AE 27:37.

⁶⁹³ AE 12:238.

⁶⁹⁴ SLE 5:389. For some inexplicable reason, AE follows the Latin bible (Vulgate) when translating Ps. 45:6 as "The scepter of Thy Kingdom is a scepter of equity." AE 12:236. While this is similar to the translation found in the RSV ("Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity."), it is not at all how Luther translated the verse in this commentary, "Virga directionis virga regni tui" (the scepter of your kingdom is a straight scepter), WA 40.2:523, or in his German bible translation: "Das scepter deines Reichs ist ein gerade scepter." Unsurprisingly, Luther's translation directly informs how Luther describes Christ's unique scepter in his own words: "[T]he scepter of this kingdom is praised with special praise that it is straight, not crooked or full of knots, that is, it does injustice to no one but exercises justice to the mathematical point itself." SLE 5:390; see AE 12:236; WA 40.2:524. Elsewhere, Luther commented on Hebr. 1:8, where Ps. 45:6 is quoted: "The rod or scepter of his kingdom is the gospel, which is a scepter of rightness because it is right and proceeds in a straight line." SLE 12:174; see AE 75:274. This is the opposite of equity, and rightly so, as Luther explained later on by distinguishing the "straight," mathematically exact standards Christ applies in his spiritual kingdom from the necessarily imprecise standards that obtain in the government of the state, the church, and the house where one will not hit the bull's eye but must be content with hitting the target at all. AE 12:236-38.

⁶⁹⁵ Providing an example for a general confession in the Small Catechism, Luther wrote: "I, a poor sinner, confess myself before God *guilty of all sins*." SC V, 22; see SC V, 18: "Before God we should plead *guilty of all sins*, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord's Prayer." As Luther explained (AE 33:206), the justice of God's law is so absurdly strict that, apart from God's Word, it must appear to be contrary to everything that is just and right in this world.

⁶⁹⁶ "To be sure, it is written [in the Lord's Prayer] for what and how we should pray. Yet when it comes to how God should give what we ask for, we cannot express or hit upon *the time, person, manner, and measure*. . . . Since it is therefore above and beyond our knowledge when or how he should help us and grant our request, we ought to leave it to his discretion while continuing to pray. And we should not cease to pray or doubt whether we are heard for this reason; for everything happens for our best." SLE 8:709-10; see AE 24:391-92.

forgiveness, of sins.⁶⁹⁷ Correspondingly, our future *inherent* or *formal* righteousness—just as our current *imputed* righteousness that is by faith in Christ—will be a mathematical point in perfect conformity to Christ’s perfect law, while our current active righteousness is not such.⁶⁹⁸ Indeed, the gospel attenuates the harsh condemnation of God’s law so that, among those who are justified by faith in Christ, the law is to be taught in its “third use” for life in the kingdom of this world by encouraging them to do what is good, as a friendly exhortation, which is exemplified by texts such as Rom. 12.⁶⁹⁹

Luther used a different “mathematical” analogy for the distinction between Christ’s kingdom and the kingdoms of the world—as well as the strict generality of the law in the former and the accommodation of the law to individual circumstances in the latter—by modifying the classical distinction between distributive and commutative justice. According to Aristotle, distributive justice applies between the individual and the state and is governed by geometrical proportion—taking into consideration individuals and their circumstances. Commutative justice, on the other hand, applies between individuals and is governed by arithmetical proportion that does not take the individual circumstances into consideration.⁷⁰⁰ Luther therefore reserved “geometry” for governing people in this sinful world, while applying “arithmetic” to God’s kingdom and the theological use of the law.⁷⁰¹

The necessary imperfection of the church on earth and all earthly government “is unknown to certain raving preachers and to the mob, who are quick to hype the mistakes of princes and kings,” even while the former sin horribly themselves.⁷⁰² But this imperfection is well known to experienced lawgivers and philosophers who have therefore prepared equity and other remedies for these “sick,” i.e., imperfect laws—and imperfect rulers—humans must

⁶⁹⁷ AE 8:341; AE 12:238-39; AE 13:267-69; AE 54:103.

⁶⁹⁸ AE 12:239; see Rev. 21:27; AE 26:260; AE 73:86, 125-28, 133; AE 79:175-76, 178. Accordingly, the present holiness of the church consists chiefly in the perfect holiness of its head, Christ, and is an article of faith, in that it must be believed and cannot be seen. AE 12:233-36, 241; AE 73:163-68, 179-80, 196. In SLE 5:416 (AE 12:257), Luther concluded: “[B]lessed is he who properly recognizes [the true holiness of the Church]. If you can look at the church, the pastor, the brother and see that he is baptized and has the gifts of the gospel and faith, you see heaven and paradise.”

⁶⁹⁹ AE 73:153-54.

⁷⁰⁰ E.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 2-4. Distributive justice generally applies, e.g., when a community awards honors or goods in proportion to the merits or needs of its individual members. Commutative justice generally applies, e.g., in strictly reciprocal contractual arrangements such as labor or sales contracts. See Krom, *Justice*, p. 81-82, 142, 168, 198-99.

⁷⁰¹ AE 2:341; AE 3:130. Applied to the Catholic doctrine of merit, the two types of justice correspond to the equitable doctrine of congruous merit (*meritum de congruo*) which applies to sinners and the justified alike, allowing the former to merit justifying grace by cooperating with actual grace, and the stricter condign merit (*meritum de condigno*) which applies on to the justified allowing them to merit an increase of sanctifying grace. However, acquiring actual grace by natural powers alone is now seen as Semi-Pelagian. While distributive justice is seen as belonging to God in the proper sense, applying commutative justice in the proper sense to God’s relation to creation is seen as impossible. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, tr. Patrick Lynch (Herder: St. Louis, 1954), p. 48, 236, 265-66. Oberman, *Harvest*, p. 128-45, 170-74, has analyzed the doctrine of merits in the late Middle Ages. Simply put, Catholic doctrine conceives of the relationship of humans to God in equitable terms, while Luther viewed it in terms of strict justice. Thus, for Catholic theology, humans can (and should) contribute to his righteousness before God by doing his best (with the assistance of divine grace), while this is impossible in Lutheran theology. Equity, however, did retain an important role for Luther when it came to human life together in this fallen world, as noted.

⁷⁰² SLE 5:395; see AE 12:240.

tolerate on earth.⁷⁰³ Christians and pastors should therefore “learn not to be unreasonable with the mob.”⁷⁰⁴

While they should not be “unreasonable,” they should seek to correct a government official who has fallen—first by prayer, second by humbly and modestly offering their advice in public—while at the same time teaching the people that it is impossible to lead others without sin, in government and the household.⁷⁰⁵ Thus, while the necessary imperfection and patchwork character of all human efforts to lead a virtuous life (including human efforts to govern well) must be tolerated patiently, this unavoidable imperfection is no reason to make no efforts toward virtuous life and government and to embrace the worst human impulses in public office instead. Put differently, government officials and lawgivers—just like all Christians—still ought to “make an effort” and “do as much as possible” to hit at least the target, even if they—just like all Christians—might never hit the bull’s eye.⁷⁰⁶

Distinguishing “the two kingdoms” therefore also involves making the following distinction: Christ’s law and doctrine as well as our imputed righteousness and the Church’s holiness as to its Head are most pure as indivisible mathematical points. By contrast, human rulers and laws, as well as our “civil righteousness” (in the home, the *visible* church, the state), are imperfect and divisible but are all that is possible in this life, even among Christians.⁷⁰⁷

*This distinction cannot be learned too well, namely, that in the sphere of worldly government we bear everything with patience and excuse everything with equity, while we strive to practice civil righteousness as much as possible. But if this does not succeed everywhere, we should say, “This glory belongs to Christ alone and not to other kingdoms.”*⁷⁰⁸

“Whoever does not want to do this must evidently go into a different world.”⁷⁰⁹

In sum, government officials, parents, and pastors are sinners just like those placed under them. Just as the former must overlook the many wrongs committed by the latter, so the latter must overlook the many wrongs committed by the former. This is part of properly distinguishing the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world. While perfection is required in the former without consideration of individual circumstances, perfection is impossible in the latter because of sin. While the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed to faith to allow believers to live in Christ’s kingdom of perfection, love allows humans to live with each other in this world’s kingdom of imperfection by overlooking the many wrongs and imperfections that are impossible to avoid in a fallen world. Those who hypocritically demand a perfect government, family, or church on earth not only fail to properly distinguish the two kingdoms. They also endanger the very existence of these institutions on earth by generating discord and strife. They fail to do what they can to preserve these institutions without which human society on earth—and the salvation

⁷⁰³ AE 34:130-31, WA 39.1:61. “They therefore confess with one accord that a moderation according to equity is to be applied along with the laws.” SLE 5:393; see AE 12:238. AE has the vague “measure of moderation,” while Luther uses the precise term “epiikian,” equity, WA 40.2:526.

⁷⁰⁴ SLE 5:395; see AE 12:240.

⁷⁰⁵ AE 12:242.

⁷⁰⁶ SLE 5:392, 397; see AE 12:238, 242.

⁷⁰⁷ AE 12:241-42.

⁷⁰⁸ SLE 5:398; see AE 12:242-43; WA 40.2:532.

⁷⁰⁹ SLE 5:396; see AE 12:241.

of souls by the gospel—is impossible. At the same time, while achieving perfection in government is impossible in this world, Luther publicly and humbly instructed government officials to do what they can to enact just laws and administer justice properly, just as he called on all Christians to grow in holiness while recognizing that perfect holiness is presently a matter of faith only. Acknowledging the inevitable imperfection of life in this world therefore did not lead Luther to excuse those who simply surrendered to sin.

F. Living in the End Times—Cross, Joy, and Deliverance for All Believers in Christ

Luther believed that God’s final judgment and the end of the world were close at hand.⁷¹⁰ While Luther recognized that the precise time of Christ’s return for final judgment was known to God the Father alone,⁷¹¹ he saw the signs of the end Christ revealed in the gospels—e.g., Matt. 24; Luke 21—as a warning that the Last Day would arrive soon.⁷¹² Luther considered the unprecedented advances in civilization he observed in his day—an abundance in food and eating, drink and drinking, clothing, art, worldly learning, global commerce—as signs of the end, according to Christ’s warning of “cares of this life” (Luke 21:34) and his sure prediction that the last days will be like the days of Noah (Luke 17:26).⁷¹³

Additionally, there were also the great innovations in spiritual matters under the papacy—the condemnation of the gospel of salvation by faith alone, the sacrifice of the mass, and the rule of Aristotle over the church—which amounted to the installation of the Antichrist, the predicted “desolate abomination,” in the temple of God’s church.⁷¹⁴ It was “above all else” these *spiritual* devastations—not “unchastity as before the Flood or purely worldly sin as it was in Sodom”—that compelled Luther “to believe that Christ must come soon. For such sins are too great. Heaven cannot endure them any longer. They provoke and defy the Last Day too much. It must fall on them before long.”⁷¹⁵

Regarding the natural signs announcing the end according to Christ’s prophecy, Luther observed that many will be misled concerning these natural signs as signs of the coming end by the fact that solar and lunar eclipses as well as meteors are not always followed by immediate

⁷¹⁰ AE 54:437. In AE 68:337, Luther speculated that the world would end in the sixth millennium since the creation of the world which had already existed for about 5,500 years. He also believed that the end would come during the existence of the (Holy) Roman Empire, which he saw in tatters. AE 35:300, 314; AE 46:199-200; AE 68:286. Commenting on the meaning of Mat. 24:34, Luther stated that “this generation” refers to the Jews who crucified Christ or unconverted Jews in general, while “until all these things take place” must be taken as a synecdoche (a part for the whole), meaning “until all these things *begin* to take place.” AE 68:340-41; AE 75:108.

⁷¹¹ AE 68:327-28; see Matt. 24:36, 42, 44.

⁷¹² AE 75:92; see Matt. 24:33.

⁷¹³ AE 75:92-93.

⁷¹⁴ SLE 11:49; see AE 75:93-94; see also AE 79:330-36; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4. In SA II, IV, 10-12, Luther taught that the pope is the real Antichrist, because he demands that Christians be saved based on the pope’s authority and power—instead of based on what Christ said and did—thereby going beyond the enmity against Christians demonstrated by Muslims who at least allow Christians to believe in Christ.

⁷¹⁵ SLE 11:49; see AE 75:94. In AE 54:77, Luther noted that prosperity of the world and contempt for God’s word are the two chief signs of the coming end that go largely unnoticed.

calamity.⁷¹⁶ The distress and perplexity of nations—experienced in the consciences of those languishing without the gospel under the papal errors—will similarly be explained away by most as having some natural cause.⁷¹⁷ And, thanks to science, natural causes will also be presented as explanation for the meteorological phenomena identified by Christ.⁷¹⁸

Consistent with these signs of destruction, Luther did not expect the world to improve before the return of Christ. In fact, he saw and expected the opposite, believing that the end of times would be the worst of times.⁷¹⁹ Breaking the dominance of the erroneous doctrines of the papacy by the rekindling of the gospel was God’s gracious intervention that prevented the papacy from destroying everything, including the gospel, the sacraments and Holy Scripture.⁷²⁰ Yet this intervention only accelerated the process of moral decay: While the legalistic doctrines of the papacy managed to restrain human iniquity by fear of punishment, God’s rekindling of the light of the gospel by the work of Luther and his associates had the result that “the people turn in completely irrational animals and beasts while they despise pure doctrine. . . . [E]veryone follows nothing but their own desires.”⁷²¹

Yet this spread of licentiousness in response to the gospel was not a chance event, as Luther pointed out:

I say this as a warning for those who wish to accept it, because one and all want to be completely free, despising God’s word. For there is an old prophecy among the ideas concerning the Antichrist which says that, at the end of the world, when the deception of the Antichrist has been uncovered, the people will be wild and rude, completely fall away from the faith, and say that there is no longer a God, and thus willfully live according to their own desires.⁷²²

For this reason, Christ wondered whether the Son of Man would find faith when he returns.⁷²³

In these threatening yet inevitable events of the end times, the believers patiently bear their cross of temporal misfortune, loss, persecution, and widespread false doctrine, while resisting their sinful nature that does not want to bear this cross.⁷²⁴ The believers will recognize that the true doctrine of the gospel must engender persecution while the false doctrine of the devil leads to undisturbed worldly peace, so that God seems to wear the mask of the devil (as the cause of political unrest and rebellion), while the devil seems to wear the mask of God (as the

⁷¹⁶ AE 75:95-96. In AE 68:331-32, Luther commented on Matt. 24:29 that astronomers are able to calculate the date for solar and lunar eclipses, but that God is not tied to their predictive calculations, as he can cause the sun to go dark when they do not predict it, as, e.g., when the sun lost its light soon after full moon on the day of Christ’s crucifixion (Matt. 27:45), which is astronomically impossible.

⁷¹⁷ AE 75:96-98.

⁷¹⁸ AE 75:98-99.

⁷¹⁹ AE 52:248; AE 1:216; see AE 75:99 note 26.

⁷²⁰ AE 54:76-77.

⁷²¹ SLE 1:409; see AE 1:336; see also AE 79:343-44.

⁷²² SLE 5:849; see AE 13:190-91; see also 2 Thess. 2:1-12.

⁷²³ AE 13:191; see Luke 18:8.

⁷²⁴ According to SLE 2:1080 (AE 6:352-53), the true attitude of Christian faith in the face of such losses is as follows: “Well then, let my body and life, as well as my possessions be taken from me. Let it all go. I am certain that God himself does this and imposes it on me while he has the best intentions for me.” Famously, Luther expressed this Christian confidence in the fourth stanza of his hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” *Lutheran Service Book* # 656. See AE 53:285; see also AE 51:310.

cause of political peace and stability).⁷²⁵ The believers will also persistently pray that God may hasten the end of the world to usher in their final vindication.⁷²⁶ They may take comfort in the many examples in the bible and patiently wait for God to overthrow his smug and self-confident enemies in a miraculous way when they least expected it, as in the Flood.⁷²⁷

Due to the marginalization of the gospel, the end times are therefore both legalistic and licentious. For those who bear responsibility in government and church, this means that they must redouble their efforts to do their duty faithfully. Preachers must continue to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments to do what they can to preserve the truth of God's word for their contemporaries and descendants.⁷²⁸ And those in government must also do what they can to follow David's example by maintaining schools and pulpits to curb false doctrine and to "protect everyone against the violence and heedlessness of others."⁷²⁹ Yet as demanding and overwhelming as leading a Christian life in the end times is, the manifest signs of the end times give those who believe in Christ reasons for joy because the end of this world will bring about their ultimate liberation from sin, death, and hell.⁷³⁰ This is what Christ's parable concerning the budding fig tree foretelling summer (Luke 21:29-31) indicates, as summer is a season of joy and happiness, just as the coming of the kingdom of God.⁷³¹

These believers in Christ will also have the works of mercy Christ, according to Matt. 25:31-46, will require on the Last Day when he returns in visible glory to judge the living and the dead.⁷³² The Last Day will therefore *reveal* the currently *hidden* division between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world, between those who have truly believed in Christ as their only Savior and those who have not, even though they might have been members of the visible church on earth.⁷³³ Because the former lived by faith in Christ and followed his example of mercy and kindness toward all sinners, they will have the kind of works of mercy Christ inquired about—focused on the Fifth Commandment⁷³⁴—"as a public testimony of the fruits of

⁷²⁵ AE 27:43; see Gal. 5:11.

⁷²⁶ AE 6:353; see Luke 18:7-8.

⁷²⁷ AE 6:353.

⁷²⁸ AE 13:192.

⁷²⁹ SLE 5:852; see AE 13:192-93.

⁷³⁰ AE 75:103-4; see Luke 21:28.

⁷³¹ AE 75:107.

⁷³² AE 79:342.

⁷³³ SLE 11:1895 (AE 79:348): "Look, the distinction between sheep and goats is made already in this life in this way, so that everyone can realize it in himself and so that it may also become noticeable outwardly. For those who do not have faith, certainly do none of these works, as they do not take comfort in Christ's grace or remember to do mercy. Thus, they walk past God's word and their neighbor, as if they saw and heard nothing. They do not want to know that it is the Lord whom they are to serve by these works and that he will require this from them." Yet works done according to the Second Table of the Ten Commandments—including even the works highlighted by Christ in Matthew 25—are not entirely reliable identifiers of those who belong to Christ by faith, "because some heathen have also practiced these works and may at times appear to be holier than the Christians, although their actions do not proceed from the heart in purity and simplicity, for the sake of God, but they seek something else by their actions, because they have neither true faith nor knowledge of God, while the Holy Spirit is here [among the Christians]. He sanctifies the heart, so that they produce such fruit from a good, fine heart, as Christ says in the parable in Matt. 13:23." SLE 16:2291; see AE 41:167; Luke 8:15. For the time being, the true saints and the true Church are therefore hidden. AE 33:89; AE 77:111; Col. 3:3; 1 John 3:2.

⁷³⁴ AE 79:341-42.

their faith.” By contrast, the latter (including hypocritical Christians) will have only the fruits of their unbelief and the resultant lack of mercy to show for.⁷³⁵

The Last Day will therefore reveal God’s kingdom.⁷³⁶ And the fact that the Last Day will bring the believers’ final liberation from sin underscores that the kingdom of God is not an earthly paradise of worldly peace, justice, and material abundance. As Luther explained, the kingdom of God does not consist in “a crust of bread” or “a temporal, perishable good,” but in “an eternal inestimable treasure and everything that God Himself possesses.”⁷³⁷ Specifically, the kingdom of God is

nothing else than what we learned in the Creed, that God sent His Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil, and to bring us to Himself, and to govern us as a King of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience, for which end He has also bestowed His Holy Ghost, who is to bring these things home to us by His holy Word, and to illumine and strengthen us in the faith by His power.⁷³⁸

This kingdom comes in time “through the Word and faith.”⁷³⁹ It comes “in eternity forever through revelation.”⁷⁴⁰ In the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “we pray for both these things, that it may come to those who are not yet in it, and, by daily increase, to us who have received the same, and hereafter in eternal life.”⁷⁴¹

That is why the Last Day will bring the greatest joy to believers.⁷⁴² But for the unbelievers, even though they may have recited the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer many times, the Last Day is something to be hated and dreaded.⁷⁴³ This is because unbelievers, at best, are driven by threats to prepare for Christ’s return by relying on their good works.⁷⁴⁴ This approach is promoted by unfaithful preachers who seek to scare people into heaven by presenting Jesus as an angry judge.⁷⁴⁵ And yet, even those who fear the Last Day need not lose heart but should pray for the grace to rejoice in that Day as believers in the gospel, because they are nearer to heaven than those who simply do not care about God’s eternal kingdom at all.⁷⁴⁶

In sum, the end of this fallen world is at hand. A sign of this age is the confusing mix of legalism and licentiousness caused by the widespread marginalization and misinterpretation of the gospel. This results in persecution and suffering for those who are not ashamed of the gospel.

⁷³⁵ SLE 11:1888; see AE 79:343, 346-47, 348. Accordingly, it is important to read Matt. 25:31-46 in its proper biblical context which requires the distinction between works that are morally good because of their outward conformity to the moral law even apart from faith in Christ and works that are theologically good because they proceed from faith in Christ. See AE 26:262-63, 266-68, 271. Evidently, Christ spoke about the fruits of faith, not simple human decency, in Matt. 25. See Matt. 7:18; 12:33; AE 31:361-62.

⁷³⁶ LC III, 53.

⁷³⁷ LC III, 55; see John 14:27; Rom. 14:17; see also AE 13:193-94.

⁷³⁸ LC III, 51.

⁷³⁹ LC III, 53.

⁷⁴⁰ LC III, 53.

⁷⁴¹ LC III, 53.

⁷⁴² AE 75:104.

⁷⁴³ AE 75:104.

⁷⁴⁴ AE 75:105.

⁷⁴⁵ AE 75:105-06.

⁷⁴⁶ AE 75:106.

The one true God seems to wear the mask of the devil because following him leads to hardships, not peace and prosperity. But these are the birth pangs of the visible revelation of Christ's kingdom in glory that will result in the deliverance from sin, suffering, and death for all those who have believed in Christ as their only Savior. Undergoing these painful experiences is therefore a reason for rejoicing because these experiences announce the return of Christ to gather his elect from the ends of the earth and to judge the world based on the presence of genuine works of mercy and kindness, that is, works that are the fruits of faith in Christ the Savior. Christ's return in glory will bring an end to the institutions of government and the family, as their divine purposes for this fallen world will then have been fulfilled. The Church of believers, however, will stand before God with his angels, cleansed from all sin, to praise and serve him in perfect righteousness and holiness according to his eternal law.

III. 20TH-CENTURY LUTHERAN RESPONSES TO MAJOR PHILOSOPHICAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES

A. Luther Meets the Enlightenment and Modern Liberal Society

How would Luther have approached the world we inhabit today—the world shaped by powerful intellectual movements such as the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, and political and economic liberalism that brought us constitutionalism and the cell phone? Answering this big question is evidently a somewhat speculative endeavor. But Luther’s theology is sufficiently clear to answer this question in a way that helps clarify what he taught. This section therefore serves as a mid-point summary before the rest of this book will highlight some key intellectual developments in the centuries after Luther and investigate how 20th-century Lutherans in Germany—in support or resistance—have dealt with the major economic, theological, cultural, and political crisis that was National Socialism.

For Luther, doctrine does not change because God and his word do not change. Doctrine cannot be divided—affirmed here, rejected there—because God and his word cannot be divided. As the gospel concerning Jesus Christ does not change, so the moral law—implanted by God in the hearts of all, summarized in love that serves the neighbor, and obscured (yet not completely eradicated) by sin—does not change.

The three holy orders—the household, the government, and the church—God instituted soon after he created the world out of nothing retain their purposes to perpetuate humanity. In a fallen world, God works in and through these orders to provide their specific bodily and spiritual remedies against sin and the devil. The two kingdoms—God’s and that of the world—remain distinct yet interrelated as faith and love, freedom and service, as well as perfect imputed righteousness and imperfect civil righteousness. As the instrument of the Holy Spirit in this world, the Church is called to teach these key distinctions and the rest of the whole counsel of God as it is revealed in his word, and to do so *sine ira et studio*, without anger and playing favorites.

On a doctrinal basis, Luther evidently would have much to critique if he were to look at today’s society based on Christ’s “straight law,” just as he had much to critique when he looked at the society of his day. Some doctrinal contrasts and disagreements between Luther and modernity will be discussed in detail below.

Yet it is important to keep in mind that the people of his time were no less fallen than the people of our time. While their common fallenness shows itself in different forms, the common denominator of these different forms is humanity’s original sin. Luther described the root of all sinful deeds, words, and thoughts as a violation of the First Commandment—You shall have no other gods—specifically, fallen humanity’s desire to be like God, instead of being content with simply bearing the image of God in which they were created. This desire is the desire to know good and evil independently—and to secure permanent success in this world in a God-like manner by one’s own reason and strength—that is, apart from God’s moral law, God’s revealed word, and God’s blessing. This desire therefore seeks to replace God, both as he grants success and failure in this life for reasons he has not revealed and as he has revealed himself in the Scripture.

The inevitable fruit of this most fundamental violation of the First Commandment was in Luther's day, and is in our day, carnal freedom, that is, maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain as well as saying and doing as one pleases contrary to what reason counsels to the extent it is still sound. Yet the First Commandment is also broken—then and now—by the attempt of fallen humans to turn God into their debtor when it comes to success in this world and the next by attempting to lead a moral life or by attempting to make up for their sins by their righteous deeds, contrary to the gospel.

In this confusing mix of libertinism and legalism that is characteristic of the end of time, the Church is called to proclaim Christ's "straight law." This perfect and unbending standard reveals to all who have ears to hear that all humans are infected with this desire to be like God. As a result, all are without excuse. All stand condemned to eternal death as those *guilty of all sins*, that is, as those who have broken every single one of God's Ten Commandments in every way possible, even when their actions outwardly seemed to conform to God's holy law. Yet to all these, the gospel promises God's full pardon on account of Christ's sinless life and innocent suffering and death. Those who believe this promise will be saved. Indeed, as unbelief breaks all commandments, so faith in this promise fulfills all commandments. And as the image of God is renewed in them by the Holy Spirit, they will begin produce the fruit of faith in the gospel, i.e., willing and selfless service of the neighbor according to God's law summarized in love.

The Church's task therefore also includes equipping Christians to live in a fallen, confusing world as God's channels, hands, mouths, and feet—as God's masks—by being agents of peace, patience, kindness, and love in a fallen world where hatred and anger, division and cynicism, isolation and exploitation, greed and selfishness predominate. Luther therefore would ask the Church today what its leaders and members contribute to social peace and virtuous citizens and virtuous government on all levels. He would sharply criticize those who—instead of promoting love, equity, forgiveness, and prudence as key virtues in a fallen world—have embraced the post-Enlightenment plague of political partisanship and who therefore do what they can to inject its venom into the hearts and minds of their followers. They do so although it destroys social peace and discredits the Church's core mission—the proclamation of Christ's saving gospel to *all* sinners, made attractive by leading a life that displays the fruits of the Spirit such as kindness, patience, joy, and love.

Consistent with how all Christians should live in this fallen world, the key and *only* task of the government—including Christians serving in government—is to preserve outward peace and keep people alive so that their lost divine image might be restored in their souls by the gospel the Church proclaims based on God's biblical word. For Luther, the government's single task has two fundamental aspects required by the negative and positive aspects of the Ten Commandments: The first is restraining sins, especially sins against the poor, the weak, and the marginalized in society. This is done by enacting and adjudicating just laws in a way that is guided by the principles of prudence and equity. The second aspect is providing for the bodily needs of those who cannot provide for themselves because they are poor, sick, or elderly.

Yet not only are these two aspects of the divine duty of government required by the two aspects of the moral law—avoiding what is wrong and doing what is right. These two aspects also emulate the love, patience, forgiveness, and grace shown by God in Christ and in his daily preservation of all creation. Put differently, Luther tirelessly underscored the importance of

kindness, patience, grace, and mercy in human interaction that focused on individual circumstances because he simply followed the example of what the Holy Spirit reveals in the gospel—Jesus Christ as God’s gracious heart, Christ as the one who shows God as the furnace of love God is in his innermost self, despite all human experiences to the contrary.⁷⁴⁷

If anything, then, Luther’s focus on grace in doctrine and life follows the example of God as he has revealed himself in Scripture. This God is the one who sent his Son—not to crush sinners with a mighty army like the glorious kings of this world—but to perform his supreme kingly service of vicariously fulfilling the law for his wayward subjects by his life and death on the cross. This God is also the one who provides sun and rain to the good and the evil. Importantly, God did and does so after prudently considering humanity’s concrete situation as a Father. That is, God did not look at humanity in some idealized way, as he created humanity in paradise as perfect and capable of perfect obedience. Nor did he look at humanity as a merciless judge might look at a remorseless defendant. Rather, God considered humanity in its current “wretched state” of being enslaved by sin, death, and the devil in a fallen world with the heart of a prudent, merciful father who understands that the members of his household are incapable of rendering the perfect obedience the law requires.⁷⁴⁸

Put simply, then, Christ is both gift and example for all Christians, including those who hold high and low offices in government. He embodies the law as much as he embodies the gospel. Following his example means to follow the law that is summarized in love of God and neighbor. But before he can become our example of selfless service of the neighbor, he must become God’s saving gift to us. And we must receive this gift by faith in the promise. Christ must therefore first save us by the grace and mercy he won by his atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Because it follows the example of the gospel itself, Luther’s focus on what the fallen neighbor needs in a concrete situation does not set aside or override God’s unchanging moral law. Rather, this focus is required and limited by the very summary of this law. According to

⁷⁴⁷ AE 30:265; AE 42:164; AE 51:95; AE 78:371.

⁷⁴⁸ See stanza four and ten of Luther’s famous hymn, “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” e.g., *Lutheran Service Book* # 556 (tr. Richard Massie), that ties together the important concepts of Christ as gift and example: “But God has seen my wretched state / Before the world’s foundation, / And mindful of his mercies great, / He planned for my salvation. / He turned to me a father’s heart; / He did not choose the easy part / But gave his dearest treasure.” “What I [i.e., Christ] on earth have done and taught / Guide all your life and teaching . . .” See AE 53:219-20. Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, rev. ed. (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2017), p. 138, characterizes this hymn as “a summary of Luther’s richly concentrated theology, which reveals Luther’s own understanding of the scope of Scripture.” Consistent with Luther’s emphasis of Holy Spirit’s ongoing work of revealing the gospel concerning Christ and the Father’s grace and mercy revealed in Christ, Helmer argues that this hymn should not be forced into a simplistic “law-gospel” narrative but should be understood as a “narrative of Trinitarian advent” that flows from the joy resulting from the Holy Spirit’s comforting revelation of the gospel concerning the Son sent from the Father’s loving heart, referenced in stanza nine. Helmer, *Trinity*, p. 148; see LC III, 61, 64-65: “This [third] article . . . must ever be and remain in operation. For creation we have received; redemption, too, is finished. But the Holy Ghost carries on His work without ceasing to the last day. . . . [In the three articles of the Creed,] we have everything in richest measure; for here . . . [God] has Himself revealed and opened *the deepest abyss of his paternal heart and of His pure unutterable love*. For He has created us for this very object, that He might redeem and sanctify us; and in addition to giving and imparting to us everything in heaven and upon earth, He has given to us even His Son and the Holy Ghost, by whom to bring us to Himself. For . . . we could never attain to the knowledge of the grace and favor of the Father except through the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the paternal heart, outside of whom we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But of Christ we could know nothing either, unless it had been revealed by the Holy Ghost.”

God's word and human reason—e.g., the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12)—this summary is not justice but love. Love, however, is not realized in unbridled individualism and self-realization. Rather, genuine human love is made manifest as it was in Christ's earthly life, that is, as selfless service of the sinful neighbor and even the enemy in need.

Analyzing life in today's society from the vantage point of prudence and equity as Luther would, Luther would have much to commend when considering the process that has, in many ways, formalized and codified what Luther described as the case-specific exercise of prudence and governmental grace⁷⁴⁹—e.g., individualized determination of guilt, presumption of innocence, listening to the people, due process, pardoning those unjustly condemned by the law, laws that seek to curb business practices that seek to exploit the poor, and legal hurdles that seek to prevent a thin-skinned or megalomaniac leader from starting wars unjustly or prematurely.

Moreover, while Luther spoke out against rebellion and cautioned that a change in government is much easier to accomplish than an improvement of government, he counseled the prudent ruler to permit small rebellions to preserve outward peace. Luther might therefore look at regularly held elections and the rights under the First Amendment as such prudent safety valves, reasoning that it is more tolerable to have a regular, orderly system of change in power than chaos and bloodshed that comes with open rebellion against a tyrannical regime that will not cease subjugating the people, even though the people hold it in open contempt. To the extent the exercise of religion without government interference is necessary to preserve outward peace this too is a prudent measure Luther would support.

To be sure, this formalization and codification of governmental grace and justice falls short of what Luther saw as the *ideal* form of government, i.e., a prudent ruler able to apply the law strictly or leniently, exactly as the situation required, without being tied to legal codes that, no matter of detailed, would never be able to capture perfectly what is required by a virtually endless variety in circumstances and situation. Yet Luther emphasized that only God's rare gifts to humanity—his healthy heroes and miracle men—would be able to rule like this, that is, by embodying the law instead of following many, often conflicting written laws. For the rest of those holding government offices, he memorably counseled against trying to be the apes and cuckoos of these heroic figures, as that would lead to certain failure. Less gifted individuals—the bulk of the individuals Luther observed in high offices in his day—should instead do what they can by operating under written laws and asking God for the ability to apply them equitably and prudently—i.e., as a good, *experienced* ruler would, not as an inexperienced firebrand fresh out of college would—to preserve life, property, and outward peace so that the gospel may proceed unhindered by avoidable social division and war.

In fact, Luther would likely say that, due to the formalization of grace noted earlier, there is not enough prudence and equity, as governmental powers are not at the free disposal of a single ruler but are—e.g., in the United States of America—dispersed through various branches and agencies of government, within a complex system of federalism, under a written constitution, and on the foundation of popular sovereignty. Regardless, within this system, various bodies—such as the voters and the legislators—have considerable discretion. Luther would want them to use their discretion prudently, that is, to make government virtuous in terms

⁷⁴⁹ See, e.g., Christian Waldhoff (ed.), *Gnade vor Recht – Gnade durch Recht?* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014); Detlef Merten, *Rechtsstaatlichkeit und Gnade* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1978).

of fulfilling its sole task of preserving peace and human lives, *as much as that is possible in a fallen world with limited (human) resources*, that is, in a way that considers the times we live in and the people we live with. As Luther recognized, the exercise of discretion to find the elusive balance between mercy and justice—anarchy and tyranny—is necessarily flawed. This is why he counseled that discretion should err on the side of mercy.

Similarly, Luther would demand more in terms of taking care of the bodily needs of the citizens who cannot provide for themselves by providing (free) food and healthcare for them at the expense of the community. As was the case in his day and age, there is always more the government should do in this vast domain because mutual aid on an individual or familial level—though required by God’s law—is not a substitute for what God requires of the government as well. Yet as is the case when it comes to restraining sin by means of the legal system, there are also no prefabricated, timeless answers to how to taking care of bodily needs should work concretely in a given situation. Rather, prudence must again provide the link between what government undoubtedly should do by God’s unchanging law—providing for the poor and the sick—and how this requirement *can* be implemented, given the times we live in and the people we live with. In general terms, Luther, again, would likely counsel erring on the side of generosity, given the impossibility of administering distributive justice without any injustice in a fallen world.

Whether the task is restraining sin by laws or providing for the bodily needs of the poor, Christians as holders of various offices of service in this world—as persons of the world—work together with non-Christians. This cooperation works because the same moral law, reason, and other created gifts—including language and the arts, as well as fundamental principles of prudence and equity—are present in all humans as God’s good gifts, to one extent or another. As was the case in Luther’s age, non-Christians may well have the better insight into what reason and prudence call for in a given situation. As modeled by Luther, Christians are called to test all things and hold fast what is good (1 Thess. 5:21) on this point.

Simply put, then, Christians are called to be God’s mask behind whom he acts and through whom he channels his good gifts for body and soul to the neighbor. By serving in this way, Christians show the fruits of their saving faith in Christ—love. This love serves the neighbor—especially the least among Christ’s brothers and even their enemies—in a way that does not harm the neighbor, even as it patiently and kindly tolerates all while rejoicing only in the truth (Rom. 13:10; 1 Cor. 13:4-7). Christ will require precisely these fruits of faith when he returns in glory to judge the living and the dead on the Last Day (Matt. 25:31-46).

B. Key Intellectual Developments Between the 16th and 20th Centuries

1. A New Political Philosophy Advancing Individual Autonomy

Concurrent with Luther's work in the first half of the 16th century, a philosophy emerged that provided a new rationalization for fallen humanity's desire to be independent of God's commandments and their unchangeable obligation to serve others in love first and foremost. While Luther engaged this philosophy implicitly by attacking fallen reason's perennial quest to shake off the yoke of God's commandments, later theologians—including Lutheran court preachers of the 17th century—engaged this new philosophy more directly.⁷⁵⁰

This philosophy originated with Luther's contemporary, Italian philosopher and diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), who had authored *The Prince* in the early 16th century before it was published posthumously in 1532. Machiavelli rejected the previous virtue-based approaches to politics as unreliable and ineffective.⁷⁵¹ Instead, he "proposed grounding political philosophy upon readily observable human behaviors of pride, selfishness, greed, and the quest for glory."⁷⁵² Moreover, he also argued that "liberty and political security were better achieved by pitting different domestic classes against one another, encouraging each to limit the others through 'ferocious conflict' in the protection of their particular interests rather than by lofty appeals to a 'common good' and political concord."⁷⁵³ Because human selfishness was perceived as ineradicable and ultimately uncontrollable, Machiavelli's proposal was "to harness those motivations rather than seeking to moderate or limit those desires."⁷⁵⁴

Those who—also at Lutheran universities around 1600—advocated for the autonomy of "political science" and the government (as well as their neo-Aristotelian philosophy in general) from the limitations imposed by God's word eagerly quoted and defended Machiavelli.⁷⁵⁵ Other Lutherans rejected this approach precisely because it relieved the government of its duty to care for the people and thereby permitted it to embrace its own self-interest in preserving its rule—disguised as "national interest" (*ragion di stato*, *raison d'état*, *Staatsräson*)—even if it included the instrumentalization of religion to that end.⁷⁵⁶ Machiavelli's conception of the autonomy of politics based on selfishness and the use of raw power proved victorious in the long run.⁷⁵⁷ The

⁷⁵⁰ Wolfgang Sommer, *Gottesfurcht und Fürstentherrschaft: Studien zum Obrigkeitsverständnis Johann Arndts und lutherischer Hofprediger zur Zeit der altprotestantischen Orthodoxie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), p. 296-97.

⁷⁵¹ According to Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2019), p. 24-25, that prior approach "was self-admittedly more 'art' than 'science': it relied extensively on the fortunate appearance of inspiring founding figures and statesmen who could uphold political and social self-reinforcing virtue-cycles, and acknowledged the likelihood of decay and corruption as an inevitable feature of any human institution." And it also "relied upon reinforcing norms and social structures arrayed extensively throughout political, social, religious, economic, and familial life." As seen, Luther broadly fits within these general characterizations.

⁷⁵² Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 25.

⁷⁵³ Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 25.

⁷⁵⁴ Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 25.

⁷⁵⁵ Horst Dreitzel, *Protestantischer Aristotelismus und absolutistischer Staat* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1970), p. 147.

⁷⁵⁶ Sommer, *Gottesfurcht*, p. 297; Dreitzel, *Aristotelismus*, p. 368-69.

⁷⁵⁷ Like Machiavelli, English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) concerned himself chiefly with the question of who should have power, not where it came from—let alone what it should be used for. Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 18. Fallen reason, as Luther emphasized, must be taught the origin and purpose of the government from God's

means—political power—becomes an end in itself, which seems inevitable in a purely rational approach to politics, because fallen reason does not know where political power comes from or what ultimate purposes it is to serve, as Luther pointed out.⁷⁵⁸

But Machiavelli was by far not the only proponent of dismissing as obsolete what had come before. Others argued that religious belief needed to be marginalized or instrumentalized because it was a source of conflict and therefore not a reliable source of political stability.⁷⁵⁹ Others laid the foundations for a new science that sought to enable humans to prevail over the natural world, instead of simply accepting it, thereby instilling a belief in the “potentially limitless human capacity to . . . effect human desires upon the world.”⁷⁶⁰ Others still grounded their arguments for individual autonomy in mythical accounts of an alleged state of nature—which accounted neither for the fall nor for the divine institution of the three holy orders—to claim that human beings are, “by nature, nonrelational creatures, separate and autonomous” who are therefore free to choose to whom they related, for how long, and in what form—in the political sphere, but also in the family—on a contractual basis grounded in their self-interest.⁷⁶¹

2. Human History as a History of Development to Greater Morality and Freedom from Superstition Under the Banner of Reason

This philosophical legitimation of potentially limitless individual autonomy is combined with a second powerful notion emerging during the centuries after Luther. This is the notion of human development from primitive origins—where most men existed as mere slaves who were kept compliant by (humanly-generated) religious beliefs—to the dizzying heights of the age of reason where all humans could achieve full self-actualization, mature adulthood, and personal freedom after all infantile superstitions and traditions are left behind.

The superimposition of this developmental idea on the history and doctrine of the church—according to which later generations have superior insight into God’s truth simply because they are further along in the process of human reflection on God—resulted in disposing of (or radically reinterpreting) the teachings that previously were commonly held, branding them as outdated ideas that are deemed no longer suitable to address the new insights or demands of the present.⁷⁶² Even an early, comparatively moderate Enlightenment figure like Lutheran

revelation because it is a divine institution, not a contractual agreement among men to serve individual safety and self-preservation. This critical revelation must therefore guide the proper exercise of fallen reason. Despite this and other important differences between Machiavelli and Luther, influential German theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) viewed Luther as a Machiavellian when it came to life in the “autonomous” political realm. Wright, *Understanding*, p. 26-27.

⁷⁵⁸ WA 40.3:203.

⁷⁵⁹ Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 25, referencing Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679).

⁷⁶⁰ Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 26, referencing Hobbes and his employer, Francis Bacon (1561-1626).

⁷⁶¹ Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 31-34, referencing Hobbes and Locke.

⁷⁶² See, for instance, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race* (1778), in Henry Chadwick (ed.), *Lessing’s Theological Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 82-98. For Lessing (1729-1781), revelation—which Lessing understood as a form of divine education—sped up the process of human development because it revealed to humans what humans could have—albeit more slowly—figured out by their own unaided reason (p. 83). Lessing radically reinterpreted and historicized core Christian doctrines in a process he called “the development of revealed truths into truths of reason” (p. 95). For instance, “original sin” is defined by

theologian Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (1706-1757) rejected the Lutheran doctrine of plenary inspiration by distinguishing those parts of the bible he deemed necessary for salvation and the rest of the bible. While the former were inspired and error-free, the latter were the products of human authors and therefore subject to human limitations and errors. This distinction—rejected by Luther⁷⁶³—was among the foundations for the so-called historical-critical method developed by Baumgarten’s student, Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791), and others.⁷⁶⁴

Complementary to the concept of intellectual and social progress and development, some advanced the notion that an originally pristine moral religion—taught by Jesus (and other sages)—had been covered up over the centuries by corrupt priests who had turned Jesus from a great moral philosopher into a god and had ascribed various superstitions and miracles to him, including his resurrection. The pristine moral teachings of Jesus needed to be, and could be, distilled from the superstitious human writings constituting the New Testament by free rational inquiry into these writings. This moral enthusiasm went hand in hand with rejecting as immoral the vicarious atonement, i.e., the doctrine that Christ’s death vicariously satisfied God’s wrath over the sins of the whole world.⁷⁶⁵

Beginning in the first half of the 18th century—the beginning of the end of the era known as “Lutheran Orthodoxy”—Luther was reinvented as a forerunner of the Enlightenment according to Enlightenment’s own developmental approach to human history. This was accomplished by devaluing his biblical teachings which German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) called “confusing nonsense.” At the same time, the spirit of the age valued highly his personality and courage, so that he was styled as a champion against Enlightenment’s pet peeves of clericalism and religious heteronomy and for Enlightenment’s ideals of freedom of conscience, rational interpretation of Scripture, and the emancipation of the German language.⁷⁶⁶

Lessing as one’s inability to be the master of one’s actions to the point of obeying the moral law. This “inability” is then seen as a problem only for the “first and lowest stage” of human development (p. 95).

⁷⁶³ AE 37:26.

⁷⁶⁴ Sorkin, *Religious Enlightenment*, p. 138, 160; Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation 4: From the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century*, tr. Leo G. Perdue (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), p. 175-90.

⁷⁶⁵ E.g., Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and of Fabulous Theology* (1794), in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings* (Library of America, 1995), p. 669-71, 681, 685. Paine’s treatise also rejected the Old Testament after concluding that it was a collection of morally depraved myths, more worthy to be called “the word of a demon, than the word of God,” containing a “history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind” (p. 677). Instead of the bible, Paine praised creation as the true, incorruptible, and universal self-revelation of God, studied by “natural philosophy,” which is “the true theology.” (p. 686-87, 691). Paine’s work built upon the work of John Toland (1670-1722), *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1695). In this work, Toland, an Irish Deist and student of John Locke, subjected the bible to rational analysis and praised Jesus as a moral teacher but still defended the miracles. Reventlow, *History*, p. 65-72. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) completed *The Life and Morals of Jesus Christ Extracted Textually from the Gospels* in 1820 but never published it during his lifetime. The title of Jefferson’s work speak for itself.

⁷⁶⁶ Albrecht Beutel, “Martin Luther im Urteil der deutschen Aufklärung,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 112 (2015), p. 164-91. As Beutel concludes (p. 187-90), the Enlightenment’s focus on Luther’s personality and character at the expense of his theology turned Luther from a teacher of the church into a hero of German intellectual progress. The “spirit of Luther” (his courage etc.) replaced the “letter of Luther” (his actual teachings) and prepared the way for a reception of Luther’s teachings within the limits of the Enlightenment, which some saw as a “new reformation” or even as a completion of what Luther had left unfinished. This modernist paradigm—thanks to Friedrich Schleiermacher, it focused on Luther’s “religious experience” as the unassailable core of his theology—

This notion of development and progress made those who have embraced it vulnerable to ideological manipulation based on the social or political demands of the day because presentism is based on a shift in criteria. Social acceptance of propositions—determined in an implicitly or explicitly democratic or consumeristic process (“what most people say/believe/do/want”)—and the mere passage of time have displaced God’s word and the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶⁷ But, as Luther noted in his 1523 treatise on government, “there are few Christians on earth . . .[,] and God’s word is something different from common practice.”⁷⁶⁸

3. Enlightenment as a Rational Form of Christianity

In its development, Enlightenment thinking adopted and seemingly secularized terminology originally referring to the work of the Holy Spirit by transferring it to the work of reason itself.⁷⁶⁹ Indeed, “enlightenment” is just such a term, as is the concept of emancipation from a tutor. What Luther taught as the work of the Holy Spirit by means of the gospel concerning Christ,⁷⁷⁰ Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) identified as the work of reason liberating itself from being in a state of tutelage, that is, the self-imposed unwillingness to use reason without direction from another.⁷⁷¹ Human reason thereby competes with the Holy Spirit and seeks to displace him as if he were a now outdated idea of a superstitious “dark age.”

shaped Luther research well into the 20th century in the persons of Karl Holl, Gerhard Ebeling, and their students. See Volker Leppin, “Setting Luther into His Historical Place: My Quarrels with the German Orthodoxy in Luther Research,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* XLVIII (2017), p. 930. The three 20th-century Lutheran theologians discussed below—Paul Althaus, Werner Elert, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—were part of this modernist paradigm and conveyed it to American audiences. See Christine Helmer, *How Luther Became the Reformer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019). Bonhoeffer was Holl’s student at Berlin University in 1925 and taught Ebeling at the Finkenwalde Seminary in 1936/37. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 68-70, 565.

⁷⁶⁷ See Reinhard Slenczka, *Neues und Altes 3: Dogmatische Gutachten und aktuelle Stellungnahmen* (Neuendettelsau: Freimund Verlag, 2000), p. 54: “Consciously or unconsciously, being bound by Scripture and the Confessions is regularly abrogated or circumvented . . . because of an unacknowledged notion of development or change in circumstances and ideas that is historically and socially conditioned. But when Holy Scripture is no longer recognized and acknowledged as God’s word, the critical distinction between God’s word and word of humans is abrogated, and the particularity of human subjectivity and social circumstances becomes the norm for the church’s doctrine, order, and action.”

⁷⁶⁸ SLE 10:392; see AE 45:102.

⁷⁶⁹ Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), p. 391-92, who, after discussing the sharp verbal attacks on Christianity by French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778), perceptively observed about Voltaire’s own program: “[T]here was nothing quite so Christian as a summons to bring the world from darkness into light. . . . The dream of a universal religion was nothing if not catholic. . . . Voltaire’s dream of a brotherhood of man, even as it cast Christianity as something fractious, parochial, murderous, could not help but betray its Christian roots.” Luther’s own work as a reformer can be described as growing out of a late medieval reform movement promoted by Luther’s own Augustinian order, which unsuccessfully sought to promote the Christianization of society. See Eric Leland Saak, *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017).

⁷⁷⁰ SC II, 6: “[T]he Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” See also AE 26:359-60 (on Gal. 4:1-2).

⁷⁷¹ Lewis White Beck (ed.), *Immanuel Kant on History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1963), p. 3: “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’—that is the motto of enlightenment.”

This displacement resulted in a critical shift regarding the nature and foundation of human life together.⁷⁷² Even more important from Luther's perspective was that displacing the Holy Spirit by human reason also had a major impact on the doctrine of salvation itself. As noted in the previous subsection, the doctrine of the vicarious atonement came to be seen as immoral. Kant himself appears to have embraced as reasonable the Scholastic notion⁷⁷³ of divine grace as a reward for a human's best moral efforts (*meritum de congruo, facere quod in se est*),⁷⁷⁴ which Luther denounced as "an appalling blasphemy against Christ."⁷⁷⁵

4. Rewriting the Natural Law: From Serving the Neighbor to Experimental Self-Service

As an outgrowth of fallen reason's quest to live by its own law—that is, autonomously—and not by God's law, the developments triggered by the Enlightenment had an inevitable impact on the understanding of natural law. While God's law commands humans to serve God and their fellow humans in God's three holy orders, fallen reason turns the Golden Rule commanding to love the neighbor as oneself into the command to love (the neighbor by loving) oneself. From the inborn fountain and channel of human interaction and mutual assistance, the law is transformed into a means of human independence, mutual non-interference, and freedom from the neighbor, summarized not in love but in the right to be left alone.⁷⁷⁶ Similarly, life within the three orders God instituted and preserves as permanent and

⁷⁷² Reinhard Slenczka, *Neues und Altes 1: Aufsätze zu dogmatischen Themen* (Neuendettelsau: Freimund Verlag, 2000), p. 379.

⁷⁷³ See Oberman, *Harvest*, p. 128-45.

⁷⁷⁴ For an introduction on the complex relationship between Kant and Luther, see Robert Stern and Volker Leppin, "Luther's Influence on Philosophy," Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2025 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/luther-influence/>. While Stern and Leppin noted similarities between Luther and Kant, they also pointed to "important divergences" when it came to the importance of Scripture for "religion," the role of free choice, and Luther's concept of grace. Arguing in Erasmian fashion, Kant made a deduction from the fact of the command to the possibility of obedience and posited "that we will be discouraged in our moral efforts unless we believe that we can do something to make ourselves deserving of grace and hence of divine assistance to be good." See, e.g., AE:33:48-50, 126-28.

⁷⁷⁵ SLE 19:1471 (#32); see AE 34:305; see also AE 26:126; AE 73:115-16.

⁷⁷⁶ Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 48-49, where he quotes Locke: "The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom." Locke accordingly viewed the commandments of the natural law as primarily, if not exclusively, negative prohibitions: "no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions." John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 102 (Second Treatise, ch. II, § 6). Importantly, the requirement not to harm another, for Locke, is simply reason's extrapolation from the individual's right to be left alone by others. It is therefore not an innate idea, as Locke rejects the notion, conceiving of the human mind as an initially blank slate, so that the presence of reason does not signal the presence of truth—as natural law's anthropological locus—but the presence of the power to achieve truth. Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 78. Accordingly, the law becomes a trap for the self that desires to use the law to be left alone, as Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 82, notes: "The fence that I build to keep you out ends up also keeping me in." Similarly, the liberal conception of "individual rights" defines rights "as protections *against* the intrusive, or obtrusive, actions of others," rights as ultimately asocial, "abstract powers," while the pre-liberal concept of rights understood them "as the social extension of natural powers" or the right to access a pre-existing reality of a social nature, such as the right to marry as the right to access God's institution of a procreative union between husband and wife, as Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 216-18, observes.

fundamentally unchangeable structures for mutual service and human life together is contractualized, to be cancelled at will, without advance notice, on a whim.⁷⁷⁷

Relatedly, the promotion of a largely unconstrained marketplace of ideas and lifestyles is seen as the best way to promote some undefined “truth” and social progress. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) advocated for these ideas in the 19th century.⁷⁷⁸ Mill argued that speech ought to be free, ultimately in order to enable people to live out their individuality according to their own opinions, unhampered by the traditions, customs, and opinions of others—so long as the individual “refrains from molesting others in what concerns them.”⁷⁷⁹ The freedom to live out one’s individuality as a pseudo-scientific self-experiment—of course, at one’s “own risk and peril,” according to Mill’s disclaimer—is seen as a necessary precondition for individual and social progress.⁷⁸⁰

Mill contrasts experimental individuality that asks “what suits me?” with the “Calvinistic theory” that sees surrender in obedience to the will of God as something good. In Mills’s view, this “Calvinistic theory” has led people to ask only “what is suitable to my position?” and therefore regards “self-will” as “the one great offence of man.”⁷⁸¹ As Mills saw it, while the person pursuing his individuality “employs all his faculties,” the person living by customary rules and traditions “has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation.”⁷⁸² “Persons of genius,” though “a small minority,” play an important role in Mills’s model of advancing individuality, breaking societal “fetters,” and, hence, promoting social progress.⁷⁸³

Additionally, as seen, political theory since Machiavelli has widely accepted human autonomy, selfishness, and depravity as immutable realities and driving forces of human life. Instead of seeking to curb autonomy and ambition in some way, these features of fallen human nature are harnessed or even encouraged to stabilize political power and maximize economic output.

This has altered Luther’s recognition of human selfishness after the fall in an important way. Luther recognized that fallen humans act out of selfish motives, namely, the avoidance of punishment and the seeking of rewards and benefits. But Luther taught that these selfish and external motivators should be harnessed as motivators to do the unselfish act of love commanded by God. This is very different from condoning, justifying, or encouraging inherently selfish actions (e.g., charging as much as one can in a “free” market) based on the premise that sinful human beings simply cannot help acting

⁷⁷⁷ See Knut Alfsvåg, “Christians in Society: Luther’s Teaching on the Two Kingdoms and the Three Estates Today,” in Harrison & Pless, *One Lord*, p. 81-88.

⁷⁷⁸ John Stewart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings* (New York: Classic Books, 2010). Deneen characterized Mill, especially as he expressed his ideas in *On Liberty*, as “the midwife of modern liberalism.” Deneen, *Liberalism*, p.144.

⁷⁷⁹ Mill, *Liberty*, p. 60.

⁷⁸⁰ Mill, *Liberty*, p. 60-61.

⁷⁸¹ Mill, *Liberty*, p. 66-67.

⁷⁸² Mill, *Liberty*, p. 63.

⁷⁸³ Mill, *Liberty*, p. 70. Responding to widespread longing for a new type of political leaders in Germany after World War One, Hitler saw himself as a genius in the art of politics. Emerging out of nowhere without a formal education and yet with deep insights into “the hidden architecture of the world,” Hitler believed that he was not tied to conventional morality but was free to create the new morality needed to liberate and purify the German race from all noxious Semitic influences. Thomas Weber, *Becoming Hitler: The Making of a Nazi* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), p. 187-93, 228.

this way but that the “invisible hand” of purely self-interested market forces in a purportedly free market will make it all come out alrights, at least for some market participants. But God instituted government precisely in order to force sinners to serve their neighbors within God’s social orders according to God’s commandments.⁷⁸⁴ Indeed, markets before this intellectual transformation were regulated in order to serve social and human ends—as part of the economy, or household *management*—but now they have come to be organized as essentially self-regulating, or free, to maximize gain.⁷⁸⁵ Thus, societies or the government no longer control the markets; instead, the former are controlled by the latter due to the commodification of everything.⁷⁸⁶ The ensuing “liberation of appetite in the economic realm” disconnects “the pursuit of appetite from the common good.”⁷⁸⁷

What is more, students of political philosophy have long since recognized the political risks of a citizenry marked by constant anger, mistrust, and polarization. For instance, according to Aristotle, friendship among citizens is a key element of a well-established, lasting political order dedicated to the pursuit of moral excellence and the common good.⁷⁸⁸ But Aristotle also recognized that the “practice of isolating citizens from each other is a central feature of any tyranny.”⁷⁸⁹ Tyrants (or would-be tyrants) accomplish this by depoliticizing and atomizing the citizenry, e.g., by encouraging (impoverished) citizens to busy themselves with private economic pursuits as family units—instead of pursuing virtue and the common good as citizens—and by causing them

⁷⁸⁴ By contrast, Gene Veith, *Working for Our Neighbor: A Lutheran Primer on Vocation, Economics, and Ordinary Life* (Arlington Heights: Christian Liberty Press, 2016), seeks to reconcile free-market economics (as developed by Adam Smith and others) with Luther’s theology by claiming that “the whole economic system” is ultimately governed by love precisely because it is governed by the *rational self-interest* of all market participants. But given that the fall also damaged reason in its this-worldly functions, how *truly rational* can this self-interest be—and how different from selfishness? A precedent for Veith’s synthesis of Luther and Smith appears to be German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), according to Wright, *Understanding*, p. 30-31. Yet as Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 78-79, rightly notes: “Community is more than a collection of self-interested individuals brought together to seek personal advancement. Rather, it ‘lives and acts by the common virtues of trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion, and forgiveness.’”

⁷⁸⁵ Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 253. Althaus, *Ethics*, p. 111, was correct when he underscored “the seriousness with which [Luther] criticizes economic life on the basis of love and equity” and when he concluded: “Just as [Luther] did not recognize any Machiavellian autonomy in politics, so he recognized no mammonistic autonomy in business. The danger of materialistic distortion of our economic system is always present. Christians must be on watch against it.” Aristotle similarly taught that “a political order in which the primary purposes are the protection of property and the assurance of order so that people can pursue their private economic interests (and here one easily thinks of modern thinkers such as Locke and Smith) is not a *polis* . . . but merely an economic alliance or a commercial treaty. The tyrant is someone who . . . regards [the *polis*] . . . as an economic alliance designed to produce wealth mainly for himself or herself.” Roger Boesche, “Aristotle’s ‘Science’ of Tyranny,” *History of Political Thought* 14 (1993), p. 9.

⁷⁸⁶ Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 253-59.

⁷⁸⁷ Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 85-86.

⁷⁸⁸ Boesche, “Tyranny,” p. 13-14; see Boesche, “Tyranny,” p. 23: “For Aristotle, the opposite of tyranny is not a political order that protects rights and allows voting, but rather a political order that creates virtue and excellence in individuals.” Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that Aristotle’s critique of tyranny may have been a veiled critique of Athenian democracy, as argued by Ivan Jordović, “Aristotle on Extreme Tyranny and Extreme Democracy,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 60 (2011), p. 36-64.

⁷⁸⁹ Boesche, “Tyranny,” p. 16.

to engage in amusement instead of genuine education to fill their scarce leisure time.⁷⁹⁰ Yet tyrants also strengthen their rule by destroying friendship more directly, e.g., by sowing discord among citizens and creating surveillance system, to amplify distrust in society.⁷⁹¹

5. Enlightenment Hermeneutics Result in a Confusion of the Two Kingdoms

As outlined on the previous pages, the Enlightenment has had a profound impact on human life together and Christian theology. Because Lutheran theology is fundamentally biblical in nature, it is important to discuss in some detail the effects the Enlightenment has had on the doctrine concerning, and the interpretation of, the bible. Two renowned Lutheran theologians of the 20th century—Paul Althaus and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—illustrate the impact of the Enlightenment in this area that concerns the source, rule, and norm of all Christian doctrine.

Althaus affirmed the use of historical-critical methods of biblical scholarship developed during the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact, typical for theologians embracing this key aspect of the Enlightenment, Althaus underscored the eminent importance of Reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) for “overcoming the orthodox falsification of Luther’s doctrine of Scripture” and claimed that historical criticism of the bible—essentially, finding historical errors in God’s word—was beneficial for theology in that it resulted in a proper understanding of the inspiration of the bible: Despite the “fully human” nature of the bible (including its human errors), the bible is inspired because it has spiritual effects, chiefly faith in Christ.⁷⁹² According to Althaus, the “undeniable blessing” of historical criticism therefore lies in making it impossible for the church to adopt a “Christology of glory” and requiring the church to adopt a “Christology of the cross” instead.⁷⁹³

As a result, the gospel concerning Christ is the basis for, and limit of, the authority of Scripture, according to Althaus. This distinction between Christ and Scripture allows the theological enterprise of the church to proceed freely, that is, by critically distinguishing between the “eternal gospel” and its historically conditioned “theological forms” in the early church’s New Testament “testimony” that contains much that is not essential for handing down the “untruncated gospel.”⁷⁹⁴ Accordingly, the scriptural character of a given theology by no means requires that the church’s doctrine is reduced to what is taught in the bible, as that would be “biblicistic Puritanism.” According to Althaus, “scriptural theology” only requires that the freely developed theological “tradition” must demonstrate its legitimacy by being consistent with the scriptural gospel itself.⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁹⁰ Boesche, “Tyranny,” p. 10-11.

⁷⁹¹ Boesche, “Tyranny,” p. 15-16.

⁷⁹² Paul Althaus, *Die Christliche Wahrheit: Lehrbuch der Dogmatik*, 7th ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1966), p. 169, 181.

⁷⁹³ Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 129-30.

⁷⁹⁴ Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 172-74.

⁷⁹⁵ Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 171.

Bonhoeffer similarly acknowledged historical criticism of the gospels as an inevitable reality that, among other effects, made the historical contours of Jesus uncertain.⁷⁹⁶ Like Althaus, Bonhoeffer also saw theological benefit in historical criticism in that it destroyed the traditional doctrine of verbal inspiration that “eternalizes the historical, instead of recognizing the historical as coming from God’s eternity and God’s resurrection.”⁷⁹⁷ Put differently, while historical criticism cannot arrive at a definitive account of the historical Jesus, this Jesus is accessible only by the faith created by the risen Christ.⁷⁹⁸

These somewhat paradoxical thoughts resulting from the embrace of critical historical scholarship for the interpretation of the bible result in paradoxical restatements of key doctrines of the Christian faith, including the doctrines of creation and scripture. For instance, Althaus claims that creation and fall cannot be “historicized into a temporally primal history of humankind” because doing so would “miss . . . the full reality of the subject matter.”⁷⁹⁹ This “deeper dimension of reality” “cannot be contained in our human history” because it is “its foundation.”⁸⁰⁰ Adam’s fall is therefore not a historical event; it is humanity’s fall: “The fall appears in history but it cannot be located in it but is omnipresent and simultaneous.”⁸⁰¹ Althaus

⁷⁹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932-1933* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), p. 329-31. On the philosophical roots of Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutics see generally Richard Weikart, “Scripture and Myth in Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *Fides et Historia* 25 (1993), p. 12-25. Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutical and theological focus on Christology apparently dated back to his studies with Reinhold Seeberg (1859-1935), a systematics professor at Berlin who, as a representative of the Luther Renaissance, was shaped by neo-Kantian Lutheran theologian Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) and Ritschl’s turn from metaphysics to Christ. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 70. Beginning in the 18th century, other theologians took a similar approach. For instance, Erlangen theologian Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875) tried to establish in his dogmatics textbook—tellingly named *Christi Person und Werk* (Christ’s Person and Work)—“that the presentation of dogmatics must proceed from Christology.” Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics I*, tr. James Langebartels and Heinrich Vogel (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), p. 108. This Christological hermeneutic adopts an essentially Reformed, experiential approach to scripture and theology which, mediated by Schleiermacher, was adopted in Lutheran academic theology to evade the impact of Enlightenment historical criticism on Scripture as principle of theology. See Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics 3* (St. Louis: CPH, 1953), p. 143; see also Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics 1* (St. Louis: CPH, 1950), p. 66-67, 200-01.

⁷⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 331. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 289-91, 293-97, where he—in a 1925 paper (written for a seminar conducted by his systematics teacher, Reinhold Seeberg) on historical and pneumatological interpretation of Scripture inspired by the commentary on Romans written by Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968)—endorsed the Reformed maxim *finitum incapax infiniti* (the finite is not capable of the infinite) to distinguish between Scripture and revelation. Scripture is only “witness” to revelation, not revelation. Identifying scripture and revelation would “objectify scripture by rational means.” Bonhoeffer conceived of the biblical text as fallible as to the events that are reported but as God’s word when it comes to the interpretation of these events. God’s word—concretely, Jesus Christ—is therefore found behind the “husk” of the historical, fallible, unimpressive text, where he is present “[i]n the word . . . not as a substance, but as revelation, judgment, and will.” Because one cannot “return to a pre-critical time,” historical and pneumatological interpretation are therefore to be used simultaneously by the pneumatological interpreter. In a way, pneumatological interpretation builds its edifice on the rubble to which the historical interpretation has reduced scripture—whenever “God opens human eyes to receive revelation in certain *indescribable* and *undetermined* moments and words.” Christ’s *substantive absence* from the word *and the world*, as taught by Bonhoeffer, will be discussed below.

⁷⁹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 330.

⁷⁹⁹ Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 385.

⁸⁰⁰ Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 385

⁸⁰¹ Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 385.

conceded that this reformulation gives up the “historicizing form of the traditional doctrine of original sin.”⁸⁰²

Bonhoeffer similarly saw Genesis 1 as an expression of “scientific naïveté.”⁸⁰³ While advising his students against a “derisive attitude,” Bonhoeffer thought it important to point out that the text’s knowledge of reality is time-bound.⁸⁰⁴ Letting oneself be tied to the proposition that Genesis 1 contains factual assertions would therefore lead to “a very bad conscience,” as “[t]he theory of verbal inspiration” is insufficient to turn what sounds like a fairytale into reality.⁸⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer also concluded that the “six days of creation” are not about literal days but about the rhythm of God’s works.⁸⁰⁶

Concerning the story of the “enchanted tree” of good and evil (Gen. 2:9), Bonhoeffer conceded that “the world” considered it to be a “myth” set in “the dim and distant past.” But when this account is understood as “God’s word,” it is about an event that transcends history and affects all history.⁸⁰⁷ Indeed, because “the church of Christ” says that this text applies to us, it captures our whole lives.⁸⁰⁸

Bonhoeffer, therefore, operated with a twofold meaning of the Old Testament that corresponded to two gods: The “historical” meaning of Genesis (and, presumably, the Old Testament as a whole) referred to “Yahweh.” But “from the viewpoint of the church”—that is, “from the end” of time—“in the whole of Holy Scripture God is the one and only God.”⁸⁰⁹ Because theology accepts “all the methods of philological and historical research” as they determine “the text,” its own method is a continual returning from this text to its “presupposition” that the bible is “the book of the church” that must be interpreted as such.⁸¹⁰ Put differently, the meaning of God’s word that is relevant and normative today does not reside in the objective “text” of God’s word but must be found in its presupposition, namely, that it is “the book of the church.”

The above paragraphs illustrate fundamental departures from the biblical hermeneutics of Luther, despite the claim that these departures are fully consistent with, even required by, Luther’s own doctrine of Scripture. Unlike Althaus and Bonhoeffer, Luther located the meaning of God’s word in the objective text itself—not in some ahistorical “gospel” or “book of the church”—even if the meaning of God’s word is Christ (Luke 24:44-45; John 5:46).⁸¹¹ Therefore, Luther’s sharp disagreements with the Jewish interpreters of the Old Testament (and their

⁸⁰² Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 386.

⁸⁰³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), p. 50.

⁸⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 50.

⁸⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 51, 81.

⁸⁰⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 49. Bonhoeffer’s 1931 catechism draft shows how this works in practice. Scripture does not teach us how the world came about, only that God created us in his image. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 261.

⁸⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 82.

⁸⁰⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 82.

⁸⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 23.

⁸¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 22.

⁸¹¹ E.g., AE 15:267-70. Indeed, in his refutation of Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament, Luther recognized that he could not appeal to the greater clarity of the New Testament but had to demonstrate from the very text (and context) of the old prophecies that Christ’s interpretation of them was not irrational or “paradoxical” but captured what the original speakers/writers intended to convey and what the first hearers understood. AE 45:208; AE 47:178-79.

Christian disciples),⁸¹² and with heretical Christian interpreters of the New Testament, concerned the correct meaning of *the words* of scripture, not the relative merit of this or that system of theology devised by a renowned theologian of the church based on some central idea.⁸¹³ Hence also Luther's constant exhortation to stay away from any interpretation of Scripture that turns fallen reason into the principle of interpretation. As Luther recognized, with reason in the driver's seat, many biblical passages—intended as historical accounts—will sound like silly fairytales.⁸¹⁴

Moreover, Luther did not recognize any human errors or human traditions reflecting the historically or scientifically limited “worldviews” of the human authors of the bible. Instead, Luther distinguished between God's word and the words of humans by means of Scripture.⁸¹⁵ When human authorities disagreed with the bible, Luther was bound to locate error in the former, not the latter, because the latter is the inerrant written word of God.⁸¹⁶ Everything else is another iteration of spiritualism—the claim to possess the Spirit “without and before the Word”—and the type of poisonous enthusiasm that “inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world” and that, while seeking God, ultimately only finds the devil.⁸¹⁷

As a result, Luther did not believe in the development of doctrine concurrent with general cultural developments, such as subjecting the bible to the new methods and standards of historical or literary criticism that emerged beginning in the Enlightenment. Because a given doctrine has been revealed in the bible, the church must teach and defend it without any alteration.⁸¹⁸ This fundamental hermeneutical difference between Luther and post-Enlightenment

⁸¹² E.g., AE 45:213-21; AE 47:178-79. Tellingly, Luther vigorously and repeatedly defended the virgin birth of Christ by expounding Isaiah 7:14 and other texts, because he understood it as “necessary” to support faith in Christ as both God and man. E.g., AE 24:97; AE 45:206-11. Althaus, however, regarded it merely as a possible “simile” but not as a necessary “naturalist” fact or “Heilstatsache.” Althaus did not discuss Isaiah 7:14 (or Genesis 3:15) in his dogmatics textbook. This is unsurprising, given how Althaus generally approached OT messianic prophecies, claiming that these texts must be interpreted in their “historical meaning” and in their “historical place.” This led Althaus to argue that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled only some of these prophecies, which caused him to be crucified by his contemporaries who were offended by the fact that Jesus did not fulfill other OT prophecies. Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 208-09, 442-43. Bonhoeffer likewise rejected “the old doctrine of the virgin birth” because it supposedly answered a supposedly illegitimate “how” question (how did God become man in Christ?) and “missed” the critical “who” question (who became like us in Jesus?). Like Althaus, Bonhoeffer pointed to the “uncertain” biblical “witness” on this point, i.e., the fact that Christ's virgin birth is not expressly taught in John and Mark. Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 354-55.

⁸¹³ E.g., AE 24:90-99 (divinity of Christ); AE 37:19 (Lord's Supper).

⁸¹⁴ E.g., AE 1:122-23, where Luther defended the historicity of the creation of Eve out of Adam's rib against a rationalist interpretation, noting that this and similar accounts “sound more like a fairy tale” and “extravagant fiction and the silliest kind of nonsense if you set aside the authority of Scripture and follow the judgment of reason.”

⁸¹⁵ E.g., AE 36:135-37. For a thorough exposition and defense of the various aspects of Luther's doctrine of Scripture against its modern critics, see, e.g., Eugene F. A. Klug, *From Luther to Chemnitz: On Scripture and the Word* (Kampen: J. H. Kok N.V., 1971); Armin Buchholz, *Schrift Gottes im Lehrstreit: Luthers Schriftverständnis und Schriftauslegung in seinen drei großen Lehrstreitigkeiten der Jahre 1521-28* (Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang, 1993); see also Joachim Ringleben, *Gott im Wort: Luthers Theologie von der Sprache her* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Armin Wenz, *Das Wort Gottes – Gericht und Rettung: Untersuchungen zur Autorität der Heiligen Schrift in Bekenntnis und Lehre der Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

⁸¹⁶ E.g., in SLE 1:149 (AE 1:122), Luther asserted: “[W]e dare not give preference to the reputation of men over Scripture. For human beings can err, but the Word of God is the very wisdom of God and the most certain truth.”

⁸¹⁷ SA III, VIII, 3, 9-10.

⁸¹⁸ AE 41:135-36.

theologies concerning the source and norm of all Christian doctrine has consequences also for the fundamental distinction of the two kingdoms and the critical area of the basic forms of human life together, the three holy orders of family, government, and church.

These significant consequences will be discussed in greater detail below. But it is important to note the first and most serious impact right away: The hermeneutical shift caused by the Enlightenment has resulted in a confusion of the two kingdoms because it has caused the spiritual kingdom to be subjected to human opinions, even to those of “the church,” instead of the word of God alone.⁸¹⁹ Put differently, this hermeneutical shift makes those who embrace this shift part of the world. It turns God’s doctrine, as it is revealed in Scripture, into human doctrine. As a part of human culture, this human doctrine, *beginning with the bible itself*,⁸²⁰ is constantly developing. As such, all doctrine must be seen as replete with limitations and errors, false starts, conflicts, and unfulfilled expectations. Yet as if synchronized with secularized notions of “progress,” this type of human doctrine nonetheless claims increasing “insights” into the nature of God and creation in a trial and error process of investigation under the umbrella of intellectual freedom.

In the end, this shift is not about failing to defend some outdated theological constructs, whether that be the much-maligned doctrine of “verbal inspiration” or the equally much maligned distinction of the two kingdoms. This shift goes deeper because it has a deep spiritual consequences in that this shift ultimately makes its adherents members of the false church of Cain and the devil that must be at war with Christ’s true church—and the true meaning of Scripture—until Christ’s return.

Luther explained this spiritual dimension as follows:

[T]he devil is too smart and powerful for us. He obstructs and hinders everywhere. When we wish to rely on Scripture, he creates so much dissension and strife in Scripture that we grow too tired and timid to trust Scripture. We must constantly argue and wrestle with him. If we wish to rely on human councils and counsels, we would completely lose Scripture and remain completely in the devil’s possession. He is Satan and is called Satan, that is, an antagonist. He must resist and cause misfortune. He can do nothing else. Additionally, he is a prince and god of the world, which is why he has enough power and ability to act as antagonist. But since he is willing and able to do so, we should not think that he will leave us in peace. He does not take breaks. He does not sleep. Choose, therefore, if you would rather wrestle with the devil than be his own. If you wish to be his own, he will grant you safe conduct and leave you in peace with Scripture. If you do not wish to be his own, fight back, attack him. He will not disappoint you. He will create discord and sects based on Scripture so that you will not know where Scripture, faith, Christ, and you yourself will remain.⁸²¹

And yet, even when the meaning of Scripture itself is at issue, there is no higher authority available—the church, popes, councils, sacred tradition, reason, the collective will of the people, philosophers, historians, scientists, etc.—to resolve this fundamental conflict than God’s clear

⁸¹⁹ AE 45:105; see AE 13:194-96.

⁸²⁰ See Wenz, *Wort Gottes*, p. 135-38.

⁸²¹ SLE 20:766-67; see AE 37:17.

biblical word itself.⁸²² Luther explained this for example when prefacing his *exegetical* labors against the fanaticism of those who denied the real presence of Christ's body in the bread, and of Christ's blood in the wine, of the Lord's Supper:

Only God's word remains forever, while errors always spring up next to it but eventually founder. I am therefore not worried that this enthusiasm will be around for a long time. It is too obvious and brazen and does not go against human ideas or some uncertain passage in Scripture but attacks a clear, plain passage, as we will hear. I will therefore again set myself against the devil along with his enthusiasts, not for their sake, but for the sake of the weak and simple-minded.⁸²³

⁸²² “[N]ecessity urges to the writings of all teachers to the Bible and there seek the Bible’s judgment and decision over them. For it alone is the true liege lord and master over all writings and doctrine on earth.” SLE 15:1481; see AE 32:11-12. Therefore, “Scripture is our law and defiance” when conflicting authorities are asserted in the church. SLE 15:1549; see AE 32:81.

⁸²³ SLE 20:768-69; see AE 37:19. After concluding his introduction, Luther quoted a single verse from the biblical words of institution of the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:26) and stated: “At this time, I wish to take up this single verse, *in defiance of the devil and all his spirits*, to prove how this single verse is strong and mighty enough against all their rotten, loose chatter.” SLE 20:777; see AE 37:28.

C. God's Holy Orders, Orders of Creation, or Christ's Mandates?

As discussed in part two, Luther distinguished the three holy orders of family, government, and church based on God's biblical word. In the bible, Luther located God's words of institution for these orders before and after Adam's and Eve's fall into sin, that is, at specific points in the earliest human history.

As seen in the previous section, God's institution of these orders at discrete times in the early history of humanity has been given up by renowned theologians of the church as rationalist historiography came to determine what is historical fact or fairytale in the wake of the Enlightenment. Combined with the idea that Scripture's authority is limited to "the gospel" or "the risen Christ," this concession to the Enlightenment opened the door to adopt the other bedrock principle of the Enlightenment: Biblical doctrine regarding the three holy orders can and must be developed to adapt it to modern views and philosophies. As already seen in the previous discussion of hermeneutical principles, while this approach promises currentness and relevance and appears to make Christianity easier to apply and follow, this approach also means that human views are given divine authority. This distortion of God's indivisible word on this issue not only distorts all of God's word. As will be seen, it also harms human beings subjected to this distortion precisely because it distorts God's word.

The following section will illustrate this harm by looking at two competing theological movements in German Lutheranism in the first half of the 20th century. These two movements reacted to the instability regarding the theological foundations of social order caused by the Enlightenment. The first movement resorted to speculation about nature (including biology and history)—theologically conceived of as creation—to shore up those foundations. Two representative theologians of this movement are Erlangen theologians Paul Althaus and Werner Elert. The second movement resorted to Christ to renew the theological foundations for society, here represented by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

1. Paul Althaus and Werner Elert

a) Autonomous Orders of Creation, Racial Struggle, and the Hidden God

Both Althaus and Elert served as military chaplains during World War One (1914-1918). Althaus spent the entire war on the Eastern Front in German-occupied Lodz where he served both as a chaplain in a military hospital and as a pastor to the local German Protestant minority.⁸²⁴ Elert only served on the Eastern Front at the beginning of the war.⁸²⁵

While ministering to the German-Protestant minority in Lodz, Althaus came to see the Great War as something more than a military or political conflict. He saw the war primarily as

⁸²⁴ Lodz was an ethnically and religiously mixed city with German (Protestant), Jewish, and Polish (Catholic) residents. Before the German army conquered it, Lodz had been part of Russia since the 1815 Congress of Vienna; it is now part of Poland. In Lodz, Althaus also met his future wife, Dorothea, who had been born to a German family living in Warsaw, at the time also part of the Russian Empire. Tanja Hetzer, *"Deutsche Stunde": Volksgemeinschaft und Antisemitismus in der politischen Theologie bei Paul Althaus* (Munich: Allitera Verlag, 2009), p. 48.

⁸²⁵ Bernd Hamm, "Werner Elert als Kriegstheologe: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Diskussion 'Luthertum und Nationalsozialismus'," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 11 (1998) p. 249 note 129.

the God-given opportunity to reassert the Germanness of Germany and the Germans against their ethnic and cultural degeneration due to the influx of non-German influences. Especially (but not only) in the ethnic diaspora of Lodz, Althaus thought it was critical to preserve German blood, culture, and language pure. For Althaus, Lutheranism was the quintessential cultural expression of Germanness. Luther therefore embodied for Althaus what it meant to be German.⁸²⁶ Elert viewed Luther quite similarly.⁸²⁷

According to this view, nations are not ever-changing historical and cultural conglomerations of individuals or groups of individuals. Rather, they are understood as biologically cohesive entities on which, and by which, God imposes certain moral demands.⁸²⁸ The members of a given nation cannot escape these biological demands of the *hidden* God in his law—that is, the “order of creation” (*Schöpfungsordnung*)—just as they cannot escape their individual fate, no matter where they live.⁸²⁹

Elert and Althaus expressed this identification of God’s law with the reality of creation when they confessed in the 1934 Ansbach Advice (*Ansbacher Ratschlag*) against the 1934 Barmen Theological Declaration:⁸³⁰

3. The law, “namely the immutable will of God” (Formula of Concord VI, 6), meets us in the total reality of our life, as it is illuminated by the revelation of God. The law ties each to his station in life into which he is called by God and binds us to the natural orders we are subjected to, such as family, nation, race (that is, the connection of blood). . . .

4. . . . Those who, by faith in Jesus Christ, become certain of the grace of the Father, experience even in [the natural orders] “pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy.”

As Christians, we honor in gratitude to God every order, that is, every political authority, even in its deformation, as a tool of divine unfolding, but as Christians we also distinguish between gentle and harsh lords, healthy and deformed orders.

5. In this knowledge, we as believing Christians thank God the Lord that he has given to our nation the Führer as a “godly and faithful ruler,” and that God wants to prepare “good government” in the National-Socialist order of the state, a government with “discipline and honor.”

We therefore know that we are responsible before God to assist the work of the Führer in our vocation and station in life.⁸³¹

Elert counted faithfulness, honor, joyfulness, trust, fearlessness as positive German character traits, while he believed that lack of discipline, lack of national dignity, and lack of care for the nation are negative aspects of the German character. According to Elert, God

⁸²⁶ Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*”, p. 50-66.

⁸²⁷ Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums 2: Soziallehren und Sozialwirkungen des Luthertums* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1932), p. 127-28.

⁸²⁸ Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 125-26.

⁸²⁹ See Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 47-49, where he also underscored that the identification of the “order of creation” with God’s law meant that the created order is an order marked by God’s hiddenness and wrath.

⁸³⁰ The Barmen Declaration was chiefly authored by Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). It was signed by two Lutheran bishops (including Hans Meiser (1881-1956), the bishop of Elert and Althaus) and at least two Lutheran professors (including fellow Erlangen faculty member, Hermann Sasse (1895-1976)). A key tenet of Barmen read: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.” Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*”, p. 183.

⁸³¹ Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*”, p. 258; see 1 Peter 2:18; SC II, 2; III, 14.

demands that the former be strengthened while the latter are eliminated.⁸³² Biological identity therefore requires and determines actions.

Based on the purported close connection between a nation's specific God-given character and religion, it is not surprising when Elert blamed Calvinism (John Calvin was French) for having opened Germany's door to negative French influence and decadent "Western civilization." Accordingly, Elert saw Calvinism and Catholic internationalism as inimical to the flourishing of the German national character that, as noted, found its consummate embodiment in Luther and Lutheranism.⁸³³

Moreover, if the nation is defined as a biological unit that, as such, has an ideal moral form, it follows that the nation can achieve its full ethical potential only if it is biologically—or racially—pure. As Elert explained in the 1934 Ansbach Advice, because the church understands this biological order as created by God, the church cannot but aid the government in the task of preserving and restoring that purity by teaching that this order is God's law that is binding on the church and its members.⁸³⁴ Writing in 1937—two years after the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws⁸³⁵—Elert defined "Germanness" based on "German blood," "because we carry the character of our nation in us by our blood." Elert added: "We can poison the German blood in us, we can corrupt the German character in us, but we cannot revoke the fact of being tied to our nation by fate." Elert claimed that Christians were called by their Creator to "work with resolute earnestness for keeping German blood pure, as this is now demanded and fostered by our legislation."⁸³⁶

Althaus, who, as noted, also conceived of Germanness as a matter of "blood," rejected the proud (and crude) antisemitism "of the street." Still, he conceded that this antisemitism had a valid point that should move the church to warn against the corrosive influence of Jews on Germany's national identity. Following his own advice, he warned in 1929 that Judaism, as the "main vector of the rational-criticist spirit of the Enlightenment," had become the champion "in the struggle against the irrational historical conditions and ideal traditions of our nation."⁸³⁷

Thus, if individual nations—just like individual persons—have a distinct character, with peculiar strengths and weaknesses, this means that the nation must provide the abiding form for the inculturation of the three orders of church, government, and family in a concrete nation. As a result, there should, for instance, be a specific Germanic form of government.⁸³⁸

Elert considered the party system of the Weimar Republic to be "a clear break with the order of creation" and demanded that "party egotism that interferes with the state and its vital

⁸³² Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 129.

⁸³³ Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 125, 127, 139-41.

⁸³⁴ Hetzer, "Deutsche Stunde", 258-59.

⁸³⁵ The 1935 Nuremberg Laws defined based on racial criteria who counted as a German. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 536-54.

⁸³⁶ Werner Elert, *Der Christ und der völkische Wehrwille* (Leipzig: Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1937), p. 7.

⁸³⁷ Hetzer, "Deutsche Stunde", p. 149-56.

⁸³⁸ Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 132, claims that "what mattered to [Luther] was realizing 'Germanness' when shaping the political order" and argues that, for Luther, this "Germanness" is "inherently structured according to tribes, according to blood and soil." Similarly, Althaus argued in 1935 that, because the state in its true sense is an ethnic state (*Volksstaat*) and therefore more than a state simply founded on the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*), the government's task was not only to restrain evil but also to assist the will of the Creator by making "a nation into what it can and should be." Hetzer, "Deutsche Stunde", p. 197.

powers must, for ethical reasons, be fought at any cost.”⁸³⁹ Within the immutable biological parameters set by God’s law, however, the government operates in “autonomy” (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) when enacting changeable civil laws.⁸⁴⁰ According to Elert, it was well within Luther’s doctrine of vocation when a “mass leader” (*Massenführer*) rises up to accomplish great things, even against God-given authorities and the will of the people.⁸⁴¹

Along these lines, Althaus (in late 1933) welcomed Hitler’s rise to power, acknowledging gratefully that the new government once again “dared to bear the sword of judgment” to restore the idea of “retribution” to its proper place, thereby resisting the “dissolution of the penal law into social therapy and pedagogy.” Althaus also praised the new rulers for having “crushed the irresponsibility of the parliaments”⁸⁴² and for having begun to “restrain the forces of corrosion in literature and theater.”⁸⁴³ Indeed, in his 1933 Easter sermon, Althaus spoke about the “rebirth” of “a nation that had lost itself, that had existed in shadow and shame.”⁸⁴⁴

In addition to a specific Germanic form of government, Elert believed there should be a specific Germanic form of (articulating) church doctrine and of organizing the church to facilitate the proclamation of the transcendent gospel to members of the German nation.⁸⁴⁵ For

⁸³⁹ Hamm, “Kriegstheologie,” p. 219 note 38.

⁸⁴⁰ Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 62-64.

⁸⁴¹ Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 78. Remarkably, these thoughts were published in the year before Hitler’s 1933 rise to power. As discussed above, Luther did recognize extraordinary rulers but taught that they embodied the God-given law of nature and were thus not autonomous. AE 13:161. While Elert recognized that Luther defined the natural law by means of the Ten Commandments, he nonetheless claimed that natural law, for Luther, is nothing but the “created order.” Elert concluded that, because Luther was not a proponent of “theocracy,” “all law is natural law or no law is natural law.” *Morphologie 2*, p. 337-38; see Christian Neddens, “Gerechtigkeit und Umkehr: Theologische Grundlagen der Rechtsethik bei Werner Elert und Hans Joachim Iwand,” in: Christoph Barnbrock and Werner Klän (eds.), *Gottes Wort in der Zeit: Verstehen – Verkündigen – Verbreiten* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), p. 367-70. While this may sound clever, Luther was not the legal positivist Elert made him out to be. As discussed above, Luther sharply criticized those rulers who claimed that God had authorized them to rule as “free lords,” because they failed to recognize that God’s word and commandments also determined how they ought to carry out their God-given office in the world. AE 13:48-49, 69-71.

⁸⁴² The Reichstag Fire Decree, adopted in February 1933, allowed the cabinet in Berlin—ultimately, Hitler—to override civil rights and abrogated the limited independence of the federal states (Bavaria, Württemberg, Hesse, etc.). Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 333. The Enabling Act, enacted on March 23, 1933, allowed the cabinet in Berlin—ultimately, again, Hitler—to rule by decree without consulting parliament (or the Reich President). Two days prior, the Nazis had staged the “Day of Potsdam” to frame the first session of the new parliament after the March 5, 1933, election. It featured the famous handshake between Hitler and Reich President (and retired imperial Field Marshal) Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934) during the Reichstag opening ceremony at the Protestant Garrison Church at Potsdam where Frederick the Great (1712-1786) was buried. The event buoyed Protestant hopes for a renewed alliance of church and state. Contemporaries therefore saw the Day of Potsdam as the passing of the baton from the Second Empire that had ended in 1918 to the Nazi government, symbolically ending the Weimar Republic. Evans, *The Coming*, p. 350-54; Volker Ulrich, *Hitler: Ascent, 1889-1939*, tr. Jefferson Chase (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), p. 433-35. Following the March 5 election, Hindenburg expressed his belief that Germans would now “once and for all . . . be done with all this going to the polls” and all the “parliamentary hullabaloo” that had always been “deeply alien and unsavory” to Hindenburg. Ulrich, *Hitler*, p. 436.

⁸⁴³ On the purge of German cultural life from Jews and other undesirables by the government in 1933, see Evans, *The Coming*, p. 405-18.

⁸⁴⁴ See Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*,” p. 54, 64, 151-55, 159-60.

⁸⁴⁵ The theologies of Elert and Althaus were driven by an evangelistic and apologetic impulse that sought to counteract the secularization of German society. Specifically, they sought to show that God is present and active—

instance, Elert claimed that, by adopting the ancient creeds in the Book of Concord, the Lutheran church imported “specifically Greek thoughts and forms” into Germany. At the same time, Elert addressed concerns raised by a “purely Germanic religiosity” by noting that these “Greek thoughts” were decisively diluted by “waters from German springs” in the way Luther and his associates taught them to the Germans. Consistent with Althaus’s comments regarding the “eternal gospel” that had to be distinguished from the historically conditioned ideas found in the writings of the New Testament, Elert distinguished “the transhuman call of the gospel” from the nationally conditioned doctrine of the church as “human response” that, in order to be understood, must be shaped by the specific created character of the receiving nation.⁸⁴⁶

Accordingly, Elert and Althaus wrote the 1933 Erlangen faculty opinion on whether, and how, the “Aryan Paragraph”—the German government had adopted it in April 1933 as part of the new Civil Service Act to fire Jewish public servants—should be adopted by the churches. In principle, Elert and Althaus agreed that Christians who are members of the German nation have the right to demand that their ministers are not Jews (as defined by law), especially at a time when, according to the faculty opinion, those Jews were perceived as strongly as never before to be alien to the German nation. At the same time, Elert and Althaus recognized that “especially a genuine conversion to Jesus Christ” *might* allow Jews to become true Germans and as such ministers in the German church.⁸⁴⁷

and is therefore *experienced by natural man*—in history, not just in the church. Elert articulated this concept by teaching the gospel as God’s revelation that illumines and answers humanity’s common experience of the fateful claim and wrath of the hidden God over humanity in the realities of this life, including in the experience of government and economy. This experience is the gospel’s natural point of contact in humans, the “evangelische Ansatz.” Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 291-302, 519-20; Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums 1: Theologie und Weltanschauung des Luthertums* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1931), p. 15-52. Neddens, “Gerechtigkeit und Umkehr,” p. 369-70, notes the apologetic intent behind Elert’s understanding of the law. Althaus articulated this idea in his concept of the “primal revelation,” the *Ur-Offenbarung*, e.g., in *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 37-94. Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*,” p. 39-40, traces Althaus’s doctrine of the “primal revelation” back to his Tübingen professor, Adolf Schlatter (1852-1938). In 1933, Althaus accordingly saw the church’s task in explaining to the people that their experience of rapture at the rise of Hitler to power was an experience of the living God of the bible. Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*,” p. 160. Thus, Althaus and Elert, as well as the German Christians, are “contextual theologians” who attempted to make Christianity relevant to the secularized Germans of their time by instrumentalizing the experience of Germany’s political “rebirth” in 1933 to overcome the growing alienation between the nation and the (Protestant) church. See Notger Slenczka, “Das ‘Ende der Neuzeit’ als volksmissionarische Chance? Bemerkungen zum volksmissionarischen Anliegen der Glaubensbewegung ‘Deutsche Christen’ in der Hannoverschen Landeskirche in den Jahren 1933/34,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 11 (1998), p. 255-317. But already a few years after this experience, those attempts to interpret the experience of the “rebirth” in *Christian* terms had lost plausibility. When it became clear in 1934/1935 that the German Christians would be unable to deliver Protestantism to Hitler as a unified Reich church—and when the youth had become increasingly Nazified and paganized during the 1930s—the Nazis began to distance themselves from Protestantism. Evans, *Reich in Power*, p. 252-53.

⁸⁴⁶ Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 130-31.

⁸⁴⁷ In contrast to the mediating position of the Erlangen faculty, German Christians had fully embraced the “Aryan Paragraph” for the church, while the Marburg faculty of theology—the most famous member of which at the time was New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)—had rejected the introduction of an “Aryan Paragraph” in the church. Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*,” p. 171-82, 251-56; Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 88-95; Evans, *The Coming*, p. 452. Hamm, “Kriegstheologie,” p. 220 note 41, points out that Elert’s racism was different from that of the “primitive” antisemites of the day in that Elert conceived of “race” not as a purely biological category, but Elert’s racism was also different from the cultural or moral antisemitism (“Jewishness” as a particular mindset that is

Given that Althaus served on the Eastern Front during the First World War in the racially and religiously mixed German diaspora, it is noteworthy that pressure to adopt an “Aryan Paragraph” in the Protestant churches had come from, among other groups, “racially conscious pastors from areas near Germany’s eastern borders for whom Protestantism represented German culture against the Catholicism of the Poles and the Orthodox faith of the Russians,” as well as “young men who despised the feminization of religion” and for whom “Hitler took on the mantle of a national redeemer who would bring about the rechristianization of society along with its national reawakening.”⁸⁴⁸

b) Evaluation

While Althaus and Elert were (and often still are) lionized as Lutheran theologians of the highest caliber, they were not faithful students of the bible or Luther.⁸⁴⁹ The following points show the serious discrepancies between their theology and that of Luther.

First, the conservative political philosophy espoused by Elert and Althaus was a common reaction to the Enlightenment that was itself shaped by the Enlightenment. This philosophy filled the gaps left by their gospel-reductionist understanding of Scripture.

While politically conservative, Althaus and Elert read the bible through the Enlightenment lens that caused them to focus on an ahistorical “eternal gospel,” while it precluded them from “repristinating” the historic biblical “worldview” in their time. Likewise, they inherited the Enlightenment’s reinvention of Luther that stripped down his theology to a minimum and embraced him chiefly as an all-purpose champion of German liberty.⁸⁵⁰ This view of Luther would become the most popular view among German Protestants in the early 20th century and even among leading Nazi ideologues.⁸⁵¹ As a result, Althaus and Elert—freed from outdated “worldviews” by the Enlightenment—simply filled the gaps created by this liberation from the past by developing Luther’s teachings into a form that made them compatible with the prevalent conservative worldview of their present—racial nationalism.

not strictly tied to biology) that seems to have been Althaus’s preference in that Elert put greater emphasis on the biological aspect of race. See Weber, *Becoming Hitler*, p. 172-74, where he discusses the various types of antisemitism prevalent in post-1918 Germany, distinguishing “metaphorical” and “literal” antisemitism, where the former focused on Jewishness or Judaism as undesirable cultural realities, while the latter saw Jews as biological realities as the problem to be eliminated.

⁸⁴⁸ Evans, *Reich in Power*, p. 224.

⁸⁴⁹ See Hamm, “Kriegstheologe,” p. 210 note 7, where he notes a significant level of “Elert apologetics” in contemporary Lutheranism that fails to acknowledge the “great distance” between Luther’s theology and Elert’s modernist theology. Unsurprisingly, “Werner Elert . . . saw article 1 of the Augsburg Confession as a regrettable remnant of medieval theology that did not fit the law-gospel paradigm.” David P. Scaer, “Gospel Reductionism: Then and Now,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 88 (2024), p. 329 and note 19. Helmer, *Trinity*, p. 6-27, places Elert’s rejection of the Trinity in favor of “the law-gospel paradigm” in its broader neo-Kantian context of likeminded Luther scholars during the 19th and 20th centuries.

⁸⁵⁰ See Beutel, “Martin Luther.”

⁸⁵¹ John Hellwege, “The Nazification of Martin Luther,” *Lutheran Theological Review* 33 (2021), p. 49-53, is correct in noting that the Nazis viewed Luther, not as a theologian, but as a German hero who fought for German freedom. See also Dorothea Wendebourg, *So viele Luthers . . . : Die Reformationsjubiläen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), p. 23-24, 150, where she discusses the celebrations of the 450th anniversary of Luther’s birth in 1933). As demonstrated in Beutel’s essay, this “heroic” view of Luther is itself an Enlightenment idea.

This racial nationalism arose as a conservative response to the political and social disruptions created by the Enlightenment.⁸⁵² In response to these disruptions, 19th-century conservative thinkers sought to ground political order in what they perceived as “natural,” such as the nation. By doing so, they sought to establish a stable order distinct from the ones they perceived as “unnatural” and therefore unstable, i.e., orders reflecting Enlightenment ideas such as the “social contract,” universal human rights, and written constitutions.⁸⁵³

Beginning in the 19th century, some conservatives demanded that nation states be ethnically pure.⁸⁵⁴ With the rise of the “modern” science of biology and Darwinism to prominence in the late 19th century,⁸⁵⁵ “social Darwinists” projected the perceived evolutionary struggle for the survival of the fittest from species onto the history of nation states—all life is struggle, even the life of nation states. Just as only the “fittest” of several species (and only the fittest within a given species) survive in nature, so also only the fittest of nations can survive. To be fit as a nation and prevail for the impending race war meant for the social Darwinists that the collective body of the nation must be “healthy”—racially, physically, and morally “fit.” The Nazis implemented this program by waging war against “the enemies within”—the Jews, the incurably ill, and the various “asocials” (“professional criminals,” the chronically unemployed, etc.)—to prepare Germany for the global race war they initiated in 1939.⁸⁵⁶

⁸⁵² Jerry Z. Muller (ed.), *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 24-27; Christopher Clark, *Revolutionary Spring: Europe Aflame and the Fight for a New World, 1848-1849* (New York: Crown, 2023), p. 251-52.

⁸⁵³ Muller, *Conservatism*, p. 9-22; Clark, *Revolutionary Spring*, p. 122-29.

⁸⁵⁴ Clark, *Revolutionary Spring*, p. 149, where he quotes “patriotic activist and gymnastic guru” Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852), whom he contrasts with liberal advocates for the nation state who not only regarded Greece, Britain, Germany, and other nations as ethnically mixed but who also saw this mixed character as a strength, not a weakness.

⁸⁵⁵ The related concept of eugenics had its ardent evangelists also in the United States, as shown by Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸⁵⁶ Johann Chapoutot, *The Law of Blood: Thinking and Acting as a Nazi*, tr. Miranda Richmond Mouillot (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018); Evans, *Reich in Power*, p. 705-08; Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin, 2010), p. 80, notes that Hitler, in October 1939, signed an order authorizing a program of forced euthanasia of the incurably ill—later called Action T-4—which he backdated to September 1, 1939, the date of the beginning of the Second World War.

Publishing excerpts from Luther’s theological polemics against the Jews in popular editions during the second half of the 1930s built on previous efforts and was part of the Nazi government’s national mobilization effort for the impending race war against Jews (and Slavs). While Luther’s polemics against the Jews—and their reception in the 20th century—deserve a separate treatment, it is clear that his focus was on the *doctrinal* controversies regarding the divinity of Jesus Christ and the meaning of the Old Testament. While he made harsh proposals for how Jews refusing conversion should be treated—including driving them out of the land and destroying their synagogues and books (e.g., AE 47:268-72, 285-88, 292)—these proposals are no more than prudential practical advice. Luther did not there pronounce unchangeable doctrine. By contrast, the Nazis could not care less about Luther’s defense of the non-negotiable doctrine regarding the divinity of Christ or the Old Testament but wanted to “sell” Luther’s drastic but no more than prudential—that is, necessarily time-bound—opinions and proposals as inviolable race law. Luther scholars such as Althaus and Elert should have made this critical distinction clear to the government and their followers. Sadly, they failed to do so because they themselves had integrated perpetual racial antagonism and hatred into their theology of “creation,” with deadly consequences for millions of Jews in Europe.

While the Nazi's social Darwinist ideology was anti-Christian at its core,⁸⁵⁷ this did not mean that self-professed Christians did not endorse at least some aspects of the ideology or support at least some of the practical goals of the Nazi state.⁸⁵⁸ As seen, Elert called on Christians to join the government's work of restoring the purity of the German blood and praised war as an expression of the nation's collective "will to preserve its life."⁸⁵⁹ Althaus similarly saw the hatred of other nations and love of one's own nation as two sides of the same coin and therefore deemed the struggle of nation against nation unavoidable.⁸⁶⁰ He welcomed the Nazi government because it reintroduced "retribution" instead of "social therapy" in the criminal justice system, advanced "racial hygiene," and tightened restrictions on abortions, but he criticized the forced euthanasia program, perhaps deviating from his usual focus on what serves the nation in part because one of his daughters was disabled.⁸⁶¹

What allowed Althaus, Elert, and similar theologians to embrace the Nazi ideology was the reduction of biblical authority to the "eternal gospel" and the identification of God's law with the given political order. What connects these two concepts is the application of the Enlightenment concept of "development" to Christian doctrine. As seen in Althaus, because the authority of the bible is reduced to the "eternal gospel," theology is set free to go beyond the bible insofar as the bible, according to Althaus, contains not just that "eternal gospel" but also historically conditioned material and an obsolete "worldview." Critical for this spiritualization of the Enlightenment concept of "development" in the ethical realm at issue here is a misconstrued Luther-quote—those who have the Spirit are able to make new, better decalogues⁸⁶²—which, according to Elert, indicates that even the "order of creation" is by no means a stable, immutable order.⁸⁶³ Indeed, as Elert confessed in the 1934 Ansbach Advice, the church receives the "concrete content" of the order of creation, not from God's word, but from the "current national order of the state," which renders the order of creation "subject to historical change."⁸⁶⁴

Elert and Althaus recognized that their particular view of "order of creation" that effectively permeated the three holy orders taught by Luther by a racially defined "nation" was itself a doctrinal innovation or, as they would put it, a product of "historical change."⁸⁶⁵ Althaus

⁸⁵⁷ Chapoutot, *Law of Blood*, p. 100, noted that leading Nazis viewed Christianity as a Jewish sect that had sapped Germans of their natural vitality, putting them at a disadvantage in the race war.

⁸⁵⁸ Evans, *Reich in Power*, p. 515, notes that although the application of Nazi principles of "racial hygiene" swept away "traditional Christian morality," Protestant welfare officials agreed with this policy. When Catholic officials objected to forced sterilizations, Nazi propagandists cast this conflict "as another episode in the long struggle between religious obscurantism and scientific enlightenment."

⁸⁵⁹ Hamm, "Kriegstheologie," p. 221-22.

⁸⁶⁰ Hetzer, "*Deutsche Stunde*," p. 147. Althaus therefore rejected the League of Nations or any international legal order designed to mitigate the antagonism between nations as pacifistic attempts to "regulate history" that was difficult to reconcile with "God's living just action in history." Althaus therefore saw the "highest good of history" in the "powerful individuality of a nation, in preserving its identity and independence." Hetzer, "*Deutsche Stunde*," p. 88-89.

⁸⁶¹ Hetzer, "*Deutsche Stunde*," p. 189-91.

⁸⁶² AE 34:112-13. As discussed earlier, Luther saw this as a mere hypothetical possibility for Christians other than the apostles (or Christ), because only Christ and his apostles are the infallible teachers of the church, while all other Christians are fallible.

⁸⁶³ Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 49.

⁸⁶⁴ Hetzer, "*Deutsche Stunde*," p. 259.

⁸⁶⁵ E.g., Elert, *Morphologie 2*, p. 125-26.

defended this innovation as a necessary, even unavoidable one, due to the historical developments in the 19th and 20th century. The traditional Lutheran doctrine of government “became insufficient when the German states were pulled into a new history whose theme was the existence and freedom of the Germans as a nation.” Althaus referenced Schleiermacher and former German chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898)—who had been confirmed by Schleiermacher in 1831—to claim that it was ultimately God who, in these historical processes, revealed the “nation” as a reality the government is called to preserve.⁸⁶⁶

Thus, the Enlightenment defined the response to this intellectual movement to which Elert and Althaus were committed. It is therefore not surprising that their methodology—dismissing the “worldview” of the bible (including the concrete moral commandments set forth in the bible) as time-bound, reducing the authority of the bible to the “eternal gospel,” and identifying God’s law with the cultural norms predominant in predominant social and political order—results in ethical and political enthusiasm, i.e., a determination of what ought to be done apart from God’s word. In the case of Elert and Althaus, this enthusiasm took the form of racist nationalism, resulting in the death of millions of Jews, Poles, Russians, Germans, and many others. While this theological and political position, until recently, *seemed* to be largely discredited,⁸⁶⁷ it is important to keep in mind that their method is alive and well. And this method allows for this enthusiasm also to take on progressive⁸⁶⁸ or different conservative forms.

The second major problem of Elert and Althaus is no less serious because Althaus and Elert focused on the actions of the hidden God in history—as interpreted by their conservative political ideology—when discussing the role of the state. This rendered them unable to critique their own ideological stance and the actions of those who agreed with this stance. It also rendered them unable to support a political order in conflict with their ideology.

From the vantage point of Luther’s theology, it is uncontroversial that God acts in and through history. He builds up kingdoms and nations and lets them go to ruin. He gives. He takes away. God establishes and preserves the orders of family, church, and state in history. God acts and speaks through parents and government officials to preserve his creation. These and all people—endowed with the divine gift of reason and God’s moral law written in their hearts—are God’s agents, masks, hands, and channels.

Importantly, however, not everything people, parents, or government officials do is in conformity with God’s revealed will. Even in the kingdom of the world, not everything that seems reasonable is reasonable. Natural or psychological (pseudo-)phenomena—such as “blood,” genes, or powerful experiences of national defeat or “rebirth”—do not convey moral imperatives from the one true God. Indeed, the concept of an immutable character of a nation

⁸⁶⁶ Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*”, p. 207-08. Schleiermacher remained important for Althaus even after the Second World War for his conception of God’s “primal revelation” (*Ur-Offenbarung*) in the created realities of the world and humans, albeit without any prominent reference to the nation as a God-given biological reality. Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, p. 64.

⁸⁶⁷ See Richard J. Evans, *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁸⁶⁸ Elert’s historicizing approach to doctrine (and ethics) is critiqued and compared to similar approaches on the progressive side of the political spectrum by Reinhard Slenczka, *Neues und Altes* 3, p. 41-44.

grounded in its pure “blood” or “genes” seems speculative at best.⁸⁶⁹ It is no basis for discerning what one ought to do.

This is where Luther parts company with the likes of Elert and Althaus. Where they relied on the persuasive force of a successful political movement to advance Christ’s kingdom, Luther maintained his distance to the first German nationalists in the 16th century, including Ulrich von Hutten. While von Hutten was popular in Germany in the 19th and early 20th century, including among the Nazis,⁸⁷⁰ Luther rejected the temptation of harnessing the first German nationalists and their political clout for evangelistic purposes and relied solely on the power of the Holy Spirit to extend God’s kingdom of grace by God’s word.

Moreover, where Elert and Althaus relied on historical speculation, experiences of reality and power, and the conservative-nationalist German intellectual tradition apart from God’s word to modify God’s will—e.g., by adding the preservation of racially defined “nations” to the divinely ordained tasks of government, church, and family—Luther called theology away from the hidden God who works all in all to the God who has revealed himself in his biblical word.⁸⁷¹ Accordingly, just as the proclamation of pastors is subject to God’s biblical word to determine if they truly speak for Christ (Luke 10:16), so the reasonable actions of government officials and parents are subject to God’s unchanging moral law—the Ten Commandments as summarized in the double command to love God and the neighbor—to determine if they truly act in the stead and by the command of God. Because this is so, the church may, and must, remind those who hold power in the kingdom of the world of God’s eternal law summarized in love.

It is therefore equally wrong for the church simply to demand obedience to whatever the authorities in the kingdom of the world require. Those who by God’s command exercise authority in the holy orders established by God act as God’s representatives only to the extent they act according to God’s unchanging revealed will within the context of the distinction of the two kingdoms. Christian obedience has limits (Acts 5:29). The church is called to mark those limits according to God’s Ten Commandments because might does not make right.

Moreover, the church is called to teach those who hold offices of authority in this world to serve those under their authority by practicing the virtues of government according to the Ten Commandments while tempering the harshness of God’s law by love, prudence, and equity to make possible the peaceful life together of sinners within a nation and among nations. This is not only reasonable. This is also required by the example of Christ.

⁸⁶⁹ For instance, it is difficult to see how the inhabitants of the region the Roman writer Tacitus (c. 58-120) described as Germania—presumably an ethnically diverse mix of Germanic and Celtic tribes—are “biologically” the same as the “ethnic” Germans living in Elert’s Germany. Elert and others had—to some extent or another—adopted and Christianized the “Germanenmythos,” a historical construct popular in late 19th/early 20th century Germany that postulated a biological *and therefore immutable cultural* national identity that connected the highly industrialized and seemingly degenerate Germans of their present with the primitive and seemingly pristine tribes living in the mists of the Germanic virgin forests of antiquity. The speculative nature of this enterprise is seen from the fact that while post-Enlightenment Germans were initially told that the Aryan race came from India, they later were told they came from the North and were the driving force behind the cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome. Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe’s Classical Past*, tr. Richard R. Nybakken (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p. 17-50.

⁸⁷⁰ Franz Rueb, *Der hinkende Schmiedegott Vulkan: Ulrich von Hutten, 1488-1523* (Zurich: Ammann Verlag, 1988), p. 283-97.

⁸⁷¹ E.g., AE 5:43; AE 33:139-40.

Most importantly, the church is called to remind those who hold offices of authority that they are not ultimately able to guarantee the success of even the best-laid plans. Rather, God is the origin, and his glory is the goal, of all life in the three holy orders. If this fundamental reality is not recognized, all social order on earth must degenerate into short-lived anarchy or tyranny.⁸⁷²

Those who, like Elert and Althaus, longingly prepared for, enthusiastically welcomed, and theologically justified the rule of Hitler effectively justified tyranny as a means to a greater social good—the racial, moral, and spiritual rebirth of Germany. Yet the political order they helped to establish was doomed to be violent and short-lived⁸⁷³ precisely because it uncritically identified God’s actions with the ruthless tyranny of Hitler and his associates. By doing so, they failed to take to heart—and teach—key lessons from Luther’s theology of the two kingdoms. In the process, they not only helped to prepare the way for a genocidal regime. They also did much to discredit Luther’s theology in the 20th century and beyond because they aggressively invoked Luther’s name, legacy, and alleged significance for Germany but deviated in several key aspects from what Luther taught.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

While theologians like Althaus and Elert openly rejoiced in Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, theologians like Bonhoeffer took a different, more critical stance.⁸⁷⁴ Indeed, while some pastors decorated the altars of their churches with swastikas to symbolize their hope for the rebirth of the German nation by means of the Nazi movement, Bonhoeffer’s first sermon after Hitler’s rise to power contrasted the biblical Gideon with the Germanic Siegfried and taught that the church had only one altar (that of the Most High God) and only one pulpit (for the proclamation of faith in God alone).⁸⁷⁵ While Elert distorted Luther’s doctrine of vocation to make room for the notion of a “mass leader” who would use his autonomy to accomplish great things—unencumbered by the law—Bonhoeffer subjected the concept of “leader” (*Führer*) to a theological critique under the First Commandment in a February/March 1933 lecture that, unfortunately, would prove remarkably predictive of things and mindsets to come.⁸⁷⁶

⁸⁷² Unlike Elert and Althaus, Gerhard Gloege (1901-1970)—a Lutheran pastor who served as the director of one of the independent seminaries of the Confessing Church between 1935 and 1938 (see Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 422, 589)—drew on Luther’s theology to criticize tyrants like Hitler when he, in 1940, published a translation of Luther’s 1533 lecture on Psalm 127 to rebuke self-divinizing humans and tyrannical leaders who claim to be able to control everything, even the success of their plans. Gerhard Gloege (ed.), *Von der Menschwerdung des Menschen: Eine akademische Vorlesung [Martin Luthers] über den 127. Psalm* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1940).

⁸⁷³ The short-lived nature of Nazi Germany is illustrated by the following indicators: Nazis valued physical fitness and ideological conformity over genuine scientific research and education in the humanities. Evans, *Reich in Power*, p. 287-320. The Nazi wartime economy could function only by ever more aggressive military conquests and the ruthless exploitation of the conquered territories and peoples, especially the Jews and the Slavs. Evans, *Reich at War*, p. 333-45. None of these developments were sustainable.

⁸⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer’s father, Karl Bonhoeffer (1868-1948), was a professor of psychiatry and neurology at Berlin University. He noted after the war that the entire family was critical about Hitler from the outset. The father’s own aversion was based on Hitler’s “demagogic propagandistic speeches,” his condoning of political violence, his “choice of colleagues,” and “his psychopathic symptoms.” Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 21, 258.

⁸⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 462-63; Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 257.

⁸⁷⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 268-82. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 259-60, noted that, for some reason, the last two sentences of Bonhoeffer’s manuscript were cut off in the radio broadcast. Bonhoeffer, in any event, had not written this lecture

a) Christ as Center of Creation

As seen in the hermeneutical section above, Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ is a key part of his theology. This holds true when it comes to understanding the created world and providing direction for the Christian life in this world. In his 1933 lecture on Christology, Bonhoeffer elaborated on his understanding of Christ's relationship to the world, including the state. Expressly rejecting the doctrine of Christ's omnipresence or ubiquity in creation,⁸⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer distinguished a threefold form of Christ's presence in the world *for* the world. First, "as word of the church," that is, "[h]is presence is, by nature, his existence as preaching."⁸⁷⁸ Second, Christ is present for the world as sacrament, specifically the Lord's Supper, "in the sphere of our body's tangible nature."⁸⁷⁹ Third, "[a]s Word and sacrament, Christ is present as church-community."⁸⁸⁰ According to Bonhoeffer, the relation between Christ as word/sacrament and Christ as church is analogous to the relation between reality and form: "The church-community . . . is the form he takes" by means of the word and the sacrament.⁸⁸¹

After discussing the threefold form of Christ, Bonhoeffer described Christ as the center of our human existence, as center of history, and as center of nature. In this threefold scheme, Christ is present for humanity, not substantively and actively as asserted by the doctrine of ubiquity, but by being humanity's judgment and justification.⁸⁸² Because Christ is present as the "church-community," the church is "the hidden center" of the state.⁸⁸³ Judgment and justification take place in the church's proclamation of Christ's cross which is "both the affirmation of law and order and its ultimate breaking and abolition." The cross is therefore the "true origin" not

in response to Hitler's rise to power but as part of a prearranged lecture series on German youth. Bonhoeffer's famous 1937 book on following Christ, *Nachfolge*, can be read as setting forth an alternative to the talk of "leader and followers" that was common in Nazi Germany, as noted by Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Biografie*, 4th ed. (Munich: dtv, 2017), p. 224. The commonly used English title, *The Cost of Discipleship*, alludes to the book's theme of "costly grace" but obscures this important historical connection.

⁸⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer rejected the doctrine of ubiquity as an attempt to answer a "how" question (how is Christ present in the sacrament?) instead of the "who" question (who is the Christ who is present in the sacrament?). Bonhoeffer considered the "how" question illegitimate. The answer to the legitimate "who" question is Christ as "the Humiliated One." Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 321-23.

⁸⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 317-18.

⁸⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 318-23.

⁸⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer here developed a theme he had established in his 1926 dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*. Written under Seeberg and reflecting Seeberg's interest in sociology, the dissertation was subtitled "a dogmatic inquiry into the sociology of the church." Bonhoeffer's concept of "Christ existing as church-community" centers on Christ what Seeberg (and Hegel) had conceived of in Pneumatological terms—"the Spirit existing as church." Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 70, 82-83. Bonhoeffer continued to think of Christ in this paradigm when he—in a 1940 reflection on Christ's ascension—saw *the church* as increasingly mediating the presence of the risen Christ to all of creation. Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940-1945* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), p. 480.

⁸⁸¹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 323. Bonhoeffer used the German term "Gemeinde" and did not specifically refer to "church" in this context. This seems to be intentional. "Gemeinde" can refer to the ecclesial community, i.e., the congregation or the church, but also the political community, that is, the municipality or the state. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christologie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1981), p. 37-38. As will be seen below, Bonhoeffer conceived of Christ as center of history existing as both church and state, as both communities have their "true origin" in the cross. The narrowing translation of "Gemeinde" in the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* edition as "church-community" is therefore potentially misleading.

⁸⁸² Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 325.

⁸⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 315, 326.

only of the church but also of the state. Indeed, Christ “can now be recognized only in twofold form, as church and state.”⁸⁸⁴

b) Mandates of Christ

In his fragmentary *Ethics*,⁸⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer sought to replace the notion of “orders of creation”—common among Protestant theologians at the time—by something more consistent with his overall Christocentric theology. He landed on the term of “mandates of Christ.” Bonhoeffer’s transition from “orders of creation” to “mandates of Christ” took place in two main steps. First, Bonhoeffer replaced “orders of creation” by “orders of preservation.” Second, Bonhoeffer moved away from the “orders” terminology and its association with creation and fall and replaced it by the “mandate” terminology which he tied to the ascended Christ.

By about 1931, Bonhoeffer had developed the concept of “orders of preservation” as an alternative to the “orders of creation” favored by Althaus, Elert, and others. This development found a practical application in Bonhoeffer’s ecumenical peace work that sought to overcome the political antagonisms in Europe at the time—just over a decade after the end of World War One—based on conversations between churches from the former enemy nations. While Althaus and other “order” theologians followed social Darwinist thinking and envisioned conflict and war as the natural state of international relations, Bonhoeffer and others sought to chart a more peaceful course.⁸⁸⁶

As Bonhoeffer saw it, the concept of “orders of creation” was misused to declare “very good” “certain orders, that is, given realities that are seen as worthy and original in themselves.”⁸⁸⁷ Using “orders of preservation” instead would show “that every given reality is a reality maintained solely from God in grace and wrath, in view of the revelation in Christ.”⁸⁸⁸ Accordingly, Bonhoeffer stated that an order such as marriage and nation is seen as an “order of preservation of God only as long as it is open to the proclamation of the gospel.”⁸⁸⁹ In his

⁸⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 326-27.

⁸⁸⁵ See Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 676-78, 853-91, for biographical context.

⁸⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical*, p. 351-53. Consistent with their theology that saw conflict between nations as an unavoidable given—and that decried any attempt to avoid it as un-Christian pacifism contrary to God’s created order—Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch (1888-1972) had published an article where they claimed that ecumenical efforts to secure peace with Germany’s sworn enemies “disown[ed] the German destiny and confus[ed] consciences at home and abroad.” Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 195. On Althaus’s and Hirsch’s longstanding criticism of (Christian) pacifism as contrary to conflict between nations that was part and parcel of the orders of creation, see Hetzer, “*Deutsche Stunde*”, p. 78-91, 147.

⁸⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical*, p. 353. Note that “order (of creation)” has taken on a very general meaning here. Consistent this broad meaning—essentially, anything objective that keeps fallen humans alive so that he may hear Christ’s gospel—Bonhoeffer could also speak of peace and struggle as “orders of preservation” that are open toward Christ but believed that war, “because it is absolutely destructive,” was no longer an “order of preservation.” Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical*, p. 364-67, 371.

⁸⁸⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical*, p. 353.

⁸⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical*, p. 353. The same position is advanced in Bonhoeffer’s summer 1932 lecture on the possibility of a Christian ethic, see *Ecumenical*, p. 341.

academic lecture on Genesis 1 to 3, *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer took essentially the same position.⁸⁹⁰

In his 1941 essay on the relationship between church and state, Bonhoeffer did not explicitly speak of Christ's mandates, but he had already identified four specific orders—namely, marriage, culture, state and church⁸⁹¹—and had grounded all of them in Christ.

Bonhoeffer explained his Christological foundation of the “worldly” orders of marriage, culture, and state in greater detail for the state. He did so by distinguishing his approach from what he characterized as the classic Protestant approach of grounding the state in the fall and from what he saw as the classic Catholic approach of grounding the state in human nature. Building on the Christological approach he had taken in *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer explained that, lest theology turn into “general Christian philosophy,” paradise and fall must be taught “from the standpoint of Jesus Christ,” because through and for Christ all things are created, including the “thrones” and “dominions.”⁸⁹² Christ is therefore not only the head of the church. He is also the “Lord of the government” whom the government is supposed to serve, as he is government's purpose.⁸⁹³

According to Bonhoeffer, the two traditional approaches to the foundation of government—classic Protestantism and Catholicism—ultimately ground government in natural law. Yet to do so is insufficient because “the concept and the content of natural law are ambiguous.”⁸⁹⁴ This ambiguity allows natural law to serve as the foundation for a state based on violence, law, or the nation, allowing for imperialism, democracy, and dictatorship.⁸⁹⁵ By contrast, only the “biblical grounding of government in Jesus Christ” provides “firm ground” for

⁸⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 139-40. In August 1933, Bonhoeffer collaborated with Hermann Sasse on the first drafts of the so-called Bethel Confession. Bonhoeffer distanced himself from the diluted version of this text that was published by Martin Niemöller in 1934, after several revisions by other theologians. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 300-03. Consistent with Bonhoeffer's Genesis lecture, the first drafts referred to “orders of preservation” that have no independent value. The early drafts acknowledged as orders of preservation “gender, marriage, the family, the nation, property (work and the economy), profession, and government,” but, based on Acts 17:26, rejected a separate order of “race.” Christians are to refrain from attributing to the valid orders of preservation “ultimate significance” and approaching them with “indifference.” Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 387-90. The published version of 1934 no longer cited Acts 17 on the issue of “race” but denied that “race” is on the same level as marriage, government, or *Volk* [nation]—“the orders of life imposed on humanity by God's commandment.” At the same time, it affirmed that “race” “belongs to the orders of nature to which all life even outside of humanity is subject.” “Race” is therefore, “like all orders of nature,” part of “divine ordinances” and is included in the biblical concept of “flesh.” Martin Niemöller (ed.), *Das Bekenntnis der Väter und die bekennende Gemeinde* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1934), p. 24.

⁸⁹¹ In identifying these specific orders, Bonhoeffer appears to follow Swiss Reformed theologian Emil Brunner (1889-1966) who, in his 1932 book *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen*, distinguished five natural orders as forms of human life in community—marriage, work, state, culture, and the visible church. See *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, tr. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 333-34. Brunner attributed their existence to “the psycho-physical nature of man” or man's “natural psycho-physical powers.” Except for the church, these orders are somewhat known to reason. But faith perceives—and Christian ethics teaches—they to be God's created orders and gifts that, because of sin, are no longer fully in accord with God's will and are therefore in need of reform to reflect God's will of love more fully. *Divine Imperative*, p. 335-39.

⁸⁹² Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 510, where he quotes John 1, Col. 1, and similar texts.

⁸⁹³ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 511.

⁸⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 511.

⁸⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 511.

the state, while leaving open the question of whether “a new natural law can be found” on this basis.⁸⁹⁶

When discussing the concrete task of government, Bonhoeffer elaborated on this “new natural law” from the standpoint of Christ by noting that the government’s action is not Christian, as its task is not to proclaim Christ. Rather, in keeping with his earlier teachings on the orders of preservation, Bonhoeffer noted that the government ought to act in a way “that does not exclude Jesus Christ.” To do so, government takes the Second Table of the Ten Commandments “as its measure in any given historical situation and decision.” Thus, the government’s task “consists in establishing, by the power of the sword, an outward justice in which life is preserved and [which] in this way remains open for Christ.”⁸⁹⁷

But how does the government know what is required by the Second Table, namely, that its task is to preserve life? Bonhoeffer gave a twofold answer—from the proclamation of the church⁸⁹⁸ and, where there is no church, from “the law inherent in historical life itself” that providentially corresponds to the Second Table. Bonhoeffer refused to concede that he had thereby grounded government in natural law after all, arguing that this providential correspondence comes into play only for the government that does not understand as grounded in Christ and yet arrives “at the same decisive insights for its task that are revealed in Jesus Christ to the government that understands itself rightly.” According to Bonhoeffer, this “providential correspondence” grounds natural law in Jesus Christ.⁸⁹⁹

⁸⁹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 512-13.

⁸⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 514-15. This is also how the government contributes to the keeping of the First Table of the Ten Commandments, according to Bonhoeffer. Indeed, the government exercises its “religious neutrality” by ensuring that competing religions and forms of worship do not undermine the government itself and “national order.” *Conspiracy*, p. 515-16, 521, 523-24. At the same time, Bonhoeffer recognized in a 1941 paper on the first use of the law according to the Lutheran Confessions that the content of the “first use of the law” is “the entire Decalogue.” “The idea that the second table of the law might be preached without the first is found nowhere in the confessional writings.” He also recognized that, instructed by the church, “the government proclaims the *primus usus* directly,” according to the confessions. *Conspiracy*, p. 588-89, 593.

⁸⁹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 522, 525, where he stated that the church’s task is not to seek “Christian laws” but to urge—“through direct, respectful speech”—the government to carry out “its particular task” according to the Second Table. Bonhoeffer also opined there that the church should carry out “outward justice” among its own members if the government were to fail in “its particular task” despite the church’s “respectful speech.”

⁸⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 515. In a 1940 letter, Bonhoeffer discussed the relationship between God’s revelation in nature—also in the form of natural law—and his revelation in scripture for ethical purposes. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 300-01. Focusing on the former at the expense of the latter risks a “relativization of the revelation,” while focusing on the latter at the expense of the former risks a “relativization of the historical, the norms of creation.” Bonhoeffer stated that both must be avoided. He also expressed his belief that Karl Barth, in his 1938 essay on church and state—originally titled *Rechtfertigung und Recht*, Justification and Justice—had presented a “tempting” solution that “relates (in proper biblical fashion) all the orders of the created world strictly to Christ.”; See Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968), p. 101-48. Bonhoeffer added that “[l]aw that is oriented toward righteousness and is a historical reality through power . . . is ‘the pedagogue leading up to Christ.’” With Brunner, Bonhoeffer distinguished between love as expressed in the sermon on the mount (“renunciation of one’s own right”) and law, but so that “the ultimate meaning of all law on earth is to guarantee the possibility of love in the sense of Christianity.” Brunner, *Divine Imperative*, p. 278, defined love as forgiving one another as “the expression of our unconditional willingness for fellowship,” which “is the intention of the Sermon on the Mount.”

The government's task—preserving physical life according to the Second Table⁹⁰⁰—also limits its divine claim to obedience.⁹⁰¹ While obedience is demanded in doubtful situations, disobedience is required “where the government forces [the Christians] into direct violation of the divine commandment.” Yet the decision to disobey in a concrete situation cannot be completely spelled out in “ethical concepts.” It remains “a venture of one's own responsibility.”⁹⁰²

Bonhoeffer expanded on the life-preserving task of the government under the Second Table—either as preached by the church or as evident from its providential equivalent, “the law inherent in historical life itself”—by restating that task as “preserving the world with its God-given orders in reference to Christ.” Put differently, while “it is not creative,” “[g]overnment keeps what is created in its order.”⁹⁰³ Two orders in particular the government “discovers” in the world it governs, “through which God exercises creative power” and on which the government therefore is “by nature dependent: marriage and work.”⁹⁰⁴ Because these two orders are already found in paradise, “they belong to God's creation, which exists through and toward Jesus Christ.” Even after the fall, they “still remain divine orders of discipline and grace.”⁹⁰⁵ Marriage not only serves the propagation of bodily life but also has the task of “raising children to obey Jesus Christ.” “Through work a world of values is created for the glorification and service of Jesus Christ.” This world “encompasses the whole realm from agriculture, through trade and industry, to science and art (cf. Gen. 4:17ff.)” Bonhoeffer concluded that, “for the sake of Jesus Christ a special right preserves marriage and with it the family and preserves work and with it economic life, culture, science, and art.”⁹⁰⁶ Having grounded government in Christ, Bonhoeffer did not specifically locate the institution of government in history after the fall. Rather, he simply noted that, relative to the paradisaical, created orders of marriage and work, government merely has a “regulative . . . significance.”⁹⁰⁷

⁹⁰⁰ Compared to this task, the form of government “is always secondary.” But, according to Bonhoeffer, some forms are more conducive to the fulfillment of this task than others. The “relatively best” form of government will express most clearly “that government is from above, from God;” it will be sustained and secured by “a strict maintenance of outward justice,” “the right . . . of the family and of work,” and “the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 526-28.

⁹⁰¹ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 522.

⁹⁰² Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 517-18. In his unfinished *Ethics* drafts—see below—Bonhoeffer went on to outline an “ethic of responsibility” to justify armed resistance against Hitler, including the willingness to become guilty by *breaking* the law, by acting “not bound by any law,” “in free responsibility before God,” thereby purportedly following the example of Christ who became guilty vicariously, i.e., for others. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 231-35, 272-97.

⁹⁰³ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 518. Bonhoeffer here appears to reference Brunner, *Divine Imperative*, p. 457, where Brunner stated: “[The state] creates the necessary framework of life; but it cannot itself be creative.” Brunner went on to assert that marriage, the economic order, and civilization/culture precede, and are independent of, the state. Brunner defines the state's task relative to “these divine orders of creation” as “mak[ing] a place for the autonomous life of these institutions.” *Divine Imperative*, p. 458. According to Brunner, the divinely created orders of life themselves form the “framework”—he also called this framework “Lex”—for human obedience to God's command of love of God and of neighbor that preserves and transforms the fallen created order in view of its end that is seen in God's self-sacrifice on the cross. God's true order is therefore hidden in the fallenness of the orders as they now exist. *Divine Imperative*, p. 127-33, 140-44.

⁹⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 518-19.

⁹⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 519.

⁹⁰⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 520.

⁹⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 520.

Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* modified and contextualized the four orders of church, government, marriage, and work. By designating these orders specifically as Christ's orders, Bonhoeffer sought to formulate an alternative to a division of reality into two unrelated "realms," the "divine, holy, supernatural, and Christian" realm and the "worldly, profane, natural, and unchristian" realm. Within this dualistic view of reality, some (whom Bonhoeffer called pseudo-Lutherans and cultural Protestants) proclaimed "the autonomy of the orders of this world . . . against the law of Christ," while others (the monks and Enthusiasts) "struggle against the enmity of the world in order to build the kingdom of God on earth." As Bonhoeffer saw it, both camps agreed that the "reality in Christ" is only a part of the whole reality and either embrace the world without Christ or Christ without the world, which denies the New Testament's concern "with the realization [Wirklichwerden] of the Christ-reality in the contemporary world that it already embraces, owns, and inhabits."⁹⁰⁸

According to Bonhoeffer, Christ's relation to the world and vice versa becomes "concrete in certain mandates of God in the world," specifically, "work, marriage, government, and church." Bonhoeffer prefers mandates over orders to express that these signify "divinely imposed tasks," not predetermine "forms of being." As was the case with the "orders of preservation," God willed these mandates "through Christ, toward Christ, and in Christ." The relation of these mandates to Christ—"not their actual givenness in this or that form"—is what makes them "divine."⁹⁰⁹

As a result of this Christological grounding, there was limited need for Bonhoeffer to trace the origin of individual mandates to specific biblical texts or even specific actions of God in history.⁹¹⁰ Instead, Bonhoeffer argued that it is in the concrete situations of daily life in church, family, work, and government that God's commandment "becomes the daily divine guidance of our lives." This commandment, however, is not simply an "ought," a prohibition, or a threat. It is also liberation and permission "for authentic life and for unreflective doing."⁹¹¹ Understood as permission, God's commandment commands freedom—not freedom from the commandment, but freedom "only through and within God's commandment," i.e., the merciful and holy God's total claim on man in Jesus Christ.⁹¹² God's commandment becomes *concrete* as "daily divine guidance" by the words of those who are the concrete bearers of the mandate in the four domains identified above, who act as "vicarious representatives" of Christ in their domain.⁹¹³

c) God's Law and the Ethic of Responsibility

As seen in his 1941 essay on church and state, Bonhoeffer struggled with finding a meaningful place for the Ten Commandments, the natural law, or law more generally in his

⁹⁰⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 56-68. Along these lines, Bonhoeffer therefore subjected the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God to Christ. *Ethics*, p. 112.

⁹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 68-69; see *Ethics*, p. 73-74, 389-90.

⁹¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 70-73.

⁹¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 381-82.

⁹¹² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 382-86; see Bonhoeffer, *Underground*, p. 498-500.

⁹¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 389; see *Ethics*, p. 390-91, where Bonhoeffer elaborated on the notion of "bearers of the mandate," i.e., those who represent God within their domains.

increasingly Christ-focused theology. An early instance of this struggle⁹¹⁴ is a 1926 paper on Luther and the Holy Spirit Bonhoeffer wrote in a Berlin University seminar led by famed Luther scholar Karl Holl (1866-1926). In this paper, Bonhoeffer discussed, among other topics, the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the law based on Luther's late disputations, including his disputations against the Antinomians.⁹¹⁵ Bonhoeffer recognized that, for Luther, the giving of the Ten Commandments by Moses—though not “an absolute necessity for humanity”—had become necessary because sin had obscured the natural law articulating the requirement of the Holy Spirit in the heart of all people to lead them to repentance. Bonhoeffer also saw that, for Luther, the “first fruit of the Spirit” in the new life of the Christian is “undoubtedly . . . the fulfillment of the law in love” as a “new obedience,” the restoration of the image of God.

For Bonhoeffer, this meant that the law is no longer outside the believer. Rather, Spirit and law have entered the new human, resulting in “autonomous,” “creative morality” (see Rom. 2:14), so that the “new person does not need a Decalogue” but “creates in himself the rules for his actions from the knowledge of the determined will of God.” The “new person” therefore enjoys “absolute freedom from the law,” while still fulfilling “the law in faith.” As Bonhoeffer recognized, this only applies to those who are perfect Christians. What about the rest? To them, the law needs to be preached for repentance “until *the spirit of the law* is completely dissolved *into the gospel*, until God's wrath is completely turned to grace . . . in the hereafter.”⁹¹⁶

This approach to the law in “absolute freedom” reappears in a 1928 lecture Bonhoeffer delivered during his vicarage in Barcelona. There, he claimed that, in Christian freedom, “Christians become creative in their ethical actions.” Accordingly, “[t]here is no law with a *specific content* but only the law of freedom, that is, bearing responsibility before God and oneself.” Even the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount should not be taken as literal commandments but as a call of the Spirit to risk the responsible action in obedience to God's will in the present situation.⁹¹⁷

Further developing this nexus between freedom from the law's specific content and the Christian's creativity in moral action, Bonhoeffer stated in his lecture on creation and fall that

⁹¹⁴ For Bonhoeffer's attempts to locate the Ten Commandments in his 1931 and 1936 catechism drafts see Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical*, p. 262-66, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 782-85, 787-95, 809, 812.

⁹¹⁵ See AE 73:1-238; *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and tr. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008).

⁹¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Young Bonhoeffer*, p. 331-33, 344-47, 353-54. See Karl Holl, *The Reconstruction of Morality*, tr. Fred W. Meuser & Walter R. Wietzke (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), for Holl's own view of Luther's ethics. Bonhoeffer's correct affirmation that, for Luther, the law will be fulfilled *formaliter* in heaven, remains an afterthought that is alien to Bonhoeffer's summary of Luther's theology on this key point. Put differently, Bonhoeffer's problem here is that he does not take seriously that, according to Luther, God implanted the moral law—the moral essence of the Ten Commandments—into the heart of all people, where it will remain forever, either as perfectly fulfilled (in heaven) or as completely broken (in hell). Hence Bonhoeffer's fascination with “creative morality,” i.e., the ability of the perfect Christian to make “new decalogues” he shared with Althaus. See Althaus, *Ethik*, p. 38-41; AE 34:112-13. Hence no mention of the “third use” of the law in Bonhoeffer's summary. But for Luther, the law is not “dissolved” into the gospel. Rather, the ministry of the gospel ends on the Last Day, when there will be no more sins to be forgiven, while the eternal decalogue and its joyful angelic fulfillment by the saved remains forever. Accordingly, Luther did recognize a “third use” of the law in his disputations. See AE 73:78, 86, 112, 128, 133, 141, 153-54, 177, 194, 440-41.

⁹¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 366-68.

“the image of God” means that “God in Christ is free for humankind.”⁹¹⁸ Thus, when humans were created in the image of God, they were created free—not in themselves, but free for others (God and neighbor), that is, free to be in relation.⁹¹⁹ Consistent with his relational view of the image of God—that is distinct from the normative view found in Luther, as discussed above—Bonhoeffer counted the law among the things God’s word had created out of nothing.⁹²⁰ One could therefore say that, just as God created the law out of nothing, so Christians freely create the law anew whenever acting responsibly in concrete situations.

About a decade later, these considerations result in Bonhoeffer’s “ethic of responsibility,” which he contrasted with an ethic of moral principles. While Bonhoeffer saw the latter as an unreal ideology, as servitude to an absolute good, he saw the former as taking seriously the reality of the world as radically negated and affirmed by the incarnation of Christ. Put differently, the ethic of responsibility is an ethic of freedom that operates in the twilight of a given situation where doing what is good in principle may have terrible consequences, which therefore would not be what is good *in history*. Responsible ethical action is therefore not action that is good in itself. Rather, it is action that seeks to do what is good in a given situation—judged and affirmed as the situation is by Christ—while leaving the ultimate justification of that action to God’s grace in Christ.⁹²¹

Elaborating on his ethic of responsibly, Bonhoeffer noted that, “in every subject matter [Sache], . . . there is an intrinsic law [Wesensgesetz] that is grounded in its origin.”⁹²² Acting properly in a given situation will usually require operating “within the confines of these [intrinsic] laws.” But these laws are not ultimately binding. For instance, a great political leader such as Bismarck—recognizing “the basic necessities of human life [Lebensnotwendigkeiten]”—may violate these laws “in free responsibility before God.” Yet whether political leaders abide by statecraft’s intrinsic laws or violate those laws, they become guilty and must rely on divine grace and forgiveness. Indeed, “the structure of responsible action involves both *willingness to become guilty [Bereitschaft zur Schuldübernahme]* and *freedom*.”⁹²³

Following the example of Christ’s vicarious action, the ethic of responsibility is an ethic of love that fulfills the commandments of God’s righteousness “in concrete, responsible action of love for all human beings.” Love in this sense is “directed toward real human beings rather than to some idea of a human being.” It therefore “cannot be regulated by any law but takes place in the freedom of personal dedication.” As such, love “does not derive its way of dealing with what is real independently from the real, but from the reality of the real, from its being-loved-by-God.” Such vicarious human action according to Christ’s example includes the “relative sinlessness” of vicariously and responsibly “taking on another’s guilt.”⁹²⁴

Elaborating on the relationship between responsible action, guilt, conscience, and sin, Bonhoeffer stated that even the conscience liberated by Christ “still has the function it had in its natural state,” namely to warn against violating “the law to love God and neighbor as spelled out

⁹¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 65.

⁹¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 62-63.

⁹²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation*, p. 58-59.

⁹²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 219-29, 248.

⁹²² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 270-72.

⁹²³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 272-75.

⁹²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 231-35.

in the Decalogue, in the Sermon on the Mount, and the apostolic parenthesis.” At the same time, however, Jesus Christ rather than the law is now the ultimate. Wherever conscience and concrete responsibility clash, we must therefore freely decide in favor of Jesus Christ.” In this sense, “those who act responsibly become guilty without sin,” like Christ.⁹²⁵

Acting responsibly in freedom therefore is risky in that it involves acting without being “justified by any law” and in the process creates new laws.⁹²⁶ And while responsible action is, in a sense, limited by the vocational boundaries established by “the law of God as revealed in the Decalogue, and the divine mandates of marriage, work, and government,” these boundaries may also be transgressed in responsible freedom from the law to love those who are far from us. Because this transgression happens for the sake of God and neighbor, it actually affirms the law anew and is its true fulfillment, even while the responsible person must recognize and bear “the objective guilt one incurs by breaking the law.”⁹²⁷

d) Evaluation

Comparing Bonhoeffer’s and Luther’s relevant teachings reveals several important differences. To be sure, Bonhoeffer correctly recognized serious errors in what he called the “pseudo-Lutheran” position that uncritically identified God’s will for the world with the existing reality, thereby insulating the world from being criticized or judged by God’s revealed will. Bonhoeffer was also correct in underscoring the universal scope of Christ’s kingly office. But instead of following Luther’s lead on these doctrines, Bonhoeffer went his own, often problematic ways. The following five examples shed light on the problems created by Bonhoeffer.

First, Bonhoeffer attempted to express the ultimate unity of Church and world or state in Christ. In his *Christology*, for instance, Bonhoeffer taught Christ’s existence as church as the hidden center and goal of the world and history. He also stated there that Christ could be recognized only as existing as both church and state. In his *Ethics*, he taught that the merciful and holy God relates to the whole of human life in the world by means of Christ’s four mandates, work, marriage, government, and church. At the same time, however, Bonhoeffer rejected Christ’s divine-human omnipresent rule over all of creation based on the *genus majesticum*, that is, the communication of the divine majesty to Christ’s human nature through the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ.⁹²⁸

The terminology Luther used when discussing Christ’s rule over Church and creation based on Col. 1—a text that was important for Bonhoeffer in this context—is helpful for analyzing Bonhoeffer’s approach. Simply put, Bonhoeffer merely affirmed Christ’s *visible*

⁹²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 275-83.

⁹²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 284, 288.

⁹²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 292-97.

⁹²⁸ In his Christology lecture, Bonhoeffer correctly recognized that the “*genus majesticum* is at the core of Lutheran theology.” Yet he elaborated in this lecture why, in his opinion, the doctrines of ubiquity and *genus majesticum* are answers to the impermissible “how” question that strays into Monophysite territory beyond the “negative” Christology of Chalcedon that aptly expressed the answer to the central question: “who is this human being who is said to be God?” Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 320-21, 345-50. For Luther’s emphatic affirmation of the *genus majesticum* see, e.g., AE 15:293-94; AE 37:218-19; see also SD VIII, 80-86. Without its Christological core, there is no Lutheran theology.

presence and rule as church,⁹²⁹ while rejecting Christ's *invisible* presence and rule in all of creation for the good of the church. According to Bonhoeffer, only Christ's visible presence is appropriate when it comes to expressing Christ's presence "for you."⁹³⁰

By contrast, Luther affirmed that even when the divine-human Christ is present in creation apart from the means of grace—yet still masked by creation—he actively rules creation for the good of his church. What is more, ruling and preserving creation by his almighty omnipresence, Christ is present for unbelievers as well, that is, so that they may become believers. Christ's invisible rule is therefore more than, and different from, an "ought" of God's commandment, Christ's mandates, or the natural law that can be frustrated—e.g., when the church's proclamation of God's commandment in Christ has not reached the far corners of the world or when government becomes a tyranny that is no longer open to the proclamation of Christ. Rather, Christ's invisible rule is his effective, omnipresent, omnipotent, and (in this life) incomprehensible rule for the good of his church, which creatures cannot evade because Christ alone is their strength (Eph. 1:11, 23).⁹³¹

While Luther warned believers against trying to understand Christ's invisible presence and rule in and over all creation, he nonetheless taught that this invisible presence and rule of their crucified, risen, and ascended divine-human King is for their good. Luther taught this, not based on philosophical speculation, but based on God's own word so that Christians may believe it,⁹³² which is the opposite of trying to answer impermissible "how" questions.⁹³³

It is therefore not surprising that Bonhoeffer, when trying to express the close relationship between Christ and world—his key goal against the "pseudo-Lutherans" who separated Christ from the world—must resort to the concept of heavenly mandates relayed by the church to concrete humans in concrete situations by humans who function as "vicarious representatives" of Christ on earth, as the "bearers of the mandate." Yet this concept of Christ's remote rule by divine mandates and earthly representatives is incompatible with Luther's theology because it once again separates the divine-human Christ from the world.⁹³⁴

⁹²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy*, p. 480.

⁹³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin*, p. 321. It appears that Bonhoeffer here is a faithful student of Seeberg who sociologically focused on the church and, following Ritschl, emphasized Christ at the expense of "metaphysics." Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 70.

⁹³¹ AE 21:328.

⁹³² In SLE 18:1966 (AE 33:291-92), Luther distinguished between the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory to teach that the light of glory "will show us later on that God, who now judges according to his incomprehensible righteousness, is of a perfectly righteous and manifest righteousness, just that we are to believe this for the time being."

⁹³³ SLE 20:278 (AE 40:216): "We are not told to search out *how* it happens that our bread becomes and is Christ's body. God's word is here. It says so. We stick with it and believe it." Luther took the same position regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, AE 57:12; AE 78:22.

⁹³⁴ As noted, Lutheran Orthodox theologians modified Luther's teachings concerning Christ's kingly office. Yet they defended the doctrine that Christ exercises this office by being present everywhere according to both natures. For instance, Johannes Andreas Quenstedt (1617-1688) affirmed this doctrine concerning Christ's omnipresent rule against those who—like Catholics and Calvinists—analagized the kingly rule of Christ's human nature to the worldly manner of ruling, "contending that the substantial presence need not be where the effect and operation of the king or ruler is." According to Catholics and Calvinists, then, the substance of the body of the King of kings remains locked in his heavenly palace, ruling the earth from afar, that is, by his grace, strength, and power, as well as *by his laws, mandates, judgments, and earthly representatives*. At bottom, this is what Bonhoeffer taught. Yet as Quenstedt

Bonhoeffer's very human notion of Christ's kingly office is consistent with a Roman Catholic⁹³⁵ or Reformed understanding of Christ's kingly office,⁹³⁶ as both reject the *genus majesticum*.⁹³⁷

Bonhoeffer's concept of mandates fits well in the overall context of his *Ethics* which, at least in part, was written to justify *Christian* armed resistance against Hitler's tyrannical rule. When the human "bearers of the mandate" deviate from their divinely imposed task—e.g., by leaving no space for the institutional church—humans must, in "free responsibility before God" and "not bound by any law," take matters into their own hands, kill the tyrant, and thereby become guilty and thus follow Christ's example.⁹³⁸ Luther, trusting in God's—and Christ's—omnipotent, active omnipresence in all creatures for the good of the church, left dealing with lawless tyrants beyond the reach of ordinary human action in the three holy orders to God's—and Christ's—own effective judgment:

[I]f the government is wicked, God is present. He has fire, water, iron, stone, and countless other ways of killing. How quickly he kills a tyrant! . . . [T]yrants are also at risk that, by God's permission, their subjects rise up . . . to kill or expel them. . . . You may therefore not complain that tyrants and governments gain security to do evil by our doctrine; no, they are not secure at all. . . . [D]o not be confused by the fact that the government is evil. Its punishment and misfortune is closer at hand than you may desire. . . . [God] can also raise up a foreign government, as he did in the case of the Goths against the Romans, the Assyrians against Israel, etc. Thus, there is vengeance, punishment, and danger enough hanging over tyrants and governments. God does not

pointed out, the assertion of Christ's distant rule by means of earthly representatives adds imperfection and weakness that is not appropriate for Christ's omnipotent and infinite reign. Quenstedt therefore taught with Luther that Christ the King, according to both natures, is present with his people (Matth. 28:18-20) and rules in the midst of his enemies (Ps. 110:2). See Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologiae* (Wittenberg: Quenstedt, 1691), III:262-63.

⁹³⁵ In 1925, responding to the rising secularism and nationalism in the wake of the Great War, Pope Pius XI established the feast of Christ the King on the last Sunday of October to promote the idea, and reality, of the social or legal kingship of Christ (and the Roman Church) over the world in the here and now as a path to worldly peace and prosperity. See *Quas Primas: Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on the Feast of Christ the King* (Dec. 11, 1925). Ironically, Pius XI agreed to a treaty with Nazi Germany that was signed in July 1933 to secure the independence of Catholic lay organizations in exchange for their de-politization. The Nazi government soon violated the vague provisions of the treaty. Evans, *Reich in Power*, p. 235. Perceiving similar social ills at about the same time, Bonhoeffer similarly sought to promote Christ's social reign, as did Reformed theologian Karl Barth.

⁹³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 68-69, 389-91.

⁹³⁷ E.g., Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, tr. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 439-47; Ott, *Catholic Dogma*, p. 158; see SD VIII, 12, 95; Johann Gerhard, *On the Person and Office of Christ: Exegesis* (St. Louis: CPH, 2009), p. 256-60; Quenstedt, *Theologia* III:158-208.

⁹³⁸ See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 231-35, 272-97. Bonhoeffer's "ethic of responsibility" provides insight into how Bonhoeffer understood participation—his own and that of his coconspirators—in the plot to kill Hitler at the time. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 13; Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 857, 878. Yet breaking the law in "free responsibility" does not follow the example of Christ who suffered in the sinful world *because* he was without sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Moreover, Bonhoeffer's approach is not a convincing alternative to Luther's biblical ethic of love (Rom. 13:8-10), discussed above, according to which love is the supreme law and the queen of the law that prudently relaxes—but does not abrogate—the law where strict compliance with the law would not benefit but hurt the neighbor. As discussed, love does so by doing the *lawful* thing, that is, *without becoming guilty of any sin*. See AE 76:269-75. Bonhoeffer's understanding of the law's application in this world as an unbending, strict rule (e.g., *Conspiracy*, p. 528: "strict maintenance of outward justice") therefore misses the biblical mark in two ways. It temporalizes God's eternal law and lacks love, thereby confusing the two kingdoms. As discussed, all action in this world—whether by the government or by individuals—is subject to love as the law's summary and queen.

let them enjoy their evil deeds in peace. He is right behind them. In fact, he surrounds them, rides them between his spurs, and has them by the bridle.⁹³⁹

Thus, Luther—far from being a toady of tyrants who shielded them from accountability in this life or the next—taught that wicked rulers were never safe from God’s punishment anywhere in God’s creation, as God himself “surrounds them” and is ready to kill them by any of the created means at his omnipotent disposal. Those who believe this have no need to take matters into their own hands by killing tyrants. By contrast, Bonhoeffer, certainly also not a friend of tyrants, substantially reduced the risk of tyrants to tyrannicide by Christians (and others) willing to adopt the lawless “ethic of responsibility” Bonhoeffer proposed and take matters into their own hands. Bonhoeffer’s substantively absent Christ is unable to stop tyrants by any other means.

Yet as Bonhoeffer’s own time and example show, while many individuals dedicated to Hitler’s death failed, God ended Hitler’s life when Hitler’s bunker in Berlin was surrounded by soldiers of the Soviet Red Army.⁹⁴⁰ As Luther could observe in the 16th century, those who, like Ulrich von Hutten and Thomas Müntzer, saw themselves as God’s chosen instruments to judge the tyrants and effect strict compliance with God’s mandates by physical force accomplished little beyond the deaths of thousands, including their own. In the end, then, as Bonhoeffer did not teach Christ’s invisible reign over all creation for the good of those who believe in him, he was required to overextend Christ’s visible reign through the word into a worldly kingdom to effect the desired unity of “world and church” in Christ as a Hegelian philosophical construct.⁹⁴¹

Second, Bonhoeffer’s concept of this-worldly mandates of Christ is consistent with Bonhoeffer’s notion of God’s law as a merely temporal creature that is ultimately external to God and human beings. According to Luther, God’s moral law of love—as summarized in the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule—is the unchangeable and eternal will of God, permanently written into the human heart at the time of creation. Yet, like the gospel, the divinely instituted orders of marriage and government have a limited purpose in this life.⁹⁴² By reframing these orders as “mandates” of Christ, Bonhoeffer remained consistent with his concept of a temporal law, a law just for this life. As noted, Bonhoeffer never managed to articulate the eternity of God’s moral law of love within his theological system. For Bonhoeffer, the law is not written into the human heart from the time of creation. And it will not be joyfully fulfilled in heaven by angels and saints alike. Instead, the gospel and God’s grace will be eternal, as if the resurrection would not eliminate all sin from the believers whom the Holy Spirit raises to life eternal in heaven.

⁹³⁹ SLE 10:505-06; see AE 46:109-10. What is said here of God’s rule over tyrants is also true of the rule of the divine-human Christ, according to AE 57:300-01.

⁹⁴⁰ Evans, *Reich at War*, p. 725. Hitler’s suicide was followed by “a vast wave of suicides without precedent in modern history” that “went far beyond the ranks of committed Nazis,” especially in Berlin and other areas occupied by the Red Army. Evans, *Reich at War*, p. 727, 731-33.

⁹⁴¹ See Oswald Bayer, *Leibliches Wort: Reformation und Neuzeit im Konflikt* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), p. 260, where he observed that Bonhoeffer, following Hegel, speculatively expanded Christology into “a principle of unity which eradicates vital distinctions.”

⁹⁴² E.g., AE 28:124, 128; AE 73:112; AE 79:175-76, 178.

Third, Bonhoeffer rejected what he perceived as the traditional Catholic and Protestant attempts to base the order of this world on the natural law because the content of the “natural law” seemed unclear and did not lead to a single political order. He proposed to replace this foundation by Christ himself. But Luther did not base government and family on natural law because he understood government and family not to be “mandates” but rather orders, that is, institutions given to humankind by a gracious God at certain points in the early history of the world—before and after the fall—in which humanity is to live according to the natural law until the return of Christ.

Bonhoeffer’s concerns regarding the natural law and his proposed solution point to his difficulty with Scripture, discussed above, and his attempt to deduce his theology from Christological principles.⁹⁴³ Luther, by contrast, taught based on Scripture both that the natural law, God’s eternal will, was written in the human heart *and* that God had to reveal this law on Mt. Sinai because the fall had obscured natural human knowledge of the natural law. There is, therefore, no objective ambiguity about the contents of the moral law, even as individual sinners subjectively will be confused about it when they look for it in themselves, creation, or in history. Moreover, Bonhoeffer’s juxtaposition of “natural law” and Christ is problematic because this law—understood as the eternal will of God—is also Christ’s eternal will. Indeed, Luther affirmed that the law cannot be reduced to Christ although following Christ’s example and following the law are materially identical.⁹⁴⁴

Fourth, Bonhoeffer, following Emil Brunner, described the government’s task as “regulatory,” not “creative.” This leaves out a key aspect of virtuous government as Luther taught and promoted it. This is government a source and organizer of collective material aid to those who cannot help themselves—the sick, the elderly, the poor. To be sure, Luther praised enacting just laws and regulations that protect the physical wellbeing of the citizens as a divine virtue of good government. But he did not thereby eliminate the human virtue of good government, that is, its divinely ordained duty to keep its citizens alive in times of need by establishing food stores and hospitals. In fact, Luther did his part in advising local communities who wanted to use commonly held property and raise taxes as a kind of insurance scheme against poverty and starvation due to illness, disability, or old age.

Fifth, Bonhoeffer’s addition of “work” or “culture” as a separate mandate—apparently based on Emil Brunner’s historical speculations on this point⁹⁴⁵—is problematic in that it may simply “baptize” the modern commodification of labor. To be sure, Bonhoeffer conceived of work/culture as connected to, and limited by, the other mandates, including the church and the government’s regulatory task when it came to “work.” But he did conceive of “work” as a *separate* mandate to translate the older theology of orders into his times. This created the risk that “work” would undermine the *order* of marriage—and the family—as the basic unit of

⁹⁴³ As discussed in the previous hermeneutical section, Bonhoeffer’s methodological decision was typical for those who sought to immunize theology from Enlightenment’s assault on the historicity of the bible by existentializing the epistemological basis of theology.

⁹⁴⁴ AE 73:147.

⁹⁴⁵ As noted above, “order,” as used by Bonhoeffer, was broader than the three holy orders recognized by Luther. See Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical*, p. 353, 364-67, 371. Bonhoeffer’s “mandate” terminology continued the broader meaning of “orders.”

economy.⁹⁴⁶ Luther clearly was not ignorant of the fact that not all labor happened in the home or on the family farm, a fact already reflected in the bible.⁹⁴⁷ But when it came to teaching God’s holy orders, Luther simply followed Scripture.⁹⁴⁸ While there is a divine institution of the church and marriage/family before the fall—and of government after the fall—Luther detected no institution of human labor that would be performed apart from the three holy orders. Rather, the commandment to work (Gen. 2:15; 3:19) is carried out within the three orders and for their benefit.⁹⁴⁹

Thus, within God’s three holy orders, labor is not some independent endeavor *all people* should pursue in addition to living in one’s family.⁹⁵⁰ In fact, labor should serve the neighbor and support the family. Human labor—for *both* parents and for *both* employers and employees—should therefore fundamentally be a social pursuit governed by love, not one of unyielding individual self-realization or accumulation of wealth at the expense of the neighbor and the family.⁹⁵¹ Indeed, human labor according to God’s law *includes* fulfilling the parents’ critical duties in the procreation and education of their children.⁹⁵²

In sum, neo-Lutheran theologians in the 20th century engaged in what they believed to be necessary updates to Luther’s biblical doctrine of the three holy orders. The problem with these innovations is that they were not rooted in the kind of careful reading of God’s biblical word modeled by Luther. Instead, they—embracing the Enlightenment idea of development and reducing the authority of God’s word to “the gospel”—turned political and social philosophies that seemed evident to them into the magisterial context in which they interpreted God’s word contrary to Luther’s guidance.

⁹⁴⁶ The basic meaning of the Greek term *oikonomia*, from which the English term “economy” is derived, is nothing else than “management of a household or family.”

⁹⁴⁷ E.g., Tit. 2:9-10; AE 44:81-87 (parents/children), 97-98 (servants/masters).

⁹⁴⁸ “[T]hese three institutions or orders are established in God’s Word and commandment.” SLE 20:1099; see AE 37:365.

⁹⁴⁹ See, e.g., AE 1:102-03, 211-14; AE 37:364-65; AE 79:104-07.

⁹⁵⁰ See Nancy R. Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2023), where she outlines how, beginning in the 19th century, men became first absent from, and then dangerous to, their wives and children. This happened because men were formed by the highly competitive, even brutal, industrial workplaces outside the home. Pearcey emphasizes how these social and economic developments were amplified by popularized Darwinism that conceived of men as wild animals that were just not cut out for family life, which in turn became dominated by women and increasingly unruly children.

⁹⁵¹ Schindler, *Freedom*, p. 253, where he observes that, for Aristotle, the economy—as management of the house—was not about money-making.

⁹⁵² Contrary to the critical assessment of “Bonhoeffer and Luther” on the two kingdoms set forth above, Biermann, *Citizens*, p. 93, sees a “coherence” in “spirit” and “content” between Bonhoeffer’s and Luther’s views on this issue and goes so far as to claim that, “Any suggestion that Bonhoeffer rejected or substantially modified Luther’s teaching simply does not square with the facts.” Suffice it to say that Biermann’s unconditional praise for Bonhoeffer is based on only a fraction of “the facts”—facts concerning Luther and facts concerning Bonhoeffer—presented and discussed above. Indeed, if *Bonhoeffer* “substantiates” the validity and current relevance of *Luther’s* doctrine—as Biermann, *Citizens*, p. 106, claims—then the *real doctrine* of Luther is a dead letter.

IV. CONCLUSION: HALF A MILLENNIUM LATER—STILL GOD’S MASKS

After unfolding the key teachings of Luther’s 1523 treatise on government within the context of his theology and discussing the impact—or lack thereof—of Luther’s teachings during the 20th century, all that is left is to draw out some lines based on what has been set forth in the previous chapters.

Beginning with the most important point, Luther’s theology relentlessly focuses its students on what is essential to the Christian existence—faith in Jesus Christ who saved the world by leading the life of a true King, that is, a life lived and ended to serve and save his wayward subjects by the forgiveness of all their sins. This gospel is at the heart of Luther’s theology. It is therefore at the heart of the distinction of the kingdom of God and Christ and the kingdom of the world. This gospel distinguishes between what is, and is not, Christian. This gospel bestows on faith the first and fundamental freedom—the freedom from sin and condemnation in the heart.

Christ’s church on earth is the community of all who believe this gospel. While Christ as the church’s risen and ascended Lord sits at the right hand of God, his church on earth continues in the humble form of his life on earth both in the church’s corporate worship and in the Christians’ individual lives. This is because Christ, the King of all creation, wants his omnipotent rule over the church to be hidden under weakness and insignificance. This strange contradiction is offensive to the world because it—along with misguided Christians—foolishly imagines that the omnipotent Ruler of the universe should have a culturally, politically, economically, and militarily powerful church on earth. According to this vision, the church should therefore have both spiritual and physical powers. Instead, Christ’s spiritual power is made perfect in physical weakness.

But Christ’s presence and his power are not limited to his kingdom of grace. According to both his divine and human natures, Christ is present everywhere to rule all things—including lords, tyrants, kings, presidents, princes, nations, waters, stars, and animals, as well as angels and demons—in a hidden and incomprehensible way for the good of his believers. But Christ’s gospel—in the visible and audible means of grace of word, baptism, and communion—is the scepter by which he is present in the midst of his enemies and rules over his kingdom of grace in an overt way until his return in glory.

Rooted in this gospel and turning to Christ as example, Luther’s theology takes seriously for all Christians the two main strands of biblical instruction of how to live in this world—the radical pacifism of the Sermon on the Mount and the radical turn toward the neighbor in love and service. Both strands are woven together in the believers who, like Christ, *become* neighbors as God’s masks by serving their fellow human beings in unselfish love, that is, with everything their gracious God has bestowed on them.

God has provided the contents of this service in his moral law that has been implanted in the hearts of all human beings and that, due to the fall into sin, had to be revealed anew in the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. This law is summarized in the double commandment to love God and love the neighbor. This love is the kind of love that loses itself in improving the lives of the neighbors instead of seeking to hold on to its own life. It is the kind of love that does not harm the neighbor, that tolerates everything while only rejoicing in the truth. This love therefore

imitates Christ's royal example of selfless love and undeserved mercy, freely serving those who do not deserve it.

With this understanding of love in mind, Luther was able to see and appreciate the parallels between the biblical commandment to love the neighbor as oneself and the philosophical tradition that had—simply by rational reflection on the realities of human life together—come to realize that blind adherence to even the best legal code was ultimately destructive of human life. This realization caused the philosophical tradition Luther inherited to prize equity, discretion, and prudence as moderating principles of legal justice, where concrete circumstances required this moderation. Thus, while faith in Christ provides the “solution” to this “problem” in our relationship to God, love as queen of the law must do this work in our relationships to fellow sinners in this world.

Luther embraced and expounded these parallels between God's word and sound moral philosophy because he appreciated reason as a divine gift, even as something divine in human beings. While Luther often addressed the shortcomings of fallen reason, he nonetheless valued reason as very important for governing one's life in this world. Therefore, while God's biblical revelation is the only way on which sinners can arrive at a saving knowledge of God, God's moral law as written in the hearts of all people still provides some guidance to all for life in this world and is something that believers and unbelievers have in common.

This is the new synthesis between human reason and divine revelation—between philosophy and theology, between Athens and Jerusalem—Luther proposed as a replacement to the synthesis he had studied at university where the principles of moral philosophy shaped the relationship between Christ and his Christians, resulting in the image of Christ as terrible Judge.

Yet God not only provided the contents of humble neighborly service. He also provided the basic, universal structures for human life together by instituting the three holy orders of church, household, and government at certain times in human history. God is therefore a God who created humans in his image to live in community with himself and with other human beings. Human beings are therefore not intended to live by randomly wandering through life as isolated individuals, without past, without future, without origin, without destination, as if caught in a moment that will not end.

Living in these structures according to the moral law summarized in selfless love, humans act as God's masks, as God's instruments, as secondary causes for him who alone is the Primary Cause of everything that is created and done in the universe. This reality is reason for humility. We're not the ones who make things happen and who achieve and guarantee success by our efforts. Rather, God is at work in us and through us to achieve whatever he wills.

Yet this reality is also reason for thanksgiving for those who have come to see themselves and the world as God describes them in his word—fallen, decaying, ruled by the devil, driven forward by selfish ambition, urged on by the devil, and crushed under the weight of the sinful, inherent desire to replace God. With this realization in mind, it is a relief not to have to bear the weight of the world on our own weak human shoulders but to leave that weight where it is left best—in the gracious hands of the Creator—and to live before him as the content *humans* he created us to be, not as the desperate pseudo-gods we by our fallen nature time and again aspire to be.

The reality of living and working in this world as God's masks and instruments is therefore also a reason for confidence and a firewall against burnout: We are not the ones who have to prevail against the devil on our own. God has willed to prevail against the devil—a liar and murderer from the beginning—by working through us in our daily callings in church, household, and government. What God could easily have done by himself he wishes to do with and through us as his coworkers in this world, as channels of his good gifts for body and soul to all our neighbors.

Luther rejected utopianism on an individual and collective level. Paradise is lost. Human nature is corrupted by the fall. Christians remain sinners. No amount of even the most determined, pious effort can rebuild heaven on earth. As Luther knew from his own experience, when this is attempted by force beyond what God freely grants at a given point in history, death and destruction will ensue. We are stuck in a world full of sin. We are full of sin.

And yet, Luther taught that God has provided three holy orders to function as remedies against sin in their own unique ways. Marriage (as remedy against lust) and government (as restraint of all kinds of outward sins) restrain sin in an outward, imperfect, and temporal way. As the instrument of the Holy Spirit in this world, the holy Christian church remedies sin in a radical, inside-out way by forgiveness and sanctification. Put differently, the fallenness of the world—and his own anti-utopianism—was no reason for Luther to accept the status quo, to let sows live like sows, as he would have colorfully put it. That's why Luther taught God's word, laying out how we should live and laying out how God comes to our aid to help us live the way we should live in this world.

In Luther's teaching, a third way emerges, one that charts a middle course between trying to rebuild some type of utopia on earth and giving up (or even acting corruptly) because the world is corrupt. That third way is doing what is possible in obedience to God's commandments without destroying human life together, living and working as God's humble masks where God has placed us in church, household, and government. That third way between tyranny and anarchy consists in embracing love that helps the neighbor as much as possible and does no harm to the neighbor by applying equity and prudence to the law in a fallen world.

This third way is ultimately possible only for those who believe in the triune God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is because the third way is rooted in faith that is at rest in the triune God while the body is active in the world in constant, albeit not always successful service of the neighbor. For it is only the Holy Spirit given to faith who begins to overcome and drive out what Luther described as *the* original sin—the human desire to be like God in controlling everything, from manipulating God's word and the moral law to guaranteeing the successful outcome of one's business ventures—that causes hyper-engagement in this life resulting in tyranny in the household, the government, and the church. But, once disappointed by inevitable failure, this original sin also causes total disengagement and withdrawal from life in this world resulting in anarchy.

To promote this third way, Luther taught what a virtuous government looks like according to God's word. Contrary to what some promote today, God instituted government to take care of people in a paternal way, i.e., by seeing to it that their true spiritual and bodily needs are met. In this paternal way, government reflects and stands between God (the Provider of all

good things to all people) and the head of the household (the provider of all good things to the members of the household).

Of course, Luther did not advocate individual laziness or “socialism.” And the government, for him, was also to be an agent of punishment and divine retribution to restrain sin, just like parents and the church in their ways are also agents of God’s punishment to restrain sin. But Luther not only taught that, according to Christ’s own example, restraint and punishment need to be carefully tempered by love lest people be driven into death and despair. Luther also assigned a definitively *positive* role for government as a collective way to meet needs that the individual or individual families, for some reason or another, cannot meet on their own.

This is how the *positive* side of the Ten Commandments becomes concrete in actions by the government that promote God’s word; support parents struggling with their children; provide free schooling; defend children against wayward parents; improve marriages by giving them the tools and resources they need to thrive; improve the health, safety, and financial wellbeing of its citizens. By reasonable legislation, material support, and, if needed, defensive military action, the government is to become a neighbor for those who live within the scope of its authority.

Given his antiutopian outlook, Luther was not surprised that the lofty outlines of a truly Christian life in this world we find in Scripture and in Luther’s own writings did not materialize in full in his time. We too should not be surprised that they will also not be fully realized today. In fact, there will be hard times of war, famine, failure, and persecution. There will also be times when God’s good gift of government, instituted by God to become a virtuous neighbor to the most vulnerable, will turn into a vicious persecutor of the most vulnerable before Christ returns. In a fallen world ruled by the devil, it can be no different.

Yet these expected adversities did not stop Luther from promoting virtuous government and virtuous living in all other areas of human life. God’s word (and his faith) moved him to do this. Luther, after all, was also a mask of God. God’s word (and our faith) still move Christians to do this as masks, agents, hands, mouths, and feet of his goodness: Promote virtue in a world of vice, promote peace in a world of war, promote love in a world of hate, promote hope in a world of despair, so that we might also promote faith in a world of unbelief. From time to time, these efforts will succeed and bear fruit. In success and failure, we are bound to implore, thank, and praise the One who accomplishes all that is good in the world behind and through his created masks—the one true God.

February 18, 2026
Ash Wednesday
Day of Martin Luther,
Doctor and Confessor