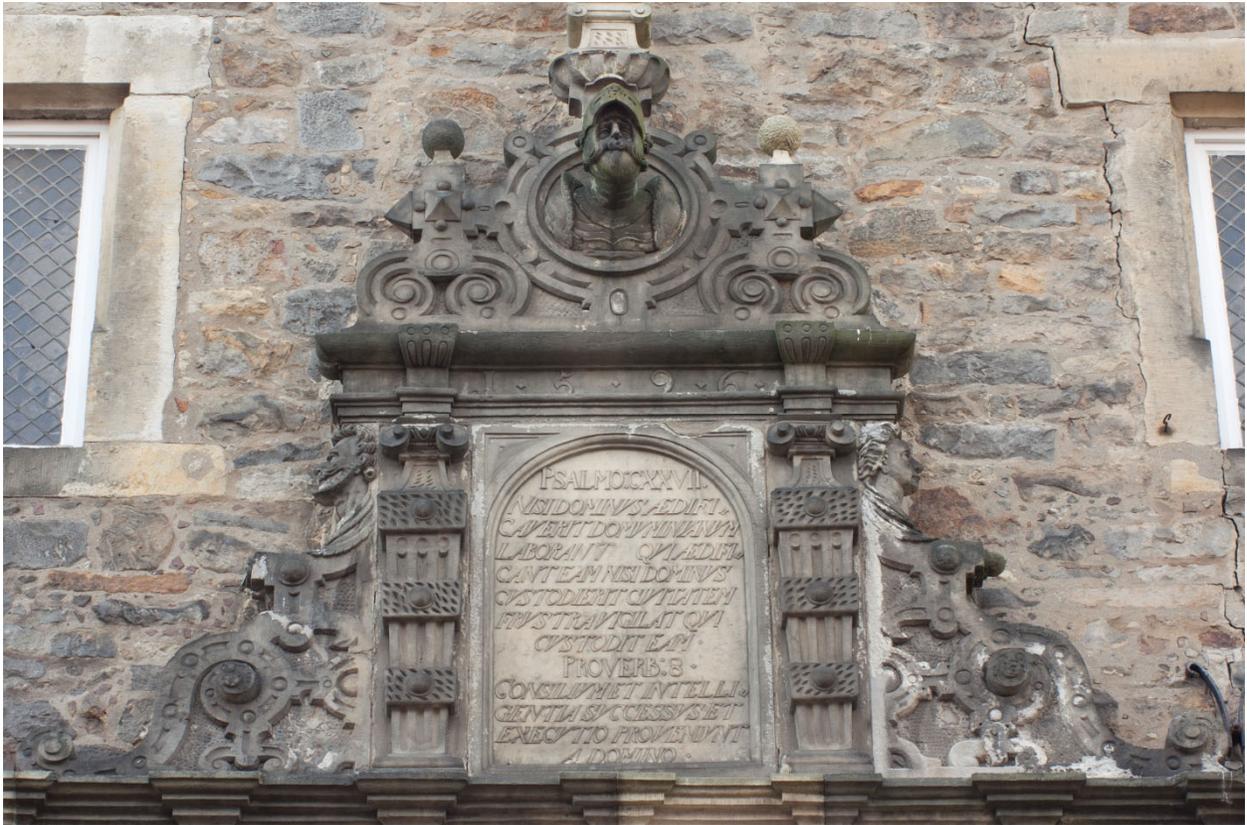


Unless the Lord Builds the House

Martin Luther's 1533 Lecture
on Psalm 127

Translated
by
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Olympia, Washington

The photo on the cover page depicts a Latin inscription located on the eastern wall of the Old City Hall in Stadthagen, Germany. Stadthagen is located in the historic County of Schaumburg which became Lutheran in 1559.

The 1596 inscription features Psalm 127:1 and a summary of Proverbs 8 that well summarizes Luther's entire lecture on Psalm 127: "Counsel and intelligence, success and execution come from the Lord."

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Setting of Luther's Lecture on Psalm 127

In 1524, Martin Luther (1483-1546) sent a brief exposition of Psalm 127 to the Christians in Riga,¹ the modern-day capital of Latvia, a country located on the eastern Baltic Sea between Finland and Poland. Luther did so in response to a request for a devotional writing by a leading citizen of that city.² In this treatise, Luther interpreted Psalm 127 as discussing matters pertaining to the government of the household and the state.³

While this interpretation may seem obvious to modern readers, it was not so for Luther. For instance, Luther's *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513-1515) interpreted Psalm 127 to mean "that no one but Christ could build and guard the house of God, that is, the holy church."⁴ Luther's 1524 exposition of Psalm 127 therefore illustrates Luther's move away from the allegorizing interpretation of Scripture in general and the psalms in particular that can be found in his early works.⁵

Luther's 1524 discussion of the concrete, earthly realities of household and state—and how to live in them as a Christian—was not without precedent in his writings. In the years around 1520, Luther had begun to address the life of a Christian in this world in relation to the gospel promise of free salvation by faith in Christ by writing a treatise on good works according to the Ten

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 volume have been prepared by Holger Sonntag based on the German text in SLE.

The confessional texts contained in the *Christian Book of Concord* of 1580—now commonly referred to as "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 AE 45:314-315.

³ AE 45:322, 328.

⁴ WA 4:414.

⁵ See AE 10:xi-xii. Luther's move from spiritualization to history is summarized in a statement he made in 1532, right around the time he lectured on Psalm 127: "When I was a monk, I was a master of spiritual interpretation, allegorizing everything. But later on, when I had come to some knowledge of Christ through the Letter to the Romans, I realized that allegories and spiritual interpretations were nothing. The things that signify Christ do not matter. What matters is who and what Christ is. Previously, I allegorized and came up with spiritual interpretations for everything, even the chamber pot. Later on, I reflected on the historical accounts, how difficult it was for Gideon to fight against the enemies in the way indicated in Scripture." SLE 22:1343; see AE 54:46-47. Luther warned in his lectures on Genesis: "I wish to admonish students of theology to shun such interpretation of Holy Scripture. For allegory or secret interpretation is harmful when it does not agree with the history. It is especially harmful when it is used instead of history, from which the congregation is taught and instructed more profitably concerning the wonderful governance of God, how he governs all stations in this life, such as household management, government, as well as the church." SLE 2:557-558; see AE 5:345.

Commandments and on Christian liberty and service.⁶ Luther also wrote about marriage in several popular treatises, e.g., his 1522 treatise on the estate of marriage and its divine institution.⁷ Moreover, in 1523, Luther had published his seminal treatise on political authority.⁸ There, Luther discussed the biblical foundations and limitations of the government and whether a Christian may hold government office. He also gave practical advice on how to act prudently in government office.

In late 1524, peasants in southern Germany began an uprising against the princes. Luther engaged the peasants' arguments but, after realizing that they could not be reasoned with, urged the princes to address the rebellion with a firm hand, as the peasants' confusion of spiritual and civil rights threatened to destroy God's institutions of state and church.⁹ The princes acted, and the rebellion ended with the defeat of the peasants.¹⁰ Looking back on the defeat of the peasants in Thuringia—resulting in the execution of Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525)—Luther, in 1526, wrote a book calling for an equitable treatment of the defeated peasants and their allies and discussing whether and when a Christian may engage in military service as a soldier.¹¹

In 1528, Luther conducted a visitation of congregations in Saxony.¹² He found deplorable conditions—a thorough ignorance of basic Christian teachings; pastors “altogether incapable and incompetent to teach;” and the people living “like dumb brutes and irrational hogs” whose expertise was “to abuse all liberty.”¹³ In response to these findings, Luther wrote his Small and Large Catechisms in 1529. In these catechisms, Luther explained the central texts of the Christian faith for children and pastors—the Ten Commandments; the Apostle's Creed; the Lord's Prayer; Baptism; the Lord's Supper; and Confession or the office of the keys.

Matters of the household and political authority were concisely addressed in these catechisms under the Fourth and Sixth Commandments, the First Article of the Creed, the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, the morning and evening prayers, and the table of duties.

In 1530, Luther's associate Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560) penned a statement of faith that was presented to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558) at the diet of Augsburg. It has therefore come to be known as the Augsburg Confession. In 1531, Melanchthon addressed various traditionalist objections to this statement of faith in a writing known as the Apology of the

⁶ AE 31:327; AE 44:15.

⁷ AE 45:17.

⁸ AE 45:75.

⁹ “[B]aptism does not free body and property but souls. And the gospel does not make property common, except in the case of those who wish to do so willingly of their own accord, as the apostles and disciples did in Acts 4:32. But they did not demand that the property of Pilate and Herod be common—as our unreasonable peasants demand—but shared their own property.” SLE 16:73-74; see AE 46:51.

¹⁰ In 1534/35, when confronted with the Anabaptist kingdom under John of Leiden (1509-1536) at Münster, Luther urged that God's Word should be allowed to do its work before the military intervened. Leaders at Münster advocated not only “believer's baptism,” but also “believers' marriage,” declaring all marriages invalid that did not involve two believers. Eventually, the Anabaptists there would advocate polygamy. M. Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), III:35.

¹¹ AE 46:87.

¹² See AE 40:263.

¹³ SC, Pref. 1-3.

Augsburg Confession. Both writings summarized and defended Luther's biblical teachings on government and marriage.

Accordingly, these writings affirmed government and marriage as God's institutions Christians may participate in without sin.¹⁴ As a result, they condemned Anabaptists and traditionalists (e.g., monks) who taught that Christian perfection required a complete withdrawal from these divine institutions.¹⁵ "Christian perfection consists not in the contempt of civil ordinances, but in dispositions of the heart, in great fear of God, in great faith."¹⁶

Expanding on the 1524 treatise on Psalm 127, Luther returned to expounding Psalm 127 by lecturing on the text at Wittenberg University on three days in July 1533.¹⁷ Luther did so in the context of an extended lecture series on Psalms 120 to 134, the psalms bearing the somewhat enigmatic title "songs of ascents." The whole set of lectures on the fifteen songs of ascents was published in 1540.¹⁸ The first English translation of the whole set of lectures was published in 1577.¹⁹

Luther's second exposition of Psalm 127 had an interesting history in Germany during the Third Reich. In 1940, Gerhard Gloege (1901-1970)—then a Lutheran pastor in Erfurt, Germany, who was active in the Confessing Church against Adolf Hitler—published a new German translation of Luther's lectures on Psalm 127.²⁰ Gloege's comments describe God's truly becoming God and man's truly becoming man as the true theme of the lecture, resulting in a grand praise of God and a "defense of man" against man himself.²¹ At the beginning of the modern age, according to Gloege, Luther called on man to halt his self-destructive self-glorification.²²

While Gloege's comments never mentioned Hitler or the Nazis by name, their radical critique of human "self-glorification" and trust in one's well-laid plans was still too much for the tyrants in power. The Nazi government prohibited Gloege from publishing anything following the publication of this translation.²³

This interesting historical anecdote supports those who have argued that Luther was welcome in Nazi Germany only to the extent he could be instrumentalized to lend superficial support to certain core political objectives of the Nazis, such as the mass murder of Jews or a "strong state." Anything beyond that—including Luther's lecture on Psalm 127 (written by Solomon, a Jewish king!) and

¹⁴ AC XVI, 1-2.

¹⁵ AC XVI, 3-4.

¹⁶ Ap. XVI, 61 (9).

¹⁷ WA 40.3:2.

¹⁸ WA 40.3:3-4.

¹⁹ WA 40.3:5. The text 1577 edition is available online (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A06500.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>). In the early 19th century, this edition was reprinted, with updated orthography, under the title *Commentary on the Psalms, Called Psalms of Degrees* (1819).

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Von der Menschwerdung des Menschen: Eine akademische Vorlesung über den 127. Psalm*, tr. Gerhard Gloege (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1940).

²¹ *Menschwerdung*, p. 79.

²² *Menschwerdung*, p. 80.

²³ *Haken am Kreuz? Die Evangelische Predigergemeinde Erfurt 1933 bis 1945* (2016), p. 59. This publication is available online (https://www.haken-am-kreuz.predigerkirche.de/fileadmin/HAK/PDF/Publikation_komplett.pdf).

his corresponding emphasis of the doctrine of justification²⁴ as well as the clear divine limitations he placed on governmental power—was unacceptable.²⁵

Responding to those in his age who sought to blame him for all the sectarians rising up after him, Luther himself showed the absurdity of trying to blame him for those who had little in common with in when it came to doctrine and practice by pointing to 1 John 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us.” As Luther noted, using this logical fallacy—*post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (after this; therefore because of this)—one may as well blame God for the existence of the devil, call Christ a devil because Judas “went out from” him, or reject the bible as a book of heretics.²⁶

The instant translation is the first new English translation since the 1577 translation. It is based on the German text published in the St. Louis Edition.²⁷ The Latin text found in the Weimar Edition has been consulted to achieve greater precision in the English translation.²⁸

Theological Themes and Challenges

For a modern reader interested in spiritual growth, an academic lecture on an Old Testament text does not seem to be a promising format. The expectation is that such a lecture will be dry, replete with abstract discussions of remote historical events, a pedantic analysis of the text, and some novel theories presented by the lecturer to keep audience members awake and engaged.

But as Luther explained in his introduction, he did not aim for novelty. He also did not aim for a merely antiquarian commentary on the text. Rather, he saw this lecture (and his other theological work) as part of the ongoing proclamation of God’s Word in obedience to the first three

²⁴ Representatives of the German Christians—and other seeking to instrumentalize and popularize Luther as the patron saint of a racially pure ethno-church—drew on thinkers from the 18th and 19th century when they embraced an Arianized, manly Jesus but rejected “rabbi” Paul and his “scapegoat and inferiority theology” along with the OT, which they saw as nothing more than “stories of cattle traders and pimps.” Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich*, I:102-105, 113, 704-705 (Frankfurt/Berlin: Ullstein, 1986). Clearly, their “theology” had nothing to do with that of Luther, even though many Lutherans and other Christians at the time embraced variations of it.

²⁵ E.g., J. R. Stephenson, “The Two Governments and the Two Kingdoms in Luther’s Thought,” in Matthew Harrison & John Pless (eds.), *One Lord, Two Hands?* 185-187 (St. Louis, CPH, 2021), where he discussed the origins—and implausibility—of the narrative linking Luther to Hitler in an essay written by Karl Barth (1886-1968). J. Wallmann, “Ein Vermächtnis Kaiser Wilhelms II.: Was hat Walter Grundmanns Eisenacher ‘Entjudungsinstitut’ mit Martin Luther zu tun?,” in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 114 (2017), p. 289, demonstrated that Luther was the *problem* for the “de-Judaizers” among the German Christians—including Walter Grundmann (1906-1976)—not the solution. Their *solution* was provided by Darwinian antisemite Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927).

The Nazi attacks on historic Christian doctrine—including limitations on human power—was the result of the 300 years of man and human reason striving for autonomy *after* Luther’s death. Those limitations proved unacceptable even after the Third Reich. In 1968, Gloege’s translation was republished by K. G. Steck (ed.), *Das Magnifikat—der 127. Psalm* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1968). Steck, also a member of the Confessing Church in the 1940s, criticized Luther for being too pessimistic about the good that was humanly possible in the world and for his pious “slogans” directing the believers to be content with their current situation. Steck, *Magnifikat*, p. 20.

²⁶ WA 38:339-340; see Brecht, *Martin Luther*, III:34.

²⁷ SLE 4:1748-1753, 1912-1973.

²⁸ WA 40.3:9-14, 202-269.

commandments. Luther therefore viewed his academic work as an act of worship and thanksgiving offered to the one true God.²⁹

It is therefore not at all surprising that Luther's lecture is very practical, despite its broad discussion of history and classical philosophy. No doubt, this practical nature enabled Luther's audience—future pastors—to provide the kind of practical pastoral care that previous generations of government officials and married couples had been lacking. Luther's own spiritual interpretation of Psalm 127 from the 1510s, noted above, illustrates this lack of pastoral resources. In fact, as Luther saw it, previous generations had been encouraged to leave the difficult tasks of governing and managing a family for the greener pastures of some type of “spiritual” existence outside of God's institutions.

The new generation of pastors, benefitting from Luther's mature teaching, would be able to comfort and strengthen their flock to do their God-pleasing duties under the cross of the harsh realities of government and family life in a fallen world. To enable them to do so, Luther addressed themes found in the catechisms, in his 1524 exposition of the psalm, and in his other writings to expound the biblical text of the psalm. This resulted in a practical guide for how to apply the biblical teachings found in the catechisms in real life.

Luther's lecture, however, is not another self-help presentation filled with sage spiritual guidance to ensure worldly success or some type of spiritual enlightenment. Rather, Luther's exposition draws the reader into the Christian life as an ongoing spiritual discipline—daily dying and rising with Christ to mortify our sinful nature more and more to glorify God and serve the neighbor despite worldly success *and* failure.³⁰ The text does so by weaving the relevant parts of the catechism—God's commandments and institutions, God's blessings and curses, and the Christian's prayer—into the life of the Christian to show them in action.

Considered systematically, Luther begins at the beginning—the one true God as the Creator and Sustainer of the world. This God created the world, instituted marriage and government, and daily sustains his creation and institutions by freely giving what is necessary for life in this world. These necessary gifts include God's unchanging law written on man's heart as well as reason and all useful arts, including language. Man's appropriate response to God's giving is to glorify God by requesting and receiving these gifts in thankful prayer, to serve the neighbor.

Included in this response is the recognition that God governs his creation according to his pleasure, while man's work is merely God's instrument and tool to convey God's gifts to the neighbor. Man

²⁹ M. Mikoteit, *Theologie und Gebet bei Luther: Untersuchungen zur Psalmenvorlesung 1532-1535* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), p. 64-66, 69, recognized that Luther's lecture on these psalms “above all, functions as a sacrifice of thanksgiving,” involving both his teaching and the students' listening, and that, generally, all theology is prayer for Luther.

³⁰ See LC IV, 65-67: “[A] truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun and ever to be continued. For this must be practised without ceasing, that we ever keep purging away whatever is of the old Adam, and that that which belongs to the new man come forth. But what is the old man? It is that which is born in us from Adam, angry, hateful, envious, unchaste, stingy, lazy, haughty, yea, unbelieving, infected with all vices, and having by nature nothing good in it. Now, when we are come into the kingdom of Christ, these things must daily decrease, that the longer we live we become more gentle, more patient, more meek, and ever withdraw more and more from unbelief, avarice, hatred, envy, haughtiness.”

is therefore not responsible for the ultimate success of his actions in this world. Included in man's response is also the prayerful recognition that, as all things in this world are and remain God's, God is free to take these gifts back when it pleases him—whether it be a spouse, a child, peace, prosperity, health, or fertile soils and abundant crops. Thus, God's gifts never become man's possession.³¹

While this should be of great comfort and relief to man, fallen man rejects this comfort. Having believed and internalized the devil's law and the gospel—"did God really say?" and "you will be like God" (Genesis 3:1-4)—man becomes unable to live out of God's gifts and under God's governance. In fact, this desire to reject God's will and to be like God is the essence of man's fallen nature that will not be removed from human nature while man lives on earth.

As a result of man's fall, then, man wants to believe in himself, living out of his own abilities and by shaping his own destiny in this world. Whatever God gives in the present is taken for granted or even rejected as insufficient—there must be more to life than this! Just look at the great life the people next door enjoy!

Thus, God's gifts are not acknowledged in prayers of thanksgiving as what they objectively are: God's gracious gifts. And if they are acknowledged as God's gifts, then they are separated from God, as if God gave these gifts to man to enable man to do with them as man pleases. Luther illustrated this sinful mindset by likening God to a shipbuilder who, once the ship is built, hands it over to the captain. And then the captain alone decides where to sail and what to use the ship for. "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul," as W. E. Henley (1849-1903) put it in his 1875 *Invictus* poem.

But God cannot be sidelined. Accordingly, he causes failure for man's efforts and plans meant to secure the good times in government and family life without God's involvement. In fact, pursuing the better things they desire, people may lose even the good gifts they already have. Political opposition at home thwarts an ambitious domestic agenda. A civil war breaks out because the people are pushed too far. A foreign adversary, believed to have been overcome years ago, suddenly reemerges as part of a powerful alliance. In the family, a promising career ends prematurely. A critical business deal falls through. The spouse of one's dreams commits adultery. A child dies prematurely.

Some, Luther observed, redouble their efforts to bend reality to their wills when faced with these setbacks—better plans must be devised; more resources must be poured into the pursuit of these plans; any and all opposition must be crushed. Tyranny in state and family is the result—my way

³¹ Analyzing Luther's exposition of Psalm 127, Mikoteit, *Theologie*, p. 216-220, observed that Luther wove several model prayers into his lecture—prayers for God to grant success at the beginning of a task; prayers thanking God when a task has been completed successfully; and prayers thanking God when a gift has been taken back by God. These prayers model what Luther considered good prayers, in that they are short, intense, and call upon God in a concrete situation and need. In his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, Luther noted that, following biblical examples—and unlike the long prayers of the monks—the ancient fathers of the church "praise short fervent prayers where you sigh toward heaven with one or two words, which you can do frequently when you read, write, or perform some other work." SLE 7:505; see AE 21:143.

or the highway—even if everything is destroyed in the process, as illustrated by Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick* fame.

Others, however, give up. Paradise on earth did not materialize at home or in the state. So they just abandon ship and run away from doing their duty in the political realm or in the family. Anarchy in state and family is the result—because there’s just no way, just have it your way—again resulting in death and destruction.

In the process, both the tyrant and the anarchist reach the same conclusion about the existence of God. As their plans fail, they realize that they are not almighty gods themselves. As their noble efforts are not duly recognized and rewarded, it seems to them that there is no god at all. Blind fate, chance, and fortune appear rule it all.

At times, however, wise human planning leads to the desired results, and brute force or cunning ruthlessness carries the day, while those who trust in God perish in poverty and failure. This provides the experiential confirmation of the promise made by the devil’s gospel in paradise—you will be like God. Trust in the devil, and he will give you your heart’s desire.

As Luther recognized, letting the godless succeed is the worst punishment God can inflict on them. Instead of calling them to repentance by derailing their godless plans, allowing them to succeed in their self-reliant life only confirms them—and those who are persuaded to follow their example—in their godlessness.

Without God’s Word, life in this world is extremely confusing. The good plans of good people fail; the evil plans of evil people succeed; the joint efforts of a strong alliance fail; the plans of an individual come to pass—seemingly without rhyme or reason, without God’s active involvement in the affairs of this life.

That is why only those few who are reborn by the Holy Spirit find God and the golden middle road of life between belief in self and total despair, between tyranny and anarchy. Those few reject the law and gospel of the devil engrained deeply in their hearts and instead embrace the law and gospel of the one true God revealed in his biblical Word. By doing so, they offer to God the chief glory and worship that is his due—faith in Christ. And while they daily struggle against their sinful nature’s desire to control their lives, they live in trust in God as the chief Governor of the world and joyfully commend *all things* to his wise ordering and directing in prayer. They further glorify God by acknowledging his gifts in prayers of thanksgiving. They are patient, content with however much or little God provides in the present time. They gratefully relinquish his gifts when God takes them back, praising him even as he does so, because they cling to the Creator, not his gifts.

They do what they can to carry out God will in government and family. Using the gifts God gives them—including their reason, language, skills, financial means, and physical strength—they engage in careful planning, sound resource management, and hard labor in service to their neighbors according to God’s will. But they know that the success of all their well-intentioned efforts is not theirs to bring about.

This is also why they engage in compromise and overlook the faults of others in love and equity to maintain concord in state and family. They do not attempt to implement by force their (or God’s)

agenda with impossible rigid perfection because they recognize that this type of tyranny must lead to death and destruction in a fallen world.

When the fallen world's harsh realities and misfortunes strike and threaten to obscure the reality of God's blessings and institutions, they turn to God's Word to be reassured that their life and work as government officials and members of the family—no matter how insignificant in itself—has deep meaning because it pleases God and is daily sustained by him. They *enjoy* God's countless good gifts. Their heart is at peace and at rest in the true God by faith, while their bodies and minds are hard at work in love for their neighbor. As Luther put it, they sleep while they work. The active and passive life takes place in the one person of the believer at the same time.

The Christian life in the tangible world as outlined above based on Luther's lecture on Psalm 127 has its analogue in the Christian life in the spiritual world. These are the two sides of a single coin—the First Commandment—applied to what Luther termed the two kingdoms of God, the world of faith and the world of love.³² To have only one Creator means to rely on the Father's created gifts in thanksgiving, to acknowledge and glorify him as the supreme Governor of the world, and to use these gifts according to Father's will for the good of the neighbor. To have only one Redeemer and Sanctifier means to rely on the spiritual gift of Christ's perfect righteousness for salvation and to acknowledge and glorify him as the one Redeemer and Sanctifier. It also means to lead a life that follows Christ's example of humble, self-sacrificial service of the neighbor in this world.

The Christian life is both rest and activity. True faith is always at rest in the triune God—the goodness of the Creator, the righteousness of the Redeemer, and the holiness of the Sanctifier. But love—the inevitable fruit of true faith—is ever active to serve the neighbor with self-sacrificial care with the bodily and spiritual gifts God richly supplies. As Luther emphasized, it is not wrong to do good works or to devise sound plans. In fact, God requires good works and sound plans in service of the neighbor! But just as the First Commandment stands firm against trusting in those works for eternal salvation, it also condemns trusting in those plans for worldly success.

Accordingly, faith is a mere instrument of God's saving action in Christ, not what brings it about (efficient cause) or earns it (meritorious cause)—God saves through faith in Christ, not because of faith. Similarly, our works are mere instruments of God's continuous work of sustaining his creation, not what brings it about (efficient cause) or earns it (meritorious cause)—God sustains through our work, not because of our work. More will be said about these and other "causes" below.

Luther's spiritual analysis of the condition of fallen man is strikingly contemporary. If anything, his text has gained relevance in the past half-millennium. High school graduation speeches are full of promises that "you can be or do anything." People are encouraged to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps instead of relying on "government handouts."

The Western economic model of consumerism is wholly premised on the notion that your current life is in dire need of improvement—and that new widget X or surgery Y is just what you need to

³² E.g., AE 45:105.

make this happen. To function as a key engine of seemingly perpetual economic growth, consumerism requires a constant state of envy of the proverbial Joneses and permanent dissatisfaction with what one has, even among children—generated by advertisements now constantly before us on every cellphone screen.³³

What is more, self-help books and videos have just the right plan to lead you to the good and successful life. Some plans demand little. Other plans demand everything. But they all make the same promise—follow plan X and good thing Y will surely happen. Or in biblical terms, “you will be like God.”

Christian books often seem no different from secular books in this regard. The only difference is that these Christian books draw their sure-fire plan from the bible or some other religious authority: If you live by biblical principles, you will succeed in this life and finally get to be the captain of your soul! Especially when you sprinkle the pixie dust of “faith” on your holy efforts—then God cannot help but bless you with what you so richly deserve! God helps those who help themselves.

The successes promised by these materials can be personal in nature—a successful career, health, prosperity, or a family wholly dedicated to the Lord and unfazed by the turmoil in a decaying world. But the promised successes can be much more ambitious—lives lived in harmony with nature and all of humanity or the restoration of an undefeatable Christian nation!

Ceaseless cares, concerns, and anxieties are the well-deserved tormentors of those who embark on this faithless—and therefore restless—way of life, requiring the use of (legal and illegal) drugs to get *some* rest and to make it through life without going completely insane. Some of those who live like this will succeed with seeming ease. Others will become tyrants, insisting on exact compliance with their plan and using violence against their adversaries when their plans are questioned. Others still will be anarchists, adopting a live-and-let-live philosophy.

Again, there is nothing wrong with coming up with a sound plan for one’s personal life, for the family, or for government work. There is nothing wrong with seeking sound advice from experienced people. There is also nothing wrong with working hard at establishing wholesome family life, raising one’s children in the faith, striving to become a virtuous citizen and skilled public servant, or serving one’s employees diligently. In fact, God commands these good works in his Ten Commandments and freely gives us his good gifts to enable us to do so. But God strictly prohibits trust in our efforts and abilities, as he wants us to trust in him as the one who freely grants success to our plans, works, and efforts. The First Commandment, then, marks the bright line between Christianity and “prosperity theology” of every description.

While Luther’s exposition focused on our life in state and family, he did discuss how he went about reforming the church by trusting in God and his Word alone. It is therefore evident that his considerations apply directly to the church, understood as a sphere of human action in this world. While the church is to live and act out of God’s good gifts and promises—both spiritually and materially—there is nothing wrong with establishing a sound plan to catechize the young, to evangelize the neighborhood, or to balance the books. There is nothing wrong with working hard

³³ K. Higgs, *How the World Embraced Consumerism*, BBC.com (Jan. 20, 2021).

on becoming good at preaching or pastoral care as a pastor. There is nothing wrong with diligently studying God’s Word and the catechism as a layperson and sharing God’s Word with those willing to hear it. In fact, God commands these good works and provides the means to carry them out. But what if our good efforts do not produce the desired results such as a growing congregation or an exciting spiritual life? Then there arises the temptation to break the First Commandment by taking matters into one’s own hands, to manufacture success by copying the ways of the successful, even if it violates Christian doctrine or Christian love.

Given that the sinful nature is still active in the Christian, living according to the First Commandment is evidently a constant struggle. This is why Luther points out that the Christian life is not learned by reading books about it. It is learned by living it, by experiencing God’s wrath and goodness in his Word and in daily life. This is the real school of the Holy Spirit. It is a daily Baptism that glorifies God.

Analyzing State and Household Management with Aristotle and Luther—the Four Causes

Those familiar with Luther’s sustained attacks on philosophy in general, and Aristotle (382-322 B.C.) in particular, may be surprised to read in this lecture (and elsewhere) that Luther has a good amount of praise for Aristotle and other philosophers and statesmen from classical antiquity, such as Cicero (106-43 B.C.) and Demosthenes (384-322 B.C.). But Luther carefully distinguished between man’s relation to God—where Aristotle and his colleagues have nothing to offer—and man’s relation to fellow man, where political and ethical treatises of Aristotle and other ancient thinkers such as Cicero could be read with great benefit.³⁴

In fact, in addition to Scripture and classical philosophers, Luther’s lecture on Psalm 127 cited several poets from the classical period and refers to secular history books. Luther did so to tap into their experiential wisdom and best practices for governing states and managing the household, to be sure. But Luther also used these citations to show the commonality in the human experience of life in this world. Good people fail and are killed. Bad people prosper and are praised. Life is frustrating, hard, and confusing. Blind fate, fortune, and chance seem to be the only constant factors in this life, for everybody from the top to the bottom of society. Thus, there is truth to be found in those non-Christian writers, when they are read in light of God’s Word.

Aristotle is particularly important in Luther’s exposition of Psalm 127 because Luther—familiar with Aristotle from his own academic studies and teaching³⁵—used the analytical method devised by Aristotle to arrive at complete knowledge of why a particular entity comes into existence, the “four causes.”³⁶ These four causes provide a useful analytical framework to compare the various

³⁴ Compare, e.g., AE 31:12-13 and AE 54:243.

³⁵ As all philosophy students of his time, Luther had studied Aristotle intensely for both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees. To obtain his bachelor’s, Luther’s studies focused on Aristotelian logic, while many of Aristotle’s other writings—including the *Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Economics*—followed before Luther received his master’s degree. M. Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), I:32-33. While working on his first theological bachelor’s degree at Erfurt, Luther was transferred to the university of Wittenberg to lecture on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* in 1508/09. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, I:92.

³⁶ E.g., Aristotle, *Physics* III, 3, 7; see also *Posterior Analytics* I, 2; II, 1; *Metaphysics* V, 2. On the origin, meaning, and function of the four causes in Aristotle see N. Stein, *Causality and Causal Explanation in Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2023).

conceptions of what household management and government are. As such, the framework is useful to distinguish Luther's biblical vision of life in God's worldly institutions of house and state from the ultimately secular, atheistic visions of this life that existed in classical antiquity and that—beginning with the rise of absolutism in the early 17th century that subordinated everything (including God) to the needs of the state—have come to dominate Western societies once more.

In the language of the medieval tradition, Aristotle distinguishes between four causes—the “material cause,” the “formal cause,” the “efficient cause,” and the “final cause.” Generally speaking, the material cause is the matter out of which the intended final product consists—e.g., timber and stones in the case of a house. The formal cause is that principle according to which the material is formed into the intended product—e.g., the plan of the architect for a house. The efficient cause is what imposes the form on the matter to produce what is intended—e.g., the builder of the house. The final cause is the end product's purpose—e.g., protection from the elements.

Applying these causes to the realm of the state, Luther explained that the material cause is the citizens, the formal cause is the laws and rulers of a given state. According to Luther, Solomon in Psalm 127 had no need to expound on these two, as philosophy and reason are quite capable of grasping these two causes. In fact, Luther observed, laws and rulers are at times better among the pagans than among the people of God.

But Solomon and the philosophical tradition sharply diverge when it comes to the main causes—the efficient cause and the final cause. Philosophy posits the wise man as the efficient cause and peace and prosperity in this life as the purposes of the state. By contrast, Solomon posits God as the efficient cause and God's glory as the final cause. The state—and the household management—is not simply a thing of this world because it has a “transcendent” origin and purpose.

God created the state and sustains every state. God's glory is the purpose of the state because, as Luther observed, the inner-worldly purposes identified by philosophy (peace, prosperity, etc.) are not always realized.

God is glorified when he is thanked and praised for the worldly benefits of peace and prosperity that God gives and preserves through the government. *This glory* is the ultimate, transcendent purpose of God's institution of household management and the state.³⁷ The institutions of the state and the household can therefore only realize their God-given ultimate purpose by means of the third institution, the church, by which God calls sinners to repentance and faith—faith that, in prayer, readily praises God as the Giver of all good things, both spiritual and physical, temporal and eternal.³⁸

Put differently, Luther does not eliminate the role of the wise in governing the state and managing the household, as he is not advocating for some kind of irrationalism in the administration of this

³⁷ See Mikoteit, *Theologie*, p. 215.

³⁸ Luther distinguished the government, household management, and the church as the three “hierarchies” or “holy orders” God instituted soon after creating man. AE 1:103-104. These three orders are permanent and created for mutual interaction and support. AE 41:177. As Luther noted, the fact that God instituted the church before the other two institutions points to eternal, spiritual life as man's ultimate purpose beyond this earthly life. AE 1:104.

world. But the wise are demoted from efficient cause to mere instrumental cause, from primary to secondary cause. In God’s grand scheme of things, they are merely God’s instruments and vessels to convey his gifts to the neighbor according to God’s will.

Similarly, worldly peace and prosperity are not disregarded as unimportant in some purely “spiritual” ideal of life on earth. Rather, they are reframed. They are turned from ultimate, yet elusive goals of human statecraft or managerial skills into good gifts God freely gives (and takes!) to bring his institutions to their ultimate purpose—God’s own glory expressed in prayers of thanksgiving and praise addressing him as the Creator and Governor of the world.

To make a broader point, the mature Luther did not discard the philosophical tradition and its experience-based reflection on best practices for government and household management. Rather, he reappropriated it and, recognizing the deficiencies of fallen reason, employed the tradition in the context of an overarching biblical worldview based on God’s constant and active presence in the real world. Unlike in the medieval synthesis of theology and philosophy, the philosophical tradition no longer defines man’s relationship to God in ethical or political categories. Rather, this relationship is defined by faith in—or by the rejection of—the alien righteousness of Christ. As a result, the rich political and ethical reflection found in the philosophical tradition is freed from being stretched beyond its inherent limitations and once more put to beneficial use where it belongs, our life of service to our neighbors in this world.³⁹

Luther encapsulated this important distinction when he, in his 1531 Galatians lecture, commented on Galatians 3:10⁴⁰ as follows:

In moral philosophy, “doing” (*facere*) [a good work] requires a good will and right reason concerning doing the work (*operari*). And this is as far as philosophers go. This is why theologians say that moral philosophy does not have God as its object and final cause. For Aristotle—or a Sadducee or a good citizen—calls it right reason and a good will when he seeks the common good of the state, a tranquil life, and honesty.

A philosopher or lawgiver does not ascend any higher. Unlike a sophist or monk, he does not intend to obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through right reason etc. This is why a pagan philosopher is far better than such a hypocrite because he remains within his limits and only aims at an honest life and public tranquility without mixing human and divine things. By contrast, a sophist imagines that God considers his good intention and his works. By doing so, he mixes human and divine things, stains the name of God, and draws this imagination from moral philosophy, abusing the latter far worse than a pagan.⁴¹

³⁹ See J. D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (2014), p. 65-103, where he summarized the extensive appropriation of classical moral philosophy—including habituation and character formation—in the Lutheran Confessions’ discussion of (the Christian’s) life in this world.

⁴⁰ “For as many as are of the works of the law (*ex operibus legis*) are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them (*ut faciat ea*).’”

⁴¹ SLE 9:346; see AE 26:262; WA 40.1:410-411.

This distinction between faith and this life, between theology and moral philosophy is a key aspect of Luther's teaching on the "two kingdoms"—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.⁴²

As indicated, Aristotle's four-cause scheme as applied by Luther is a useful analytical tool to determine whether a given political (or household) philosophy accords with Solomon's teachings in Psalm 127. In the decades following Luther's death, political philosophy *resumed* its course independent from the biblical worldview outlined by Luther based on Solomon's teachings.⁴³ Over time, government (and household management) became once more completely inner-worldly affairs—wise framers established the states, or states somehow emerged from man's inherent social nature; wise men governed the states for purely inner-worldly purposes, such as prosperity, peace, or some vague "public good." And the longer the more, the ever-changing precepts of fallen reason displaced God's unchanging law as the formal cause of the states (and households).

A prominent role in this process of establishing politics (and economics) as an autonomous human endeavor played Luther's contemporary, the Italian humanist Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527).⁴⁴ He and his followers developed the notion of the *raison d'état*—the "national interest"—as the guiding principle for the absolutist governments that, as they developed in the 17th and 18th centuries, became uncoupled from theological or moral constraints. But, as the U.S. Constitution shows, a-theological and a-moral principles of governance can also be realized in a liberal, Enlightenment-based political order—pitting ambition against ambition to protect a maximum of individual liberty.⁴⁵ The biblical distinction of God's two kingdoms is thereby turned into "the separation of church and state."

In the process, the God revealed in Scripture—actively and presently engaged in the preservation and government of his creation through human activity according to his will for his glory—is more and more displaced from history and life in this world.⁴⁶ Some Enlightenment thinkers rejected what is miraculous and prophetic in the Scriptures and reduced Jesus to a teacher of morals. Others subjected the events recorded in Scripture—including Christ's resurrection from the dead—to a vigorous materialist or rationalist critique. Others still rejected the revealed God as a superstition from humanity's collective infancy and critically reduced God to the kind of shipbuilder Luther

⁴² See, e.g., AE 12:238-239; AE 46:88.

⁴³ See, e.g., H. Dreitzel, *Protestantischer Aristotelismus und absoluter Staat* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1970), p. 80-81, 179-183.

⁴⁴ P. J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2018), p. 24-25, 100-103; Dreitzel, *Politischer Aristotelismus* 147-149; F. Meinecke, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1925). See W. Sommer, *Gottesfurcht und Fürstenherrschaft: Studien zum Obrigkeitsverständnis Johann Arndts und lutherischer Hofprediger zur Zeit der altprotestantischen Orthodoxie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), p. 296-306, for a summary of a 1655 sermon by a Lutheran court preacher—Joachim Lütkemann (1608-1655), *Regenten-Predigt so in Wulfenbuettel . . . Anno 1655 gehalten worden* (1667)—against the oppressive, greedy, egotistical, aggressive statism arising out of Machiavelli's autonomous political technology.

⁴⁵ Deneen, *Liberalism*, p. 100-101.

⁴⁶ J. Stewart, *An Introduction to Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Issue of Religious Content in the Enlightenment and Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2022), p. 30-48, where he discussed Voltaire, S. Reimarus, and G. E. Lessing. The ancient philosophy of skepticism reemerged in the 16th century and was deployed by Protestants and Catholics to undermine the position of the opponents, modern biblical criticism emerging in the process during the 17th century. R. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, rev. and expanded ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), p. 219-238, where he discussed primarily I. La Peyrère (1596-1676) and his denial of a Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and his claim of pre-Adamite humans.

discussed in his lectures on Psalm 127: God builds the ships of our lives and hands them off to us, allowing us govern ourselves according to our inherent sense of what is right.⁴⁷

In response to the Enlightenment, Romantic thinkers essentially accepted that the *outward* world and history are no more than whatever an empirical investigation yields. To preserve some type of religion or even Christianity, they posited that true knowledge of God was an immediate experience of faith. Or that religion was the heart's intuition of the universe and feeling of absolute dependency, as opposed to thinking (metaphysics) and acting (morals). Religion was thus located in the heart,⁴⁸ thereby seemingly rendering it impervious to the empiricist criticism of religion presented by the Enlightenment.⁴⁹ At least until the advent of modern psychology in the second half of the 19th century. As a result, the separation of church and state is accompanied by the separation of God from history and the external life in this world.⁵⁰

This critical separation of God from history had a particularly devastating impact on the standing of the Old Testament—a record of God's involvement in history filled with practical wisdom for life in this world according to God's holy will, in addition to the comforting promises of the divine-human Savior—in the church. As seen, Luther regarded King Solomon's political "philosophy" to be the best because it brought together the Holy Spirit's teaching and the king's practical governing experience. For Luther, the fact that it was set forth in the Old Testament did not diminish the divine excellence of the teaching.

However, in the process of subjecting Scripture to rationalist criticism, some critics came to reject the Old Testament as a whole. Others eliminated its authority for the present by viewing it as

⁴⁷ This mindset, already present in Luther's day, is generally known as Deism. Like the other attempts to salvage some type of religion from Enlightenment criticism, Deism was a response to the critical empiricism of the Enlightenment that reduced religion—and everything else—to what seemed verifiable by scientific experimentation: A Superior Intelligence had created the world and imbued it with empirically discernible rules and laws but did not interfere in the worldly processes occurring according to these rules. "The watchmaker analogy seemed persuasive." Stewart, *Introduction*, p. 23-30.

⁴⁸ In the process, religion became the domain of women. Especially with the rise of social Darwinism in the late 19th century, men—now earning their living in the autonomous world of unregulated capitalism—were regarded as semi-human brutes who lacked an inherent moral compass, were incapable of being good fathers and religious leaders, and needed to be kept in check by women, perceived to be of superior morality. N. Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2023), p. 87-209; D. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 2017), p. 252-259.

⁴⁹ Stewart, *Introduction*, p. 79-105. In the category of feelings, even determined historical critics of the OT could appreciate the psalms as expressions of genuine, living religion, while myths and dogmas were viewed as expressions of religious petrification. H. Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, tr. Leo G. Perdue (Atlanta: SBL, 2010), IV:240.

⁵⁰ A key step in this process of "separation"—in view of the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century—occurred in the late 19th century when influential scholars concluded that Luther was the originator of the autonomy of the secular sphere, including state and economy. W. J. Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 26-31. But, as noted, this conclusion was the product of developments seeking ever greater autonomy for human action beginning in the late Middle Ages and, more immediately, in the 16th and 17th centuries.

accommodating humanity's infancy which rendered it unsuitable for those who had progressed to the lofty heights of rational self-enlightenment—modern humanity.⁵¹

God, however, will not be written out of his creation by the stroke of a human pen. God remains actively present in human lives and the events of this world. God resists and frustrates man's striving for godlike sovereignty and autonomy by causing ceaseless cares and worries but also the hardening of irreconcilable social conflicts.

Some will be called by the Holy Spirit out of this chaos to a life that glorifies God and serves the neighbor in this world, even in the midst of outward and material failure. It is God's gift that they, even while they engage in this active life, will be at rest in God.

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⁵¹ Reventlow, *History*, IV:171. The OT was therefore seen as revealing a different God and teaching a different religion from the NT. For instance, G. F. W. Hegel (1770-1831) viewed the Old Testament's "idea" of God as "abstract" and therefore inferior to that of Christianity revealed in the NT. Stewart, *Introduction*, p. 138. Therefore, some thinkers concluded in the wake of the Enlightenment that the Old Testament—with its focus on history, cosmology, and the law that increasingly seemed "scientifically" untenable—should be removed from the Christian Bible to allow for a complete focus on Christ the Redeemer and eliminate difficult apologetic questions raised by the people. See, e.g., R. H. Bell, *Theology of Wagner's Ring Cycle* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020), I:146-147; R. H. Bell, *Wagner's Parsifal* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), p. 39; A. von Harnack, *Marcion*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924), p. 215-223, where he praised Schleiermacher and Hegel for agreeing with the Gnostic thinker Marcion and regarding the OT as a book that ought to be excluded from the Christian canon. Some even blamed the apostle Paul for falsifying the message of Jesus by forcing the OT upon the followers of Jesus, including the "Jewish" concept of atonement. Bell, *Theology*, I:179-180; P. de Lagarde, *Deutsche Schriften*, 5th ed. (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1920), p. 61-62. Once the "mythical" OT was removed, it could be replaced by other, seemingly more suitable mythical prefaces to the NT. Bell, *Theology* I:164-167, 179. The ground for the German Christians had been prepared by these developments that are so clearly counter to everything Luther taught, as indicated above.

DR. LUTHER'S PREFACE ON THE FIFTEEN PSALMS OF ASCENT

When beginning my lectures on Scripture, I have often indicated the purpose of our expositions of Holy Scripture. We do not desire to present some novelties or something unknown to others. Our theology has been published in Latin and in German so widely that it appears exhortations are more necessary than doctrine.⁵² Rather, the diligent preaching of God's Word is the proper worship of the New Testament.⁵³ This worship is much more pleasing to God, much holier, and better than all the worship services and sacrifices of the Old Testament. That is why the holy prophets—even while the law was still in effect—cast aside the burnt offerings and other sacrifices of the Old Testament, while praising the sacrifice of praise (e.g., Isaiah 43:21-24; Hebrews 10:5-6; 13:15).⁵⁴ But we must render this worship of the New Testament with even greater zeal and diligence because divine wisdom has once again risen over us and now shines as the midday sun after we had lived in such great darkness.

Accordingly, people in the past considered listening to a sermon to be something akin to the service rendered by a serf, and they rendered this service like they performed other labors. But now we must think about it very differently—namely, those who teach, read, write, and hear the holy things are true priests of God who render him the honor he deserves and that is pleasing to him. This should motivate us to deal with God's Word constantly. But it is also true that we are unable to have such a complete knowledge of the holy things that it would be unnecessary for us to learn, experience, and be strengthened in the same anew daily due to the devil's constant temptations by which he plagues us. Accordingly, as there is always occasion to stumble, we must never cease to contemplate God's Word for our own edification and for that of the church. Nothing is as pernicious as what is done by many people today—they have obtained a little knowledge of this divine wisdom and right away think that they have mastered it. But this wisdom does not consist in being able to talk about it well, but in applying it and in experiencing it in daily life, where it is not human reason but the Holy Spirit who leads and governs us. This is why those who are satisfied by mere knowledge of these things are completely wrong, because this knowledge cannot be sufficient without its application. In the Old Testament, God prescribed no more than the holy Ten Commandments for the people to learn and practice. But who even among the saints was able to boast that he had obtained the wisdom that the Holy Spirit presented in the Ten Commandments?⁵⁵

⁵² "Many a person listens to sermons for three, four years but does not learn enough to give a single answer concerning the faith, as I experience daily. Indeed, enough has been written in books, but not everything has been driven home to the hearts." SLE 10:233; see AE 53:67.

⁵³ "Therefore this is the simple meaning of the [third] commandment: since holidays are observed anyhow, such observance should be devoted to hearing God's Word, so that the special function of this day should be the ministry of the Word for the young and the mass of poor people." LC I, 86.

⁵⁴ The Second Commandment commands the proper use, or hallowing, of God's name which takes place "when we teach properly; again, when we call on his name in time of need, or praise and thank him in time of prosperity, etc." LC I, 64. The Creed answers these questions: "What kind of a person is God? What does He do? How can we praise, or portray and describe Him, that He may be known? Now, that is taught in this and in the following article, so that the Creed is nothing else than the answer and confession of Christians arranged with respect to the First Commandment." LC II, 10.

⁵⁵ "For it will be a long time before they will produce a doctrine or estates equal to the Ten Commandments, because they are so high that no one can attain to them by human power; and whoever does attain to them is a heavenly, angelic man, far above all holiness of the world." LC I, 317.

And we to whom all of Scripture has been presented in the New Testament are to be so bold as to boast that we have come to know it all?⁵⁶

This is why we should put off this self-love and humble ourselves before the Holy Spirit and confess that this wisdom is infinite and cannot be exhausted even if we spent our entire life learning Scripture. Although we have some knowledge by God's grace, we are daily inundated by clouds of temptations. That is why we must always return to this fountain, indeed, this fire, so that we may again become warm, lest we follow either Satan or our flesh, thereby destroying the firstfruits of the Spirit. In the schools, they used to call this *acedia*, *satiety*, which really means growing tired of the Word, which is caused by the arrogance of thinking that we know the Word well, which is quite common among the people today.⁵⁷ Moses commands against this vice that the law is to be sharpened among the descendants, that is, it is to be urged and practiced daily (Deuteronomy 6:7). When we do so, what was previously hidden from us will shine forth as something new; what we previously neglected as something insipid will begin to delight us.

This is another reason why we will expound the psalms—to drive out the devilish *satiety* and to strengthen and nourish, as it were, the spirit by using the holy things, although the most important motivation is knowing for certain that God is well pleased by this service of dealing with his Word by teaching it, reading it, writing it, hearing it, etc. God's pleasure alone should cause us to urge God's Word without ceasing—because what is dealing with God's Word other than constantly offering sacrifices, constantly serving God, constantly practicing the fulfillment of the First, Second, and Third Commandments? Sadly, exceedingly great is the number of those who constantly blaspheme God, either by teaching as God's Word things not taught by God or by persecuting the true doctrine by the sword. This is why it is highly necessary that we, who are far fewer in number, serve and praise our God who has given us life on earth and has promised us life in heaven. There is also the risk of being overcome by apathy and *satiety* as sated people without even realizing it, as *satiety* is followed by contempt. But God punishes contempt by completely taking the Word away. The papacy is a fitting example of this for all times where we see that this is what happened.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ “For inasmuch as God Himself is not ashamed to teach these things daily, as knowing nothing better to teach, and always keeps teaching the same thing, and does not take up anything new or different, and all the saints know nothing better or different to learn, and cannot finish learning this, are we not the finest of all fellows to imagine, if we have once read or heard it, that we know it all, and have no further need to read and learn, but can finish learning in one hour what God Himself cannot finish teaching, although He is engaged in teaching it from the beginning to the end of the world, and all prophets, together with all saints, have been occupied with learning it, and have ever remained pupils, and must continue to be such?” LC, Longer Pref. 16.

⁵⁷ “To [our negligence and laziness] there is added the shameful vice and secret infection of security and *satiety*, that is, that many regard the Catechism as a poor, mean teaching, which they can read through at one time, and then immediately know it, throw the book into a corner, and be ashamed, as it were, to read in it again.” LC, Longer Pref. 5.

⁵⁸ “[Y]ou should know that God's word and grace is a passing downpour that does not return where it has once been. It has been among the Jews but gone is gone; they now have nothing. Paul brought it to Greece; gone is gone there as well; now they have the Turk. Rom and the Latin lands have also had it; gone is gone; now they have the pope. And you Germans should not think that you will have it forever. Because you are ungrateful and despise it, God's word and grace will not remain among you. Therefore, grasp and seize it whoever can grasp and seize. Lazy hands must have an evil year.” SLE 10:464; see AE 45: 352-353.

I have laid out these reasons why I have undertaken this exposition of the songs of ascent—to dedicate this time to our Redeemer and to offer sacrifices to him, so that we may rightly fulfill the First, Second, and Third Commandments by preaching about the mercy of God, while the rest of the world sins against these commandments by blaspheming God. And I have gladly exhorted you concerning apathy and satiety. If anything poses a danger to our doctrine, it is this vice. Although the heretics and sects do great damage, they force us to study Scripture diligently. But this peril—satiety of the Word—arises in ourselves. Its danger increases to the extent we are not able to perceive it. But the devil is assured of victory, when we snore and have begun to be secure and sated.

The Title of the Songs of Ascents

The first question here is concerning the title of these fifteen psalms—why are they called “songs of steps” or, as others translate the Hebrew, “songs of ascents”? The interpreters have different opinions, but it is not worth the effort to recite all of them here. Lyra states that they have this title because the Levites or priests chanted them when ascending the steps or on the steps of the temple.⁵⁹ It is written in the history of the kings that steps were used to ascend to the temple (1 Kings 6:8). Lyra then imagines that there were fifteen steps and that a different psalm was chanted on each step. I do not care if this was so, but it does not seem to be true. But it is undeniable that the Hebrew word used here means step or ascent. This is why I, as far as possible, remain with the simple meaning, thinking that these psalms have this name because they used to be chanted by the Levites or priests on steps or on some elevated location. This is just like in church today, where he who publicly chants or preaches usually does so from an elevated or recognizable location, where he can easily be seen and heard by all. I think that the psalms were not sung by the whole crowd gathered in the temple or even the entire choir. Rather, certain people, designated to chant before the others, chanted (or at least began) these psalms from an elevated location. There are other psalms that have a Hebrew word in its title that may mean “of the precentor” or “of the lead singer” (e.g., Psalm 4:1), as we have explained elsewhere.⁶⁰ But who is able to know all the customs of the Hebrews, especially since now so much time has passed while they have not been used and have therefore been forgotten?

Given the great number of psalms that, while the law was still in force, were chanted during a variety of ceremonies—depending on the season and the place or depending on what had become customary—it is enough that we state that the title does not concern some doctrine but only some external custom of the singers, whatever the ceremony might have been. We chant the psalms in school. Some of the boys chant the first verses, the minister chants the prayers. In the morning, there are lessons from the epistles of Paul or the gospel, in the evening the psalms are read. The reason is that which is done publicly cannot be done without ceremonies. In the same way, everything was handled in an orderly manner and with certain ceremonies among the Hebrews. There were 24 orders of priests (1 Chronicles 25:3). It is therefore possible that they at times sang in a choir without the people, at other times individual priests sang, while they at other times still

⁵⁹ On Lyra see AE 45:320-21 with n.12.

⁶⁰ AE 12:199-200 (on Psalm 45:1). Before starting his lectures on the songs of ascents in the fall of 1532, Luther had lectured on Psalm 45. WA 40.3:1.

sang responsively, so that the people added their song. But we cannot know this for certain, now that everything has fallen by the wayside. But because this add little to our understanding of the psalms, I think that we can bear it with an even mind that these things cannot be known fully.

This is also why I will not discuss why there are fifteen psalms of ascents and why these psalms—and not other psalms—have this title. No matter how much effort we put into answering these questions, any answer will remain uncertain. And as this issue is of no particular benefit, trying to answer it would be laboring in vain. But I wanted to note that some interpret the meaning of “psalms of ascents” that it means “psalms of completions,” suggesting that these psalms would be chanted at the end when the people were to be dismissed and the sacred action was completed. And indeed, because these psalms are short and always present important teachings, they are suitable for the end. But here too I leave the last word to the Hebrews.

PSALM 127

The Writer and Subject Matter of Psalm 127

This psalm's title indicates that it was written by Solomon. And it is indeed likely that Solomon was the author of this psalm because we read in all of Solomon's books that he truly was a teacher of political affairs. Accordingly, he does not teach the chief article of his father David, justification or concerning Christ, the heir and descendent of David. Solomon, rather, discusses what he had to deal with and what God had given him to do—political affairs. But he does this in a way no philosopher has ever taught about political affairs, because he transfers all political affairs to faith. In this way, he relates everything that is undertaken in state (*politia*) and household management (*oconomia*) to God's directing. Other thinkers do not do so, whether they are philosophers or orators. The latter, to be sure, make laws and prescribe the way in which the state may be administered rightly and in which the household may be governed well.⁶¹ But they do not know where to seek success so that good plans may also come to pass. They certainly know the material and formal causes of state and household management. But they do not know their final and efficient causes. Put differently, they do not know where state and household management come from, by whom they are preserved, or what their purpose is.⁶²

Therefore, even though Aristotle wrote in his books excellently about morals and political affairs, just like Xenophon, Plato, Cicero, and others wrote excellently about the state, they do not reach the true efficient and final causes. They think that the best and principal final cause is political peace, an honorable life, fame, etc.⁶³ They posit a wise man or a prudent ruler as the efficient cause, or, as they say, a good man and good citizen.⁶⁴ But we will hear that Solomon speaks very differently and quite properly about these causes. The philosophers, therefore, are right about the formal cause, how the state is to be governed,⁶⁵ that one must follow at times commutative justice

⁶¹ “[T]he function of political science is both to constitute a city in the beginning and also when it has come into being to make a right use of it. It is clear, therefore, that it must be the function of the economic science too both to found a household and also to make use of it.” Pseudo-Aristotle, *Economics* I, 1 (tr. E. S. Foster).

⁶² “[W]hat kind of wisdom and knowledge is it that does not understand the final and efficient cause? For knowing the form and shape of a thing is not different than a cow who knows its barn but, as the German proverb says, gapes at the gate. This is also why this makes clear what a horrible fall original sin is, by which we have lost this knowledge that we are unable to know our beginning and our end. . . . This is why we should learn that the true wisdom is found in Holy Scripture and in God's word. For it teaches not only concerning the matter and form of the entire creation, but also the efficient and final cause—who created it and the purpose it was created for. If we do not know these two causes, our wisdom is not much better than that of the irrational beasts. They too can hear and see, but they do not know their beginning and end.” SLE 1:151-152; see AE 1:124-125; “Kuh ## 86, 632,” K. F. W. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon: Ein Hausschatz für das deutsche Volk* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1873), III:1668, 1692.

⁶³ “The good life then is the chief aim of society, both collectively for all its members and individually; but they also come together and maintain the political partnership for the sake of life merely, for doubtless there is some element of value contained even in the mere state of being alive, provided that there is not too great an excess on the side of the hardships of life.” Aristotle, *Politics* III, 6 (tr. H. Rackham).

⁶⁴ “Therefore the impulse to form a partnership of this kind is present in all men by nature; but the man who first united people in such a partnership was the greatest of benefactors. For as man is the best of the animals when perfected, so he is the worst of all when sundered from law and justice.” Aristotle, *Politics* I, 2.

⁶⁵ “[A] constitution is a form of organization of the inhabitants of a state.” Aristotle, *Politics* III, 1.

and at times distributive justice—that according to the latter the guilty are to be punished while the innocent are to be protected, while according to the former contracts are to be made, etc.⁶⁶

The philosophers, then, very beautifully discuss the formal cause. But this is not enough because once everything is properly instituted, success is also needed. We see that the wisest people become utterly dismayed when they realize that their most beautiful plans do not succeed. They have the most just and most honest laws and put all their efforts into having those laws observed. But they get bogged down when it comes to the efficient and final causes. They posit that the final causes are fame, peace, and wealth. But these do not always come about. Often, the opposite happens. It is therefore evident that these outcomes cannot be the final cause. In fact, the worse and more negligent a person, the luckier he is in life. This really makes good people impatient. Thus, everything depends on knowing why good people are for the most part worse off, while the worst people do very well—just as many disorderly and malicious household managers prosper while the best suffer want.

It is therefore clear that the philosophers and pagans are unable to teach about state and household management in the way the Holy Spirit can, because reason is the only thing they have and follow, while Solomon has the Holy Spirit who teaches him about the final and efficient causes of states and household management. In addition, Solomon also had reason and experience, as he engaged in governing a state and a house. This is why he does not only speak out of the Holy Spirit but also out of experience, because he dealt with the most important affairs and was highly experienced in the most important affairs.⁶⁷ This psalm, however, must be even more precious to us because such a great man wrote it about political and household affairs. Although this psalm is short, consisting only of a few verses, it is full of exceptional doctrine. But he does not urge the formal and material causes because he sees that houses already exist; that states have already been established and secured by good laws and government officials. But are these not enough? By no means, because two principal causes are missing. As far as the formal cause is concerned, it is possible that the laws were better among the pagans than among the Jews. And it is possible that the government officials were better among the pagans than those in God's people. But these things concern only matter and form.

⁶⁶ “Particular Justice . . . , and that which is just in the sense corresponding to it, is divided into two kinds. One kind is exercised in the distribution of honor, wealth, and the other divisible assets of the community, which may be allotted among its members in equal or unequal shares. The other kind is that which supplies a corrective principle in private transactions.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 2 (tr. H. Rackham).

⁶⁷ See Aristotle's discussion of the relationship between experience (*ἐμπειρία*) and art (*τέχνη*) in *Metaphysics* I, 1: Experience deals with individual cases—e.g., a physician treats individual patients—while art is the product of many individual experiences formulated in the form of general rules and principles: Treatment A works not only in one or two patients, but it works in all patients having disease B. In the process of accumulating experiences, art arrives at the causes of a thing. Medical art, for instance, knows not only that a treatment works, but also why it works. Because those who are “artists” in this sense know the causes, they—unlike those who are merely experienced—are able to teach. Theory, by contrast, is the knowledge of general rules only, without any experience in their practical application to individual cases, which is why those who have mere theoretical knowledge of a subject matter often fail to produce positive results. Accordingly, Solomon is the true political artist—combining experience and the *divinely inspired* knowledge of principal causes—while the ancient philosophers are, at best, men of experience who (because of their fallen reason) have not arrived at the principal causes. By contrast, the inexperienced monks are mere political theoreticians who ruin it all, as Luther will explain below.

This is why one must recognize the principal causes of state and household management—who it is who makes the state and the house and for what purpose.⁶⁸ The pagans and reason do not see these principal causes. Rather, reason only considers the matter and its form. And because it did not know the efficient cause, it dares to govern these things in view of the purpose it established by its own power, as if reason itself were able to establish such great things. This is why reason stumbles and is deceived. Accordingly, Demosthenes entered government service, finding the state well-established in its laws and customs. This is why he, so to speak, jumped into it with unwashed hands and feet and dared to become the efficient cause of the Athenian state. This is to say, he wanted to govern it as a wise man, according to his plans. For what purpose? Certainly, in order to establish public peace and to prepare fame and a quiet life for himself and the fatherland. He thought that everything would turn out the way he had prudently devised and considered it. But God, because he hates arrogant plans, turned everything upside down. Therefore, there was no error in the matter and in its form, but the most-wise man was deceived concerning the final cause and the efficient cause.

The same happened in the Roman state to the great man Cicero and even Julius Caesar. And so it happens that they, because neither perceive the efficient cause nor achieve the final cause, scream that everything happens by chance and fortune, which almost always thwart good plans. They could not accomplish the desired purpose by virtue, wisdom, or diligence. They realized that states are more often damaged by the ignorance and malice of the people than that they are helped by good plans. This is why they made up a third and middle thing—namely, that fortune, which is an uncertain cause, at times grants success to good plans, but at times gets in their way.⁶⁹ They were forced to say that the governing of states is greater than what can be governed by human plans, because, in addition to plans, fortune is necessary. Fortune, however, is divinely given at times to the one and at times to the other. And this is the reason why the greatest men among the pagans could not rightly teach about household management or the state.

Now a teacher comes along who has a different Spirit, a Spirit connected with experience. This teacher teaches the origin and the purpose of political and household management, that is, what is their true efficient cause and what is their final cause. He grasps both and teaches that, if you want to rule happily the house and the state, you must not set yourself up as the principal cause. Otherwise, you will overthrow everything. In these two orders of life (*genera vitae*), there are so many dangers, so many burdens and worries vexing the mind, that you will grow weary and let go of everything in despair and become indignant, saying that Satan has cast you into these burdens. Rightly so, because why do you presume to rule what is beyond your powers? Demosthenes, after having been affected by many misfortunes in the state, finally said that if two ways were presented to him—one leading to the state and the other to hell—he would rather choose the one leading to hell than the other. This is also how it goes in household management: Those who enter marriage expect that everything will go smoothly and delightfully, because they think that they will follow

⁶⁸ According to Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals* I, 1, the final cause is superior even to the efficient cause—a process is initiated to achieve a particular purpose.

⁶⁹ Aristotle discusses various views of chance, one of them being held by those who “believe that chance is a cause, but that it is inscrutable to human intelligence, as being a divine thing and full of mystery.” *Physics* II, 4 (tr. Hardie & Gaye).

a certain plan to lead their wives, to raise their children, and to deal with their employees. But in their experience, everything turns out differently—the wife is less compliant, the children are ungrateful and disobedient, the employees are careless, or the neighbors are burdensome and obnoxious. In short, the burdens of marriage are countless. When they realize this, they become indignant and belatedly begin to complain: If they had only known this, they would never have gotten married. They think that the life of the monks is much more delightful because they do not have these burdens, etc. In these terms, foolish people complain about their situation, as if by becoming a monk you would get rid of these difficulties at once. But even if you hid yourself in a monastery, you will not lack burdens. This is because wherever you live on earth, you must live either under household management or under the state. It cannot be different.

Therefore, prepare yourself that you become able to overcome and devour these burdens, learning to cast them on a cause outside of you, one that is stronger than you. But only the Holy Spirit is the Teacher who teaches and reminds us that we are to throw ourselves completely into the bosom of God’s majesty and trust him so that we may in his name take a wife, care for the family business, govern the state, make laws, etc. If this succeeds, it is well. If it does not succeed, it is also well, because it is God’s will that you, once you have answered his call to the state or household management, should remain and persevere in the same—while calling upon him.

And this is the chief teaching of this psalm. The papists chant this psalm all the time, but do not at all understand what it is all about, because they flee the government of the state and household management, although they completely drowned in them, as no one is more deeply involved in political and household affairs than they. The pope and the monks most arrogantly lorded it over great rulers and princes. And church officials adjudicated marital disputes. From the confessional chair, they ruled private homes as well as kingdoms and government officials. In the end, these inexperienced people almost ruined both orders of life, because they condemned those who lived in state and marriage as occupying profane positions, advising them to enter the monastic life instead⁷⁰—just like the pagan philosophers who proclaimed as the best the private life, that is, life lived outside of marriage and the state. Accordingly, they made laws that they themselves did not follow.

God comforts us in Holy Scripture against this foolish and ungodly life of the papists and the philosophers. In Scripture, we see that there has never been a saint who was not engaged in the state or in household management, as God drew the greatest men to the courts of the princes, such as Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Daniel, etc., not to mention the exceedingly holy kings David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and others. In fact, even John the Baptist had to become a courtier and a royal counselor, as the text says: “Herod obeyed him in many things” (Mark 6:20). This is how God cast his saints either into the state or household management—except for Christ who is the Wisdom of the Father. He neither married nor ruled a state because he had to be something peculiar before all others. At

⁷⁰ Luther here refers to the traditional distinction between “perfect” Christians (monks, clerics, etc.) and the “imperfect” Christians (fathers, mothers, farmers, princes, etc.). While the latter were required to do no more than the Ten Commandments, the former were believed to excel before God by following the optional “evangelical counsels” set forth in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5) and elsewhere. Luther replaced this external distinction of two classes of Christians by distinguishing between faith and love in every Christian. See, e.g., AE 21:3-4; 45:82, 87-88, 92.

the same time, however, he honored both orders of life, marriage (John 2:1) and government (Matthew 22:21).⁷¹

Thus, the life of the monks is truly diabolical because they flee the household management and the state.⁷² In a way, they are quite clever. Who would not rather live in solitude and live for himself, being supported by the goods of other people, enjoy leisure, peace, quiet, enjoyment, and other goods, especially when people think that this is the holy way of life? Compare this life in the monastery with our life in the world, thrown back and forth under such miserable and painful cares that fill our human lives. The monks therefore have skimmed off the most delightful parts of life and leave the dregs to others, leaving them to contend with the exceedingly difficult labors such as raising children, ruling households, administering states, etc.

But the monks receive the just wages for their idleness: They are inexperienced men who have no knowledge of human affairs, as they have confused the world with their hypocrisy and their nonsensical speculations, misleading those who govern houses and states. They even brought it about that those who lived in marriage or the state discharged their offices unwillingly, although God had called them into these offices. When either a household manager or a government official came to them to complain about those domestic or public burdens, they did not comfort and encourage them to bear these burdens. Rather, like the enthusiasts, they called such people away from these exceedingly good orders of life to the monastic life.⁷³ It came to the point that they dressed the dead in the clothes of monks before burying them. They did not know that these orders of life, marriage and government, had been created and instituted by God.⁷⁴ They did not know that they should have admonished those who came to them for advice to remain steadfast and patient, by pointing out to them that God had placed them into marriage and the state; that God was therefore well pleased with their office; that they should not leave these orders of life; that if

⁷¹ “[A]lthough Christ did not use or teach the sword, it is sufficient that he did not prohibit or abrogate it. In fact, he confirmed it. In the same way, it is sufficient that he did not abrogate the married estate but confirmed it, although he did not take a wife or teach about it. For he always had to manifest himself by engaging in the kind of station in life and work which properly served his kingdom alone. Otherwise, some would turn him into a cause and necessary example to teach that God’s kingdom could not exist without matrimony and sword and similar external matters (for Christ’s example urges us by necessity), although it exists only by God’s word and Spirit, which were, and had to be, Christ’s proper work as that of the supreme King in this kingdom.” SLE 10:391-392; see AE 45:101.

⁷² “[T]he three heavenly or divine hierarchies . . . are nothing else than household management, secular government, and church government. And those who live outside these three estates live in a self-chosen estate, which God has rejected and condemned throughout all prophets.” SLE 1:1394; see AE 4:23.

⁷³ As Luther saw it, when he began his work as a Reformer, “[t]he most learned men (I do not want to name them) considered secular authority to be a pagan, human, ungodly thing, as if it were an estate that jeopardized salvation. This is also why priests and monks had intimidated and persuaded kings and princes to take up different works to serve God, such as attending mass, praying, and endowing masses, etc. In sum, princes and lords who desired to be pious considered their station and office in life to be nothing and no service of God. They became actual priests and monks, except that they did not wear tonsures or cowls. If they wished to serve God, they had to go to church.” SLE 20:2111; AE 46:163. While not becoming a monk, Charles V abdicated as emperor in 1556 and retired to a monastery in Spain where he died in 1558. After his death, 30,000 masses were said for his soul. G. Parker, *Emperor: A New Life of Charles V* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2020), p. 470, 493.

⁷⁴ “[Y]ou should esteem the sword or government as highly as marriage or farming or any other occupation God instituted. One can serve God in marriage, by farming, or any other occupation, to the benefit of others. Indeed, one has to engage in these activities if the neighbor needs it. In the same way, one can serve God also in government. Indeed, one should serve there, if the neighbor’s need requires it. For they are God’s servants and workmen who rebuke what is evil and protect what is good.” SLE 10:390; see AE 45:100; see also AE 1:134-135; 2:141-142.

things did not go according to their plans, they should bear these burdens for God's sake and commend all things to God. This is how they would have truly taught and comforted minds. But the papists were unable to do so in the past, and even these days they cannot do it, because they have no practical experience in these offices and only have idle thoughts about these matters. Moreover, they do not have the Holy Spirit. Solomon, however, had both: He was highly experienced in state and household management. And he had the Holy Spirit. Because he had these two teachers, he learned that these things cannot be directed by human wisdom but that all is governed by God.

Naaman, the Syrian, did not only bring great wisdom to the state. The text also says that *the Lord* worked salvation through him (2 Kings 5:1). That is to say that Naaman's great wisdom would not have accomplished much good if the God had not given him success. Accordingly, if someone is to become a great and good prince, then this result is not produced by the person's natural gifts or his education or training. Rather, it is God's gift.⁷⁵ This is then also taught by experience, as things very often turn out differently than one had imagined. The same happens to the husband—how often plans fail! It is therefore true what is commonly said: Man proposes, but God disposes.⁷⁶ Or as Solomon put it, "Man's heart chooses a path, but God alone gives that it proceeds" (Proverbs 16:9). You make plans, how you wish to advance your affairs. Your affairs turn out differently—and your plans in which you put great trust are what ruins your affairs more than you or others thought. But this lack of success generates great impatience. This is why you must learn that your wisdom and plans cannot even govern your own body! How should you govern the bodies and wills of other people by it, even in a single house, city, duchy, or kingdom? Learn, therefore, that, as Jeremiah says (10:23), the path of man does not lie in his power, that not even the body you care for and carry around is in your hand.

This is what it means to teach rightly about the state and household management, namely, pointing to their efficient and final causes. But this doctrine is all the more necessary because we all are involved either in the state or in household management. Even if you are not a husband, it is still necessary for you to be part of household management, either as a son or a servant, or you have children, servants, neighbors, or you are in some other position in the house or in the society of man. But it cannot be prevented that many burdensome things happen to you. This is why one must learn how to conduct oneself in these two orders of life; who established them; and what their final cause should be. This insight is most necessary by far for those who are in a higher position in life and who are to govern either the state or the house, so that they might know what the final cause of this government is.

⁷⁵ "[N]o man should presume to take or give anything except as God has commanded, in order that it may be acknowledged as God's gift, and thanks may be rendered Him for it, as [the first] commandment requires." LC I, 27. In the First Article of the Creed, "we . . . confess that God the Father has not only given us all that we have and see before our eyes, but daily preserves and defends us against all evil and misfortune, averts all sorts of danger and calamity." LC II, 17.

⁷⁶ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* I, 19.

This psalm, therefore, is related to the book Ecclesiastes.⁷⁷ Not only does it have the same teaching but also almost the same words. In Ecclesiastes, it says, I saw that all is vanity (4:7); that things succeeded neither in household management nor in the state, but that there was sorrow in both. This is why nothing is better than being glad in God, enjoying with thanksgiving the present gifts he freely gives, and doing what one can (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10). This psalm therefore appears to be a brief summary of Ecclesiastes, where Solomon teaches both the efficient cause of the state and the household management, or of the state and the family business, as well as what the purpose for this government has to be, namely, that we are only servants and coworkers of God—not the efficient cause, but the instrumental cause by which God works and carries it out.⁷⁸ As Wisdom says, “By me kings rule” (Proverbs 8:15). Accordingly, the father is an instrument for procreation, but God is the source and originator of life. Similarly, the government official is only an instrument by which God preserves peace and what is right. A husband and a wife in the house are instruments by which the house and family business are increased.

Knowing this is very comforting. When things turn out differently than planned and we do not reach the goal that we have set for us, we can say: I am only a kind of instrument, and these things are not in my hand but are ruled by a different, higher Power and Wisdom. Thus, if the wife dies, if the children die, if the peace is disturbed, or some other trouble occurs, say this: These things are not in my hand; I am an instrument. Whatever I can, I will do, labor, care, command, guard. You, Lord, in whose hand all this is, must grant success. Otherwise, every attempt, all labors are in vain, etc. If the primary cause is not there, the secondary cause does not accomplish anything by itself. This is what the psalm teaches about the efficient cause.

In the same way, the psalm teaches about the final cause so that we might recognize that all things are God’s gift and exist for God’s glory and service, not for our peace, good life, fame, etc.,⁷⁹ so

⁷⁷ “There are three books of Solomon in Holy Scripture. The first, Proverbs, is mostly concerned with the household and provides general precepts for this life The second, Ecclesiastes, concerns the secular government and instructs not only all in common but in particular those who hold political authority: Those who are to preside over others must fear God and diligently do what is at hand. They should not get discouraged in the discharge of their office, either by the difficulty of the task or the ingratitude of the people. The third . . . bears the title ‘Song of Songs.’ It properly belongs to the Preacher. For it is a song of praise on secular government which flourished in most beautiful peace in Solomon’s day.” SLE 5:1585; see AE 15:195.

⁷⁸ “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 creatures are only the hands, channels, and means whereby God gives all things.” LC I, 26. “Yet what else are all our labors to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, in governing—but such works of children [like fasting, praying, and spreading out their clothes at night for the Christ Child or St. Nicholas], through which God wishes to bestow his gifts in the field, in the home, and everywhere else? Our labors are the masks of our Lord God behind which he wishes to be hidden and do all things.” SLE 5:1308; see AE 14:114.

⁷⁹ “[T]he final cause of God’s gifts is not that those who have the gifts may use them to engage in pleasure and tyranny or wantonness. Rather, the proper use of the gifts is to serve God’s glory and the benefit and welfare of the neighbor. But although the people receive God’s blessing—kingdoms, priesthood, strength, might, intelligence—as gifts from God, they do not ask about the purpose, for which they are to use the gifts. Why are you a king? Why are you a prince, priest, father, or mother? ‘Well,’ you will say, so that I may have a good time in this life, to live in joy and pleasure and to satisfy all my desires. I am learned and rich so that I may obtain a great name and great glory among the people.’ Indeed, this is why the rule [which gives you preeminence] in which you take such great pride will be and shall no longer be in force. For the only purpose for which God wishes to pour out and give his blessing is his glory, his praise as the Giver of the gifts and to the welfare and improvement of the Church. The purpose for which the government has its glory is to be beneficial for the Church and the subjects. Husband and wife are joined in matrimony to beget

that we should say: The Lord has done this. He has given this fortunate outcome. To him be praise and glory forever.⁸⁰ I was only the instrument. It is therefore his gift, not my work. I am to work the soil. I can be the instrument. But it is God's gift, not my work, that fruits are produced. If it were our work, the seed we sow would never be destroyed by floods, heat, rainstorms, etc. Similarly in a marriage, it becomes apparent that children are God's gift only when the wife does not give birth to children. Knowledge of these causes is necessary for a Christian.

Let us therefore now hear what the psalm itself has to say.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

These are exalted words by which he summarily condemns our labor, that it is not the efficient cause of the advantages for which it is undertaken. But now consider the histories of all peoples—the history of God's people; the history of the Greeks; the history of the Romans; the histories of all other peoples. You will see that God gave to many the beginning of establishing the state and household management in a praiseworthy manner. But they lost their courage because success did not follow their beginning. At times, the greatest efforts for the wellbeing of the state were repaid by the greatest ingratitude. How many of the greatest men in Athens, in Sparta, or in Rome were condemned and outlawed by the ungrateful citizens! This happens so frequently that it is almost the common fate of all who want to act honestly in their private and public lives and who are most eager to take care of things, but who, due to the envy and traps of others, cannot accomplish any of the things they tried to do. The devil raises so many obstacles against good men, so many opponents, such great hatred, and so many traps, so that they, overcome by impatience, cast off their care for the state or, moved by indignation, cruelly rage against those whom they see as standing against them. They either sin by throwing it all away in despair or by trying to make it happen by force in arrogance. These people begin in a praiseworthy manner and delight in their plans. But when they see that they do not succeed, they fall into either fury or despair.

This is why we should learn to take the middle road. If God has called us to govern a household, we are to say: Lord, you have given me a wife, a house, and children.⁸¹ I have charge of them by

children and to raise them to benefit the household and the government. Yet the world cuts off the purpose in all the gifts of God." SLE 2:263-264; AE 5:112.

⁸⁰ "[S]ince all that we possess, and, moreover, whatever, in addition, is in heaven and upon the earth, is daily given, preserved, and kept for us by God, it is readily inferred and concluded that it is our duty to love, praise, and thank Him for it without ceasing, and, in short, to serve Him with all these things, as He demands and has enjoined in the Ten Commandments." LC II, 19. Truly glorifying God by properly using God's gifts to his glory and for the benefit of the neighbor, however, involves justifying faith, as Luther explained: "[Y]ou see that faith alone fulfills the first commandment that requires you to glorify your God. Even if you were full of good works but lacked faith, you would not be good or fulfill the first commandment by glorifying God. For God does not wish to be glorified, unless truth and all good things are attributed to him, as is indeed the case. But no good work does that; only the faith of the heart does that. This is why faith alone is a person's righteousness and the fulfillment of all commandments. For he who fulfills the first chief commandment certainly and easily also fulfills all the other commandments. But works are dead. They cannot glorify and praise God, although they may be done, and allow themselves to be done, to God's glory and praise." SLE 19:995-996; see AE 31:353.

⁸¹ "[T]his would be the real art and strongest defense against [lusting after other women] . . . , if everyone learned to consider one's spouse according to God's word—which is the most precious treasure and most beautiful adornment one can find in a husband or wife—and to mirror oneself in it. Then one spouse would appreciate and regard the other highly as a divine gift and treasure." SLE 7:444; see AE 21:87.

your authority. Now I will do all I can do so that everything is governed in the most upright way. Now, if not everything succeeds in the way I wish, I will write: PATIENCE, according to the familiar saying of the monks: Let it go the way it goes, as it does not go any other way than the way it goes. But if things go as I wish, I will give thanks to God: Lord, it is not my work, not my labor, but your gift.⁸² The one called to the state should say the same thing. This holy advice is much more necessary for him because of the magnitude of the burdens and labors. He whose heart is prepared in this way can enjoy marriage and even the administration of the state in peace and remains still with a peaceful and calm heart, even when the greatest dangers are imminent. People who are stiff-necked and hardheaded do not do this. They simply say: This is what I want. This is my command.⁸³ Then, when it does not turn out that way, they do not want to overcome the problems by patience. Rather, they furiously throw the state or the houses into confusion. Or they say that they cannot bear those burdens or labors and resign from their offices. From this stems the anarchy that they let everything go the way it wants to go, without curbing the license of the wicked people by laws and punishments.⁸⁴ But this is the devil's plan that everything is to fall into anarchy due to the burdens that are found in both orders of life—or that a tyrannical government is established where they do not want to deviate from their plans at all. No one, however, stays on the middle road.⁸⁵

⁸² “[A]lthough [God] abundantly grants and preserves these things even to the wicked and knaves, yet He wishes that we pray for them, in order that we may recognize that we receive them from His hand, and may feel His paternal goodness toward us therein. For when He withdraws His hand, nothing can prosper nor be maintained in the end, as, indeed, we daily see and experience.” LC III, 83.

⁸³ Juvenal, Satire 6, 223. Luther detected this attitude in the papacy: “[I]t is written about the Antichrist in Daniel 11:36 that he shall be a king who does what he wishes, that is, he will be god, not subject to any law, but a lord and master of all laws. This his what his flatters sing about him in their writings: ‘*Sic jubeo, sic volo, sit pro ratione voluntas. Et: Omnia jura sunt in scrinio pectoris ejus,*’ that is, ‘So I wish, so I command; my will shall be the law, and: ‘all laws are in the shrine of his heart.’ This is what we see in the government of the pope: He does what he wishes, without law, against law, beyond the law, straight according to his will. Indeed, in his decree *Cuncta per mundum*, he screams that Holy Scripture is subject to his see while he is not subject to Holy Scripture.” SLE 16:1973; see AE 34:237; see SA III, VIII, 4.

⁸⁴ “[O]ne should glorify God and not wander around like the Cyclopes. Neither students nor other stations in life should be permitted to live as they please without laws, without any discipline and order, as if God had not demanded to obey his commandments. For where the commandments are not kept, various punishments soon follow, either by the government, teachers, or parents—or by some common calamity or misfortune. For a common calamity or harm is like a dungeon or jail of the human race, where they are booked when the law is transgressed and the government is slow to punish the transgression.” SLE 2:1875-1876; see AE 8:171.

⁸⁵ Following Aristotle, Luther defined the “middle road” as the way of equity and virtue in general. Equity and distributive justice consider persons and circumstances to avoid excesses in one direction or another, both in government and household management. AE 8:171-172. Accordingly, distributive justice—as defined by Luther above as punishing the guilty and protecting the innocent—is described as geometric in nature (doing what is proportionate in view of the concrete situation), not arithmetical (doing what is objectively right according to the strictness of the law, i.e., regardless of what circumstances and persons will allow). AE 8:173-174; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II, 6; V, 3. Both fathers of the household and government officials are therefore called to act as “living laws” in the house and state, applying the law equitably, not with inconsiderate harshness (or not at all). AE 8:171-172; see AE 2:340; 3:130. “The law is to be kept, but in such a way that the government always keeps the geometric proportion in its hand to observe the difference in persons and hit upon the right measure and equity. For . . . Aristotle says that . . . virtue is a proficiency that lies in the middle, as a wise, reasonable person can rightly determine and adjudicate it.” SLE 2:1880; see AE 8:174. “[T]his is a part of grace that must take place in government, household management, and in the state.” SLE 2:1880; see AE 8:174. In God's kingdom, however, the law must be applied arithmetically, without regard for the individual, to show every sin of every sinner. AE 3:130; see AE 12:238-239, where Luther distinguished the

This is why I often teach and admonish that, both in government office and in marriage, you should begin with the invocation of God and prayer. In this way, he who wants to take a wife should above all things call upon God and ask him for help to give him a good wife and then also govern the entire life. If this does not happen, someone will take a wife, hoping that he will have the kind of life he imagines the first love to be. But then, when the experience of the matter looks different—the wife may have some disease or some other burden occurs—then he becomes “a lion at home,” as Sirach says (4:30),⁸⁶ and he regrets what he has done. Or he neglects his house—he goes one way, his wife another—and loses everything. Because he thought that everything would turn out beautifully, he becomes indignant when it turns out differently and blames marriage. But this accusation is unjust because it is his fault. He should attribute it, not to the household, but to his foolishness, because he wants to be the efficient cause of household management. But since he is not granted to be the efficient cause, he should only be the instrumental cause.

For this reason, he should submit to a different master and say: Dear Lord, teach me that I may rightly direct the house, the state, etc. May you govern, may you assist me, lest I stumble. I will do what I am able to. If it succeeds, I will recognize it as your gift and give thanks to you. If it does not succeed, I will bear it with evenness of mind because you are the primary cause, I am the secondary cause. You are the Creator who does all things (1 Corinthians 12:6), I am only the instrument. If we governed with such hearts, all would be well. Now, however, whether you consider a government official or new husbands, you see the greatest presumption, because they set up everything as if it were impossible that it could turn out differently than they think. They behave as if they were the primary and efficient cause and predetermine their own fame and pleasure as the final cause. But God justly says: Do not act like this or you will stumble—because they steal from God and are blasphemers who invade what belongs to the primary cause. Nothing would be done rightly, if the pen wanted to teach the writer how to write or the axe wanted to teach the carpenter how to cut the tree. The same happens here if we want to govern that which belongs to God alone.

But it is useful for you to consider well examples of this foolishness. All courts of princes, all cities, and almost all houses provide us with many such examples, because they all have this attitude: I am the originator and master of this household, of this state, etc. They are therefore justly restless and indignant that not everything turns out well. Then they look for revenge for having to suffer. Clearly, such people are not the ones where to find kindness, counsel, or help. All

“straight rule” and “mathematical point” of God’s law in man’s relation to God from the “physical point” of God’s law as equitably applied in inter-human relations. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 4, where he discussed applying arithmetic principles in the area of commutative justice, regardless of the moral quality of the parties involved.

⁸⁶ “[In Gen. 12:11-13,] the Holy Spirit provides us a teaching for the household, among other things, when he recounts that Abraham spoke kindly with his Sarah. For he first asks her. Then he tells her that she is beautiful. All this is said in a kind and loving way. You do not hear anything that is tyrannical or violent. This is how it should be among spouses who have a good relationship. ‘For a husband,’ as Solomon says, ‘is not to be a lion in his home,’ Sir. 4:30. Instead, as Plutarch nicely teaches, the husband—although he is in charge of his wife—should not exercise this rule as if his wife were his serf but as the soul governs the body, being united with it in natural friendship and servanthood and sharing in all things good and bad.” SLE 1:794; see AE 2:296.

they know is either anarchy or tyranny.⁸⁷ And both are no good but harmful. This is also how it goes in marriage if neither the husband nor the wife wants to make any concessions to the other. In addition to destroying marital concord, this also causes the husband to become either a tyrant or someone who lets anything go.⁸⁸

What is one to do then? The pope answers and advises to withdraw from the state and to flee into some wilderness or some monastery. But the Holy Spirit says no, this is not God's advice but the devil's. This is what you should do instead: Consider that you are an instrument and believe that there is still another government official or father of the household who is the principal. His name is the LORD. Unless he is the principal cause, it will come to pass what the psalm says here: the house will not be built, neither the state nor the household management will flourish. The same is true for the final cause. If you want to accomplish all the goals you have set for yourself and think that your plans will not fail, you are wrong, as experience teaches. One person goes into government service to increase his power and dignity, and the opposite happens. Another person enters into marriage hoping to gain sexual fulfillment from it. He looks for a beautiful, young, obedient woman, but the opposite happens. And rightly so, because why do you enter into a government office or marriage, as if you were God, thinking that your wisdom, your power is sufficient to govern these things, as if it were unnecessary for you to lift up your eyes to him who is above and to implore him for help?⁸⁹ If you, therefore, later experience the opposite of what you had planned, you learn to sing this psalm: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Before your misfortune, you did not think that there is another Lord beside you who would be necessary to govern the house.

Those who do not come to this realization, either daily wage war against their wives or leave their wives and go away. This outcome is right, just, and holy. Because why did you enter into marriage as if you were a god, while you truly are dirt, having begun this heavenly and supernatural government with a natural mindset? It is therefore just that you fail. Why do you not rather say this: Lord, you have given me a wife, children, employees. Assist me with your help, may you govern. Otherwise, my attempt will be in vain, etc. But we should learn this because Holy Scripture teaches us, and experience agrees, that everything we undertake is done in vain without God's help.

"In vain," he says, "labor those who build it." The reason is that they either become tyrants or despair and leave their office. Then both the state and household management perish. But what madness is it to govern in such a way that either your family or you perish? We should rather adopt

⁸⁷ Aristotle defines tyranny as the rule of one (monarchy) for the tyrant's personal advantage, while kingship is monarchy exercised for the benefit of all. *Politics* III.7. Analogized to household management, the former is like the rule of the master (despot) of the slave, while the latter is like the rule of the father over wife and children. *Politics* III, 6, 8. Tyrants surround themselves with flatterers and foreigners; they stay in power by keeping their subjects uneducated, divided against each other, and under constant surveillance—and by pretending to care for the common good, as if they were kings. *Politics* V, 11.

⁸⁸ "Neither households nor states can last without trust and loyalty among the members. For how much aversion among spouses does suspicion create in a small matter. But how much more misfortune follows when this plague enters the commonwealth!" SLE 1:795; see AE 2:297.

⁸⁹ "[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." LC I, 10.

the way which the Holy Spirit teaches here so that both you and the family remain. But this happens, not if you become a monk, but when you learn to recognize God as the principal cause and the true father of the household, and when you call upon him, trust in him, and say to him: You, Lord, have created me to be a father of the household. You have given what belongs to the house. But the burden is too great for me to bear. Therefore, take my place because I will humbly cede it to you, so that you may be the father of the household. Then God will hear you and say: I will do it. Only let your attitude be that you overcome by patience if there is something that does not quite go as you wished. Also do not despair or become a monk and do not leave the place in life to which I have called you. Because you call upon me and recognize that which I have given as my gifts, I will gladly preserve you and your family. Now, if some burdens arise, you will have to bear them, but do not fear that everything will break down. Which household management was more miserable than David's? And yet, it remained until Christ was born from it. Therefore, commend it all to me as the Creator and Governor, when it appears that something is lacking.

Accordingly, this verse teaches primarily about household affairs. And you have to note well the emphasis: "They labor in vain," because it will turn into either tyranny or anarchy, and they will either leave their office or stumble and be arrogant. But there are grave dangers and harms on both sides, because they either ruin themselves or neglect their duties, because they want to labor without the Lord, that is, they want to govern these matters by their wisdom and be the principal cause. This is why Cicero, Julius Caesar, and other exceedingly wise people stumble, although they, if things had gone well, would have perhaps set up a tyranny, as tyranny is almost inevitable when there is great success.

As far as grammar is concerned, you know (I believe) that "to build" in this verse does not mean to construct a building out of timber and stone. Rather, it refers to household management in its entirety, namely, governing, leading, taking a wife, begetting offspring, raising children, governing the employees, providing, acquiring property, etc. Accordingly, the building represents a well-established household where you have very good and fruitful parents who live in peace among themselves and who have obedient children, who then turn into good adolescents and excellent men. This is the well-established house that is built out of the parents, children, and employees—a very beautiful gift of God! Generally, however, life is more like this: while the father of the household commands many things in a good way, no one obeys. But such a house is dilapidated, etc.

Accordingly, "to labor" means to wear oneself out, desiring to govern everything by one's own strength, wisdom, and will so that nothing ever fails—the employees always diligently do their duties; that the household affairs never suffer any setback, etc. To go about it in this way, the psalm says, means to "labor in vain" or to throw everything away in a kind of despair. But what must one do to avoid laboring in vain? Of course, you must do everything you are able to do based on your plan and strength. But then you must commend it all to God and trust in him who has made you a husband, who has given you wife, children, house, etc. If everything turns out well, thank God for his gifts. But if it sometimes turns out differently, overcome the evil by patience, thinking that God is testing you to see if you hold that he is the true Father of the household in whose hand is success, or if you attribute this to you and your plans. Thus, the Holy Spirit here teaches that neither can

the house be built nor can the city be guarded by means of human diligence, wisdom, might, and strength.

But this is preached in vain. It truly is like telling a story to a deaf person, because the world's ears and eyes are captive, as it were, causing it to act in its own ways, as it does the exact opposite of the Holy Spirit's teaching. This is why this divine pronouncement is sung for the instruction of the few who are godly and believe in Christ, who let themselves be instructed in the Lord. Others follow the present fashions and think that those affairs are theirs and that they can be governed by their own power and wisdom. This is then why they only get ruin, vain cares, and constant concern out of them. But although they experience and hear this, they do not become wise.

Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman watches in vain.

Just like he above called "house" the family affairs and what we call marriage and the household management, so he now calls "city" the state—be it a kingdom, a duchy, a city, or some other state, no matter how large or small it may be. But even though, considered according to the flesh, these things appear to be in our power, they are in fact placed far above us. Thus, a godly heart must be instructed so that it may know that it is in this governing—be it in private or in public life—only an instrument of God. This is why we must look to God and determine that all the things that will come to pass out of his governing are above and beyond we could ever think. Those who do not want to believe this will receive their wages, as shown here in this verse—all their intentions, plans, efforts, and labors will be in vain.

But he says deliberately: "Unless the Lord guards the city." He does not say "builds," as he said above about the house, because if the domestic and private government is well instituted, the state will do well also. Household management is the source of the state, because if father and mother, wife and husband, are not there to beget and raise offspring, the state cannot remain. The city, therefore, is preserved by the house, as the former is nothing but many houses and households. Cities form a duchy; duchies form a kingdom that unites them all. Of all these, the household management is the source that God created in paradise when he said: "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18), likewise: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28).⁹⁰ Accordingly, Solomon does not teach in this psalm how states are to be founded and how laws are to be given, because all this is already given by nature and has not been first brought forth or indicated by the lawyers. Rather, it has come forth from the source of human reason and divine wisdom. The laws have not brought forth human wisdom or reason. Rather, human wisdom or reason have produced

⁹⁰ "Now a city is an aggregate made up of households and land and property, possessing in itself the means to a happy life. This is clear from the fact that, if men cannot attain this end, the community is dissolved. Further, it is for this end that they associate together; and that for the sake of which any particular thing exists and has come into being is its essence. It is evident, therefore, that economics is prior in origin to politics; for its function is prior, since a household is part of a city." Aristotle, Economics I, 1. In SLE 16:2300-2301, Luther stated, "Thus says Ps. 127:1-2, that there are only two bodily governments on earth, the city and the household. . . . The first is householding, from which the people come. The other is governing the city, that is, the country, people, princes, and lords, which we call the secular government. These two cover everything—children, property, money, animals, etc. The house must build. The city must guard, protect, and defend this. Then comes the third government, God's own house and city, that is the Church. It must get people from the house and protection and defense from the city." Yet above all and closest to these three hierarchies must be God, as must "preserve such ring or circle against the devil and do everything in all stations, indeed, in all creatures." See AE 41:177.

all laws, just as also all the other arts we have sprung from human understanding or from reason. But just as the Creator was before the creature, so reason was before the arts, and the geometer was before geometry and is its father. And the laws have not produced what is civilly just. Rather, just men have produced the laws.

Solomon therefore does not—as a theologian would—discuss the giving of laws or the institution of things, because these were implanted by God in nature in paradise, as the text says: “God created man in his image” (Genesis 1:27). And he then explains this image: “Have dominion over the fish of the sea” etc. (Genesis 1:28). This text clearly shows that God implanted in man the law⁹¹ and the knowledge of things, agriculture, medicine, and other arts.⁹² Subsequently, ingenious men refined what they had by nature by practice and diligent reflection and wrote it down, as we see. These are the powers of human wisdom, created together with and implanted in man in paradise, as is clearly seen. This is why the Holy Spirit is not concerned about these matters. He only approves these laws and arts as an exceedingly beautiful and noble treasure, saying: All these are my creatures.

Next he wants to lift up our blind and fallen nature and call away from carnal trust, lest we undertake or take up matters that are beyond our powers, because human nature became so corrupted by Adam’s fall that it does not see that God’s gifts are, in fact, gifts. Rather, a lawyer or some other politician thinks he has all of these things out of himself and does not look up, does not give glory to God as the giver of such gifts, but says: I have done this. This “I have done this” turns into real dregs. Now that states and household management have been established, now that laws and arts have been created with man by divine order, fallen nature misuses all these things by saying: I will do it. I will govern. I will use these gifts to accomplish my goals, seeking thereby my pleasure, my fame, my peace, etc. This arrogance greatly offends God. He therefore does not grant it success, rightly so, because just as he created the sun for you to enjoy, not for you to rule it as you wish, so he created the fields for you to work them, not for them to yield what and how much you wish. In the same way, he has given the state, reason, wife, employees, and everything else. But this is the constant defect of human nature that it is so corrupted by Adam’s sin that it does not recognize God’s gifts as such. It should give thanks for the gift by saying: I have received this. Instead, it says with pride and blasphemy: I have done this. It should say: The Lord, my God, has given this to me and preserves it for me. But it says: I, man, have brought this about and will govern it according to my wisdom.

This is why the words “the Lord” must be read emphatically in the first verse to mark the antithesis: “Unless the Lord builds,” “unless the Lord guards,” etc. “The Lord,” he says, not: Man or we. We are not the ones who beget children, govern wives and employees. The Lord does these things, as the text from Genesis proves: “The Lord brought them to Adam to see how he would call them”

⁹¹ “Having a god is not only the law of Moses but also a natural law, as St. Paul says in Rom. 1:20 Likewise, ‘You shall not kill, commit adultery, steal, etc.,’ are not only the laws of Moses but also the natural law written in everyone’s heart, as St. Paul teaches in Rom. 2:14-15.” SLE 20:151-152; see AE 40:96-97.

⁹² “[W]e must everywhere hold on to the simple, pure, and natural meaning of the words, which results from grammar and linguistic usage, which God has created in man.” SLE 18:1820; see AE 33:162; see J. Ringleben, *Gott im Wort: Luther’s Theologie von der Sprache her* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), p. 352-360, on the relationship between theology and grammar in Luther’s theology.

(Genesis 2:19), etc. Adam, to be sure, named all creatures and received dominion over them, but he received the creatures from God. Adam neither created them nor brought them to himself. Rather, he named them after they had been created and brought to him and after he had been given dominion over them, but in such a way that he should be ruled by a higher Lord. Accordingly, the psalm says here: It is the Lord who builds the house, who gives wife, children, food, who guards the city, gives public peace, preserves the laws, etc.

This is why the words “Unless the Lord” should be printed in large letters, because human nature vigorously fights against them due to the fall of Adam: We attribute to ourselves all we have received from God. We seize as ours everything that must be ascribed to God. The devil also drives our nature even more into this direction, in addition to our own inclinations. This is why we are unhappy and can never be at peace. If we were without this vice of arrogance, we would have more peace and better fortune, because God would say to us: You have me as your Creator and Giver; this is why I will bless you. But because we do not do this, God pours out over us many hardships and misfortunes, sends the devil against us, and makes it seem as if he had unlocked hell, so that there is confusion in the household management and war and murder in the state. Because we do not want to hear him when he reminds us by the Word, he wants to teach us by punishments and our misfortune so that we, in the manner of the Phrygians,⁹³ begin to become wise when we are beaten and learn that we are not lords over these things.

Cicero therefore sang this song in the end: Oh, I miserable man. I have never been wise, although I was once considered wise in vain. How you, Roman people, have been deceived about me in your opinion! Cicero said this because he governed the Roman state according to his plans in such a way that he was decapitated in the end.⁹⁴ This is our vice, and not that of the Creator, which is ours because of the first and original sin of Adam: We do not recognize that the Lord gives it and governs, but do everything without fear, trusting in our own strength. In the household management, therefore, God gives to some proud young man a beautiful woman who either becomes an adulteress or who is unfit for domestic business and who is a constant burden for her husband. The same happens to the princes in governing the state when no plans can extricate them from dangers. And rightly so, because why do they not want to have the Lord who freely gives? Instead, they want to be builders themselves. But although the world hears this, it neither cares nor believes this.

This is why this is said only to the godly: “Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman labors in vain,” as if he wanted to say: The Lord is the guardian. Unless he is present, everything undertaken in the state will end in misfortune. When I studied at Erfurt, I often heard quoted this word of Martin Sangerhausen, an experienced man: Erfurt will remain invincible as far as wealth and fortifications are concerned, but the powerful and wealthy city will lack citizens. That was a very wise saying by which he testified that the state is not preserved by wealth and power, if it lacks experienced leaders. Therefore, let the people build and, if possible, fortify the cities with walls of iron; let them accumulate mountains of gold.⁹⁵ All this is in vain without a good ruler.

⁹³ Cicero, For Flaccus 27, 65: “It is not a proverb of ours or of yours that a Phrygian is usually made better by beating?”

⁹⁴ Plutarch, Cicero 48.

⁹⁵ Terence, Phormio I, 2.

God, therefore, must give this in the first place, that the citizens are good; then that their leaders are also good and experienced men; and then that the princes are the kind of people who serve and fear God. These are the true and lasting fortifications of empires and states. Once you have received these from God, you can also think about constructing walls and moats. But because this is not done, kingdoms and empires fall, one after another. And I think that monarchies would have lasted longer if the monarchs had operated without the personal pronoun, “I,” that is, if they had not been arrogant trusting in their own power and wisdom. For instance, as soon as the monarch of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar—inflated by arrogant reliance on his strength—said, “I have done this” (Daniel 4:27), he ate grass for seven years and wandered across the fields like a beast. Accordingly, the monarchy of the Persians, of the Greeks, and of the Romans was destroyed due to their arrogance. As soon as they sang, I have done this, it soon followed: I have perished. Look around and consider all the kingdoms, princes, and all the states: As soon they added to their deeds the word: I have done this, they fell down because they excluded God and took his place by their pride, as if he were foolish. This is why human plans, power, and other strength fail. We too would not lack walls or other fortifications, if we did not lack the right people. There is now a great need for such people. Those who are the current leaders cannot bear the present fortune but are proud of their power and wealth, rely on the fortifications they have, as if it were really difficult for God to destroy even iron walls and mountains of gold.

This is not to say that one should not fortify the cities and prepare protection against violence; that one should not give laws and maintain public morals. We say that this it is done rightly and must be done. We do not condemn the lawyers or the soldiers. But we do condemn the addition they attach to these, namely, that they paint on their foreheads, “I.” God will not, cannot, and should not put up with this addition. But because the world cannot do without this addition, one kingdom collapses after the other, one prince collapses after the other, one state collapses after the other. Sennacherib boasts according to Isaiah that his hand was invincible against all the gods (Isaiah 36:18-20). But this boast is followed by utter defeat by which he is struck down (Isaiah 37:36). But Isaiah writes about Cyrus: “I have taken him by his hand in order to destroy bronze doors” (Isaiah 45:2). No power is so great, no fortification so strong that God could not conquer it. How difficult do you think would it be for God to totally bankrupt Venice, an exceedingly powerful city, either by war or famine or plague, or the drying up of the sea?

Therefore, one should build fortifications, build a house, take a wife, establish the household management, etc. The Holy Spirit does not condemn this. He only wants us not to add original sin to these. Therefore, keep the creatures and use them, but take away your hereditary sin by which you offend God. Wife, children, employees, laws, goods, etc. are creatures. They are good things and truly God’s gifts. But you attach to them your hereditary sin and want to govern them according to your wisdom while despising God and not calling upon him and not believing in him who granted them to you. You want to go forth in this arrogance: I am the one who governs these things. It happens therefore justly that wife and children and employees are disobedient. May it work out for you, Mr. Regent, as want to govern these things without first paying your respects to God.

The same happens in the state. This psalm therefore says: “Unless the Lord guards” etc. He therefore places “the Lord” in the category of relationship against our original sin and against our

natural arrogance, as if he wanted to say: I do indeed say that a city is guarded without luck unless the Lord guards it. But there is a different lord who wants to govern these things, namely, our own wisdom and arrogance, which presumes to govern such great affairs while despising and excluding God. To be sure, our wisdom is sometimes successful. But it is a twofold wrath when God gives success to the ungodly: It is a scandal that offends the godly. This scandal also misleads countless other people who hope to accomplish the same but fail. Accordingly, Emperor Augustus ordered the state well. He avoided the tragic accidents seen in other kings as far as his person was concerned, although he was very unfortunate as far as the members of his household were concerned.⁹⁶ Following his examples, other strove to govern the state, thinking that they could do the same. But see how few succeeded. The saying by Juvenal is very true:

Few kings die without being cut down in blood;
Rarely you will also find a tyrant without a bloody end.⁹⁷

But I mention these things so that we might learn that we are not the regents of these lofty affairs of the state and the household management, much less of the church where everything is infinitely greater and more difficult.

“Guarding” means preserving. But, as I pointed out before, he does not here talk about the giving of the laws because, as reason is able to give them, he presupposes that they exist in a state. Rather, he admonishes and instructs government officials that they should call upon God and administer government business in fear so that they, if their plans do not succeed, may realize that God does this to curb their pride, lest they rely on their own wisdom and power. If everything worked out as planned, this would cause countless misfortunes. But now that wisdom is deceived and power accomplishes nothing, they learn by their own experience that another must be called upon as the Lord and be placed above the states, to assist and govern them and to grant success to the plans of wisdom. Consequently, they should take refuge in prayer and say: Help, o Lord, govern us, etc. Then they should know that they have a bountiful promise that the Lord, when he is called upon, will answer and help them. This is why the expression, “unless the Lord guards,” is set against those who do not call upon him, who want to guard the city and build the house by their own wisdom and strength. They are told that they will labor and guard in vain.

“Watchman” here means a king, a prince, a government official. In this simple word he includes great things, in fact, the highest in the world. God is a great Lord whose large mouth presents the greatest things to us in insignificant and weak words. This is why he calls the kings and princes “watchmen,” which are ordained to govern the states. But they guard in vain, says the psalm, unless the Lord himself is present. For the same reason, their efforts and sweat also do not accomplish what they want. Rather, if the Lord is not present, the only things they get out of it is that they crucify and torture themselves in vain. This is what the prophet calls “laboring in vain.”

When I was young, I saw several people who wore themselves out, constantly laboring day and night. Still, they did not make enough to sustain their lives. They did not allow themselves any time for leisure or play. Still, they lived in poverty with their wives and children. Now, when

⁹⁶ Suetonius, Augustus 65.

⁹⁷ Juvenal, Satires X, 112-13.

wealthier fathers of households saw these and had pity on them, they reminded them that their ceaseless laboring would never make them rich. In addition to their labor, they also needed prudence (*industria*),⁹⁸ as the latter was more important than labor as such when it came to acquiring possessions. A householder who is at least somewhat prudent will be able to make more out of a single dollar than another out of two. Because prudence leads to better results by nature.

But those who give this advice to the needy did not realize that prudence is itself a gift of God given by God to people. This is evident from the fact that a woman who is both experienced in household management and prudent is able to live with her employees on the same expenses for an entire year that, in case of less prudent women, would barely last for six months. But prudence is so important because it considers persons, places, and times, and does not take up anything without due consideration.⁹⁹ Those who do not keep this in mind in household management or the state are often deceived by necessity. It is therefore no wonder if even great wealth is not sufficient for someone who disregards and neglects it, not considering opportune times and places. That is why those people, as I said, gave this advice that prudence needed to be added to labor, because labor without prudence would not prosper.

But Solomon speaks more appropriately about these matters, when he says that prudence is not the cause; the Lord is the cause, because it is the Lord's gift when the state is governed prudently or when one does not undertake something without due consideration but wait for the opportune time. Prince Frederick, Duke of Saxony, Elector, was a prudent ruler. He was a truly prudent man. He did not say and do everything at once. Rather, he waited for the right time, the right person, and the right place. He overlooked many faults, but at the right time and at the right place, he accomplished more by a single word than many others without this prudence by force and greatest efforts. Prudent people are those who are able to overlook faults and wait for the opportune time when a single word accomplishes more than many swords at a different time. Still, this is human, not divine wisdom. This is why it is not sufficient to govern such great matters. Prayer must be added to it, so that the Lord may be present and take the guarding upon himself. Otherwise, even prudence will guard in vain, no matter how great it may be.

Accordingly, even though Duke Frederick was a very wise man, he was deceived by many things he could not avoid, which often moved him greatly. Perhaps he did not initially have the wisdom to be able to say: Lord, assist me and help me in my labors. The monks, who at the time had occupied the minds of the princes, were unable to teach anything of this. But after Frederick learned from us that government was instituted by God, he derived great pleasure from this fact.¹⁰⁰ To be sure, our people hear this and know this these days. Still, they walk according to original sin

⁹⁸ The German text in SLE 4:1938 translates the Latin *industria* as *Aufsehen*, which means care or diligence. Contextually, this does not make sense. In medieval Latin, *industria* may also mean *Klugheit* in German. L. Diefenbach, *Glossarium Latino-Germanicum Mediae et Infimae Aetatis* (Frankfurt: Baer, 1857), col. 295b. *Klugheit* means "prudence" in English. This is a much better fit for the context, as Luther speaks here of people who labor ceaselessly but lack *industria*. As he explains in the next paragraph, the *industria* he has in mind "considers persons, places, and times." This is the classic definition of the virtue of prudence.

⁹⁹ E.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 7.7; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 47, art. 3.

¹⁰⁰ "My gracious lord, Duke Frederick, of blessed memory, was glad when I first wrote *About Secular Government*. He had the booklet copied and put in a special binding. He was very pleased to be able to learn what God thought about his station in life." SLE 20:2111; see AE 46:163.

and according to their inclinations. They strive after the goals they set for themselves. This is why it will happen that they will get entangled in their plans to the point of being trapped in them. But this sin is magnified because they hear this divine wisdom but arrogantly despise it. This light has been given so that men may know it and become better by it. But they become worse and twice as presumptuous. This is why it will certainly happen that they will suffer very harsh punishment for their arrogance, as the text threatens: “He guards in vain,” that is, he tortures himself and other people in vain. Because they want to carry out everything according to their plan and do not want to ask God for help, they become furious when things do not succeed. They know that they are government officials, placed in office, which is why they think they are a terror for all and urge their plans. This is why they stumble.

In this way, this psalm instructs us concerning the principal cause by which all plans and all affairs are governed. It prohibits us to confuse the causes lest we turn the principal cause into a secondary cause or into no cause at all. Otherwise, it says, it will happen that the secondary cause will become no cause at all. He did not set everything up and then walked away, as a certain philosopher correctly says about God.¹⁰¹ God did not create matrimony and the state as a builder builds a ship who, after completing the work, leaves the same and lets the sailor take command of the ship. Rather, God is present with his creature and governs both the state and the household management. People do not know this and think that God does not care about what we do but leaves it all to us. Solomon instructs us against this false opinion to fear God and learn to govern with a calm heart and to call upon God and say: Lord, you have put me in the office of husband; therefore, help me. If I were to drive the wagon by myself, I would drive it so deep into the mud, that it could not be brought out from it again etc. He likewise reminds us that we should not be arrogant based on our wisdom, power, fortifications, and wealth. All history books are full of examples, and our daily experience proves it to be true, that arrogance does not lead to a good end. Still, the world remains the world and does not believe it. This is why this teaching is useful only for the godly. The world, however, because it does not want to listen and obey, may be soundly battered, while it justly experiences that it guards in vain, labors in vain, and grounds itself to dust in all its labors. Here it is written: “Unless the Lord.” They cast this aside. This is why God casts aside their guarding and their building. Thus, all that is left for them is the “in vain.”

It is in vain that you rise early and sit late, and eat your bread with cares, because he gives it to his friends while they sleep.

It was fitting that the Latin translation of this psalm was just as obscure as the subject matter that is taught in this psalm, because the papists were not worthy of having translated even a single sentence correctly because they were so far off when it came to the subject matter. You should therefore translate this verse as follows: It is in vain that you rise before the break of dawn and go to bed late at night and gather your food toiling greatly. This is what “bread” means. Jerome translated it as “bread of idols,” but the psalm here has in mind what could be translated as “things

¹⁰¹ In his printed lecture on Ps. 51:10, Luther contrasted the present Holy Spirit with an absent, sleeping god. AE 12:377. While this is a polemic familiar from the OT, e.g., 1 Kings 18:27 and Hab. 2:19, it appears that Luther—based on his manuscript, was not thinking of the OT but of some philosophical allusion here. WA 40.2:420, 615 suggests this reference may be to Aristotle, Great Ethics II, 15, where it says: “We can hardly suppose that [God] will sleep.” (tr. St. George Stock).

have become painful.” The Hebrews call it the bread of sorrow or the bread of pain. Thus, the meaning is that the cares, the efforts, and the ceaseless labors both in the household management and in the state are in vain if they are not blessed from above. Solomon wished to indicate by these figures of speech the exceeding efforts and labor, the exceeding cares and concern: “rise early” and “sit late,” that is, to work hard day and night, as if he wanted to say: Your strength and efforts will not make it happen. Rather, “God’s blessing gives wealth” (Proverbs 10:22). God does not want to give success from your work, or because of your work, just as he also does not want to give wealth to idle people. Rather, one must work but nonetheless leave and commend everything to the God who blesses.

This text seems to prohibit work, contrary to what is written in Genesis 3:19: “in the sweat of your face you shall eat your bread.” And contrary to what is written in Romans 12:8: “If someone governs, let him take care.” These verses seem to say the opposite of what is written in this psalm, where he states that work, rising early, taking care are in vain, while the other verses condemn idleness and laziness. Here it is necessary for you to distinguish faith and works or the spirit and the letter. Your heart must trust in God and call upon God. Thus, when you have taken a wife or taken on a government office, you do well. It is part of the outward man; it pertains to the flesh, not the spirit—works, not faith.¹⁰² Here one must work and give the old Adam something to do by rising early and going to bed late. Put differently, according to the old Adam, you must be concerned with earning your living, governing the state, giving laws, constructing protection and fortification. When war is at hand, take care to arm yourself against the enemies, to obtain weapons and armies. But do so only according to the outward man, that is, leave your heart empty and free of these cares. Cares and concerns may not go beyond the outward man.¹⁰³ That is to say, the outward man may not be idle or sluggish but must diligently carry out his office by working, considering, inventing, caring, just like an instrument, so that the hands may work. But the heart must look up from the work to the Lord and ask for help so that, while the outward man is occupied by the work, the heart or the new man let prayer take the place of work and say: Lord, I follow your call; I will therefore do everything in your name, but you must govern, etc.

¹⁰² “Although man is sufficiently justified inwardly according to the soul through faith, and has everything he should have—except that this faith and sufficiency must always increase until the life to come—man still remains in this bodily life on earth where he must govern his own life and deal with other people. Here the works begin. Here he must not be idle. Here the body must indeed be driven forward and exercised by fasting, watching, working, and moderate discipline so that the body may become obedient and conformed to the inner man and faith, so that the body may not hinder or strive against the soul, as is its wont when it is not coerced.” SLE 19:1001; see AE 31:358-359; see also AE 21:109-113, where Luther distinguished between the Christian as Christian/individual and as “secular person”/office holder. In AE 73:169, he distinguished between the ongoing work of the law in the outward man and Christ’s gift of justification and peace in the conscience.

¹⁰³ “[I]t is neither sin nor serving Mammon when you eat and drink and wear clothes. The necessities of life and body require it that the body be fed and covered. It is also not sinful to seek and acquire food. But it is sinful to worry about it, that is, that you place your heart’s comfort and confidence on it. For worry is not located in clothes or food but in the midst of the heart. The heart cannot help it. It wishes to cling to it, as one says: possessions give courage, etc. ‘Worrying’ therefore means to cling to one’s possessions with the heart. For I am not worried about anything the heart does not mean or love. And again, I must have a heart for anything I am worried about.” SLE 7:561; see AE 21:193. Among the pertinent proverbs listed under “Gut (Subst.) ## 144-154,” K. F. W. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon: Ein Hausschatz für das deutsche Volk* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1867), II:191-192, are those that feature the sequence: possessions—courage—arrogance—poverty—humility.

This comfort is so great that it cannot be expressed by words, because even if things go badly, you still have a calm heart and say: It pleased God that it turned out this way. I did what I could. If it turned out differently than I intended, this happened without my fault because I am not the principal cause but only an instrument. This is just like what may happen when you work and injury your hand by some iron tool or something else, but the hand remains the same it was before and is not thrown away due to the injury. In the same way, commend the matter to God if, for instance, your employees are disobedient, while you do what you can. Then you do two things at once with God's approval—you rise early while not rising early; you labor but you do not labor in vain. According to the old Adam, you eat your bread in care, but the heart is still and calm in the hope of the help and blessing of God.

Although we teach this daily, the people are so greedy that they—justly or unjustly—accumulate goods without ceasing. They do not even give their beasts of burden a break on holidays! But when it comes to attending church to hear the Word of God, they measure the time carefully and estimate the damage it has done to their business. They skip worship rather than work. But they do not see that, by neglecting the Word, they cause ten times the damage to their property. Even if this damage does not happen right away, it will happen eventually that the property they have amassed by working hard will be lost either by theft, war, or fire, when God comes to punish at last. Or their possessions will not get to the heir they had in mind.

In the papacy, however, the people were taught that, if they had attended mass, everything would turn out better that day. But it was reprehensible that they trusted in their work instead of the governing God. Nonetheless, success corresponded to their expectation because the devil rewarded their godlessness. This is why they write this verse on every wall:

As greasing does not slow down the wheel,
So the mass does not slow down one's way of life.¹⁰⁴

They added fables to reinforce this superstition: Several people went on a journey together. When they arrived in a village at the time of mass, one of them stopped to attend mass. But the others, because they were in a hurry, did not attend the “godly worship”—so it was regarded at that time—and were attacked and killed by highwaymen. The other person, however, who had attended mass, received the wages for devoutly tarrying in church.

This was taught publicly in the papacy. I recount it here to show us very clearly our unbelief that prevents us from ascribing to God something they attributed to their work. This is why there will be punishment for this sin that the world will experience great scarcity, and day by day there will be greater destitution. As we see now, things are more expensive than in days past. But what is the reason? Evidently that we rise early and sit late and eat our bread with cares. We delight in our concerns, our cares, and our labor, while we neglect God and his Word. This is why God will lay upon us plenty of cares, work, and burdens, because this is what we want.

¹⁰⁴ See *Loci communes proverbiales de moribus, carminibus antiquis conscripti* (Basel: Oporinus, 1572), p. 41; “Schmierer # 34,” K. F. W. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon: Ein Hausschatz für das deutsche Volk* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1880), V:1711a.

But returning to the text of this psalm where you see that governing the household and the state is committed to us, but in such a way that we are to know that we merely are the instruments, tools, and collaborators of the divine majesty, not the originators, principles, and primary causes of these divine affairs. This is why it was not enough for Solomon to say affirmatively that the Lord himself governs and establishes the city; that the Lord himself builds the house and establishes the household. Rather, he adds the negation: You do not do this. This is fitting for a good teacher. But, as I have said, the world cannot bear this negation and wants to say: I want this; I have done this; I will do this. The world wants to rule the states and take God's place. The world, therefore, produces the well-deserved fruit in that, while it engages in vain pursuits, all its work and planning are in vain, as it says in Psalm 78:33, "Their days were consumed so that they obtained nothing," which is to say: They died before they could accomplish what they had attempted. Because they do not want to believe that God governs all things, they experience that they obtain nothing and labor in vain. Rightly so, because why do we who are secondary causes—indeed, we are tools—presume to be the primary and principal cause? We act as if the axe presumed to be the carpenter, the plow to be the farmer, the pen to be the writer, etc. Therefore, let each of us remain in his order and place in life. Let us keep in mind that God requires us to say: I believe in one God, that is, God wants to remain God, the Creator and Doer of all things. He wants us to be his coworkers, or, rather, instruments, not originators. But because we demand to be originators, it comes about that we get nothing but eating our bread in cares.

Furthermore, these expressions—"rise early" and "sit late"—must be given a broad meaning to apply to every kind of work that is done in the world, not just to those who perform manual labor and who get up early to do their work. It is not evil to get up early and go to bed late. It is not evil to be occupied with one's work all day long. This is, after all, what God demands of all, while laziness and idleness are condemned. But you must distinguish labor and arrogance. He does not condemn labor. But he does condemn diabolical arrogance, because we, not satisfied with labor, additionally arrogate to ourselves the divine care and concern he has for us. God wants to tear from our hands the divine majesty we arrogate to ourselves by our cares. He does not want us to abandon work. This temptation adheres to our nature—we seek to gain the divine majesty for ourselves and seek to interfere with it. This evil first began in paradise when the devil said to Eve: "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). This evil adheres to the flesh and cannot be avoided as it should be, although we are taught about it and teach about it. Rather, we want to be and seek to be like the gods. This truly is the hereditary disease of man.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ "All of us humans wish to make ourselves into sons of God. Indeed, we wish to be God himself. Adam made the beginning with this kind of sin when he allowed the old serpent, the devil, to entice him. He was not satisfied with being a beautiful creature of God, created in God's image. He did not want to remain a human but also be God and know evil and good. When he followed the old serpent and wished to be equal to God, he became a devil. In the same way, we too follow our first father, Adam. For our wisdom, our money and property are supposed to do the trick for us. We rely on them instead of God's goodness and mercy. In sum, this is the first sin which Adam began and which now goes through us all without ceasing. Adam wanted to be God, and God was supposed to be nothing. This is what all the children of Adam do. This is why it is fitting to say, 'He who makes himself the Son of God must die' [John 19:7]. As a result, the law applies chiefly to those who make themselves the Son of God. That is us." SLE 8:929-930; see AE 69:230-231.

The Holy Spirit strives against this arrogance and this care that properly pertain to the divine majesty itself. He does so by saying that it is for God, not for us, to govern these things, and that we only are God's instruments. But this accomplishes nothing among the ungodly, and even the godly sin much against this, because we are not content with our lot. We want to govern and determine the manner, the means, and the goal as we please. This is why we torture ourselves by vain cares by day and night, as the example of the whole world shows. One man decides to take this particular woman as his wife and to follow his particular way of life in marriage. Another man has in his mind an exact plan for how to govern the state and its people that leaves nothing to be desired. He criticizes the ignorance of his predecessors. He admires his own wisdom and extols it before others. But in the experience of real life, he falls far short of his imperfect predecessors. Similarly, the father of the household I just mentioned experiences real life to be completely different from how he imagined it to be. The wife soon gets sick. The children soon die. Another calamity soon occurs. And rightly and praiseworthy so, so that you might see that God vindicates his majesty which you dared to tear from him by your plans. Thus, if nothing bad ever happens to the people who are arrogant in this way, then this is the cause of the greatest harm that is in store for the secure people.

In short, there is no order of life where very many things do not turn out very differently from what was initially thought. How much has happened to our adversaries which they did not anticipate! Of the things they thought would surely happen, how many did they accomplish? This is how it goes for every government official, in every household—they cannot put into practice what they intended to do. Thus, what do they get out of their many and various plans other than that they cannot put them into practice; that they labor in vain; and that they spend their lives in a way that leaves them very few joyful hours with a calm heart? You can find many princes who could be very happy if they were able to enjoy with a calm heart the gifts that became theirs. And they would enjoy these gifts in this way if they commended all things to God. But what do they do? They lose the happiness they have and presume to undertake what is neither within their powers nor committed to them. By these cares they torture themselves to death—and rightly so, because why do they arrogate to themselves the matters God did not commit to them; why do they not calmly enjoy the things they have? Solomon talks about this in Ecclesiastes 6:1-2: "It is a misfortune I saw under the sun that is common among the people. God has given to a man wealth, goods, and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires. But God does not give him the power to enjoy these things," etc. If we were content with what we have and enjoyed God's gifts, we would be joyful with thanksgiving concerning our wife, children, and employees; we would also do our duty in good conscience and in peace—who would be happier than we? But we do what the psalm forbids: we rise early; we are afflicted; and we eat our bread in sorrow.

This is the life of all humans on earth, as the Holy Spirit here testifies, because no one is content with his lot.¹⁰⁶

The reluctant ox wants a riding saddle;

¹⁰⁶ Horace, Satires I, 1-2.

The old horse wants to pull the plow.¹⁰⁷

The gift God has given us to enjoy displeases us. This is why we look for something else and torture ourselves by trying to figure out how to get it, without considering the good things we have. Rather, as the poet writes:

The crops in somebody else's fields are always more abundant;
And the udder of the neighbor's cattle is always bigger.¹⁰⁸

But what do we get out of this approach? Certainly nothing but “vanity of vanities” (Ecclesiastes 1:2)—bread of cares, frustrated attempts, vain sitting and rising.

This is why only the godly are able to live contently with what they have, because they know that God is the Ruler and Giver of every spiritual and bodily good. This is why they work in the simplicity of their heart and enjoy what they have acquired by their work as a gift of God, and do not presume that they are the originators of these gifts. This is why they have peace. And when a misfortune happens, they can overcome it and say with Job: “The Lord gave it; the Lord has taken it away. Praised be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). In this way, they can also enjoy the present gifts and overcome all misfortune. The flesh is unable to do either: It disdains what is present and only seeks what is to come. And while it seeks what is to come, it loses what is present, as it happened to the dog in Aesop's fables who, while gaping at the shadow, lost the meat he had in his mouth along with the shadow. Rightly so, because who would dare to reject this judgment? The dog is therefore a figure for the whole world. There you can see a father of the household whom God has given a wife, children, employees, goods, etc. This is the meat in the dog's mouth. What does he do next? He neither cares for the present gifts of God nor enjoys them. Rather, he tortures himself by other vain cares for things that are not present, that he will never obtain.¹⁰⁹ This is like those who seek to escape in a dream but who, as it appears to them, cannot even move a single foot.

But one cannot learn this from books. Rather, experience is the only explanation that can interpret this psalm.¹¹⁰ Even I certainly understand it and can teach it to others. But it happens to me often that I also torture myself by vain attempts and efforts. The reason is that the divinity that was sought in paradise cannot be set aside altogether, even by the saints. And so it is that, the more of this hereditary poison you have in you, the less calm and peace you have, as Augustine says: You have commanded it, Lord, and so it happens that every disordered heart has its own punishment in

¹⁰⁷ Horace, Epistles I, XIV, 43.

¹⁰⁸ Ovid, Art of Love I, 349-350.

¹⁰⁹ The same applies to the political realm, as Luther observed in 1526, in the aftermath of the Peasants' War: “Changing the government and improving the governing are two things that are as far apart as heaven and earth. It is easy to change a government, but improving it is difficult and dangerous. Why? Because improvement are not in our will or power but only in God's will and hand. The crazy mob, however, is not really concerned about how to improve things. The mob only wants a change.” SLE 10:507; see AE 46:111-112.

¹¹⁰ See Luther's last written statement from February 16, 1546, where he observed: “He should know that no one has sufficiently tasted the Holy Scriptures unless he has ruled the churches for a hundred years with the prophets like Elijah and Elisha, with John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles.” SLE 22:13-14; see AE 54:476. Luther there also highlighted the importance of practical experience for understanding the political writings of Cicero and the agricultural writings of Virgil. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, III:374-375.

itself.¹¹¹ Just as drunkenness brings its own punishment with it—a confused and aching head—so the disordered mind that tortures and tires itself by cares brings with it the bread with cares and vain efforts. We see examples of this even in the great princes.

This is what I have said: This verse applies not only to manual laborers but to all of humanity in all its offices—it is in vain to rise early, that is, it is very inquisitive and presumptuous, no matter what office one is in. Accordingly, the government official rises early when he is concerned that everything is carried out to achieve the goal he set for himself in his heart, according to his plans and will. Accordingly, “rising up early” means in all other orders of life that one does not have any time that is free from cares and plans, unless one achieves the goal one has set for oneself. But that is done in vain. I have seen countless examples of this. And if you live long enough, you will see them as well. Because young people do not yet have any experience, they do not yet understand these things. But after a while, you will see in all orders of life—in farmers, in the ignorant and in the learned, in princes and kings—that they rise early, that is, they have great concerns and set goals for themselves, setting themselves up as the efficient cause and desiring to rule everything according to their own wisdom. But they do so in vain.

The pagans saw this as well. This is why they said that fortune rules in all things, because if wisdom were sufficient to guide things well, then Cicero and Demosthenes would not have been deceived by their exceedingly wise and honest considerations. If wisdom and strength were sufficient, Hector would have preserved Troy, as the poet said,¹¹² and Julius Caesar would have preserved the Roman Empire. These great men did not lack wisdom, might, care, or concern. They did not fail to rise early and go to bed late. They did not lack the bread of sorrows. Yet they all failed miserably and things did not work out for them. This is why they were forced to say that fortune rules in all things and that everything happens by chance. The wiser they were, the more foolish was their government, and tyrants often had more luck than the greatest men when it came to governing, as it is said in Aristotle: The less reason, the greater the luck.¹¹³ Even though Aristotle disagrees with this notion, it is still true that the greatest wisdom destroys the greatest empires, as the proverb says: A wise man commits no small foolishness.¹¹⁴

Now, although the pagans—not illumined by the Word of God, but only taught by experience—confessed that things are not governed by wisdom and force but only fortune, they did not abstain from presumptuously relying on their wisdom and might, wanting to govern the state and the people according to their own plans. Then, when things turned out differently, they recognized their error and attributed it all to fortune. We must not attribute these things to fortune—unless you want to call it fortune when the plans of the wise and powerful and of those who rise early turned out differently than they presumed—but to the judgment of God who punishes presumptuousness in this way. Why do the people presume that they are wise and mighty in the things that are above the wisdom and might of man and that are governed by God? Why do they not use their wisdom and might where God wants them to use them, namely, in the things that are below them, about

¹¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions* I, 12.

¹¹² Virgil, *Aeneid* II, 291-292.

¹¹³ Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* II, 8.

¹¹⁴ “Leute # 1267,” Wander, *Sprichwörter-Lexikon*, III:97.

which Genesis 1:28 speaks? They are therefore rightly deceived and scream that it all happens by fortune. But they do this when it is too late, namely, after states are destroyed and empires are fallen. It is the song of fools to say, I did not intend it that way, and to accuse fortune.

Fortune, however, is not what causes our plans to be deceived. Rather, it is your foolishness and ignorance of God and of yourself that does it. First, you do not realize who you are. Second, you do not see what God's commandment is and how far he wants to be ahead of you in these matters. Like the donkeys, you begin your song on a high note; that is why you end badly.¹¹⁵ When you see this, you cry out: There is no God; there is no divine providence.¹¹⁶ Because the wisest princes do not carry out what they have most wisely set up; the mightiest kings do not accomplish what they are able to do. God is therefore unjust or simply nonexistent. Otherwise, he would have regard for the wise men, and everything would be carried out the way we determined. Excellent words indeed, as if it were truly fitting for God to be such a God who, when he sees that you as a father of the household have set up everything wisely, would simply draw near and say to you: My dear Father, your plans are good; you are a very wise man because you are able to govern, even without me. But where remain God's glory and majesty? Where remains God himself if you foresee, govern, and accomplish everything yourself? If your wisdom and might do everything, the divine wisdom and majesty are reduced to nothing.

Indeed, your plans must be reduced to nothing; your might and wisdom must be put to shame, so that you might learn from experience that, the wiser someone is, the less he accomplishes what he wants and the more foolish and more unfortunate he is. By contrast, where there is at times only little hope, there things are accomplished the easiest, so that you might realize that the wisdom and might you trust in are nothing and can do nothing but are in fact harmful. This does not mean that God condemns wisdom and might, because they are gifts God gives to man. Instead, he condemns that wise and mighty men exclude God from the government of things trusting in these gifts of God, striving to govern all things by themselves. Accordingly, Cicero, Julius Caesar, and Brutus make plans to establish the state well, thinking: This is how I will do it. Who? I, Cicero, Caesar, Brutus. How do you want to do it? By my wisdom, my might. They do not see that this presumptuousness and arrogance is sin. Then, when they see that their wisest thoughts deceive them, they become blasphemers and think there is no God or God is unjust because he does not honor human virtue and does not grant success to human wisdom. But they suffer misfortune because they exceed the limits of their wisdom and are not satisfied with having dominion over the animals of the field and over the fish in the sea, over the birds in the sky and over all animals on earth. Man has been given dominion over these things. Genesis 1:28. But they want to rule over man, who is like them, over the house, the wife, the children, kingdoms, empires by their own might and wisdom, without acknowledging God, without invoking God's help for this task.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ "Esel # 95," K. F. W. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörter-Lexikon: Ein Hausschatz für das deutsche Volk* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1867), I:858.

¹¹⁶ "Tell me, is it not completely unjust in the judgment of all that the wicked do well while the good suffer misfortune? But that is how the world runs. Here the best minds have fallen into denying that God exists, imagining instead that fate arranges all things by chance." SLE 18:1964; see AE 33:291.

¹¹⁷ "In paradise, Adam was also made lord over God's creatures and works. But not everything is put under his feet. Indeed, according to the first creation, no man is made lord over another, much less over angels. Genesis 1:28 reads

This is why this verse is the archetype and representation of the whole world. What is the whole world with all its efforts other than “rising early in vain”? Look at the princes, look at the government officials, look at the fathers of the household and the household managers, and you will see people who rise early but do so in vain. This is why they all—from highest to lowest—sing this song, a ruler as well as a household servant: I rise early and toil and eat my bread in cares. Very few are illumined by God who have this grace that they recognize they are instruments while God is the Governor, and who consider their success to be God’s gift, not the product of their wisdom and their plans. The others walk in their arrogance and ascribe everything to their work, as if they were the masters of the things. This is why they stumble. Accordingly, the failure of Cicero, Demosthenes, and other great men in the state did not consist in their being wise. Just as, in the kingdom of Israel, Ahas and Ahab appeared to be experienced statesmen. Rather, they sinned by thinking that these affairs and the empire were subject to their wisdom. Cicero saw that he was a unique orator in the Roman state; and he saw what had to be done and how everything should be governed. But because he was without the fear of God and because he attributed everything to his plans, thereby excluding God, God wanted to show him by experience that it is not enough to plan wisely and that human talents are insufficient to govern such great things, but that God’s blessing from heaven is necessary. This is why Cicero’s plans not only did not help the state, but also brought about destruction, both for himself and for the state.

The same happens with wealth and goods. Goods are not evil but a gift of God, like wisdom. God favors us by allowing us to use and possess the same. But it is evil and a diabolical striving after divinity for himself when the rich person wants to add: This is mine; this I have achieved by my prudence and my labor, considering these things only as acquired by himself. This is the evil and the diabolical striving for divinity which our parents put on in paradise, deceived by the devil. We who are conceived by them bring this striving with us into the world. Just as it is therefore impossible to put off this our flesh which we carry around with us, so it is also impossible to put off this striving for divinity completely. But the saints struggle against this striving and put it to death more and more day by day, until death finally takes it away completely with this life.

The godly who have received goods, therefore, say: I have gold; I have silver, but this is not my doing but your gift, o Lord, which you have given me by my labor. But no matter how much I had labored, I would not have anything, unless you had given it etc. But the world speaks very differently: I have a beautiful wife; I have lovely children. Who is my benefactor? Of course, I am! I deserve these things. But, says God, if you arrogate this to yourself, you lie.¹¹⁸ As a sign, I will bring it about that your children die or end up in shame; that your wife becomes sick, becomes an adulteress, or squanders your possessions, etc. Another person owns beautiful houses. If you ask him: where did you get these from, by whose work? He says: By my strength. No, and so that you

as follows: ‘Have dominion over fish in the sea, and over birds in the sky, and over all animals that move upon the earth.’ Compared to the dominion of Christ [in Ps. 8:6], this is a small dominion, namely a dominion of human reason over fish, birds, and land animals.” SLE 5:233-234; see AE 12:133.

¹¹⁸ “[I]f we believed [in God the Creator] with the heart, we would also act accordingly, and not stalk about proudly, act defiantly, and boast as though we had life, riches, power, and honor, etc., of ourselves, so that others must fear and serve us, as is the practise of the wretched, perverse world, which is drowned in blindness, and abuses all the good things and gifts of God only for its own pride, avarice, lust, and luxury, and never once regards God, so as to thank Him or acknowledge Him as Lord and Creator.” LC II, 21.

may see that this is true, I will allow them to be destroyed by fire or will allow you to die before you can enjoy them as you wish. Another yet governs in peace the state, the duchy, the kingdom. By whose strength? By my strength, he says. No, and so that you may see that this is true, I will allow sedition, war, or some other turmoil to arise that will make you wonder: Who could have suspected that this would happen?

Against this arrogance, this psalm teaches us to say: Wife, children, employees, goods, peace, kingdom, etc. are God's gifts. I will enjoy them in gratitude for as long as it pleases the Lord and for as long as the Lord gives them. When the wife or the children die, or if there is some disturbance in public life, I will say: Lord, I was the possessor of these gifts. You gave them. You have taken them away. I will therefore gladly suffer this loss, as I could not have possessed these gifts forever, etc. If your heart is prepared in this way, it can bear well the adversities which the godless must bear in greatest pain. But the world does not listen. This is why the world experiences what the psalm says: "It is in vain that you rise early." The world is its own torturer and devil plaguing itself, but in vain. And rightly so, because why do they not listen? Therefore, consider all the kingdoms, all the states, whose histories are extant—the Roman Empire, and the ones in Athens, Sparta, Thebes, etc.—and you will find a true reflection of this verse.

He gives it to his friends while they sleep.

After sufficiently rebuking our arrogance and striving for divinity, he now transitions to the second part of this psalm where he teaches that everything depends on God's blessing. This is what it means to teach rightly: First, what is wrong is torn down; then what is solid and firm is built up. One could wonder: What should we do, as our might and wisdom do not accomplish anything? We saw this in Cicero who had the greatest wisdom that can be given to a human mind, but who still did not accomplish anything by this wisdom but harmed himself and others. He certainly did not fail because of ignorance as to the matters themselves. Reason can see what is useful to do and what is not. And as we by nature are able to compare numbers and know that ten is greater than five, so Cicero can say with certainty (as far as the matter itself is concerned) what should be done when it comes to governing the state and what should not be done. He certainly does not lack wisdom, God's good creature.

But what, then, is missing? Of course, he adds arrogance, thinking that governing this matter—the most difficult by far—is a work of his wisdom. Therefore, although Cicero's wisdom is as great as that of any other statesman—as I have said before and as his writings show—he was nonetheless no match for the task he undertook. The reason is that Cicero used his wisdom to govern other people. If these people thought and wanted what Cicero thought and wanted, the matter would turn out well. But among a hundred thousand, there is scarcely one or two who approves of Cicero's plans and wants what Cicero wants. The others have something different in mind or approve of a different path. Although Cicero screams much, and the matter shows that his plan is very honest and very beneficial for the state, the majority still prevails over the better part. And the few who follow Cicero risk their lives and goods with him, the originator, by urging their plans rather stubbornly.

At the beginning of my cause, when I wrote against indulgences and other abuses, I had received from God the gift that I took this great cause upon myself and resolved to rely only on God's help. I did not think that I should undertake anything trusting in other people. Otherwise, I would have suffered the same fate as Münzer and other enthusiasts. I did rely on the goodness of the cause, that is, on God's Word itself. I thought that God's Word could not be overcome by the gates of hell, although the adversaries could easily suppress me and those who agreed with me by tyranny. And indeed, the goodness of the cause brought it about. It generated an uncommonly great approval by all, even by those who now are our bitterest enemies.¹¹⁹ Now, if I had been so foolish to think that my opinion had countless followers and had begun to undertake something trusting in these followers, as Münzer did, my end would have been like his, although for a better cause. But I preferred to follow St. Paul who admonished me in his letter to the Galatians (6:4) as follows: "Let each examine his own work, then he will have boasting in himself, not in another."

And it is useful to pay heed to this commandment also in the more important matters of state: If someone wishes to take on a big project, he should not do so trusting in other people, but resolve to take it on by himself and therefore call on God for his help. Others, who build on the favor and help of their friends, never think of God's help and therefore always have an unfortunate outcome. A certain man in Swabia, when he was led to his execution after he had tried certain plans in the state, said most wisely: What a single man cannot pick up, he should leave on the ground,¹²⁰ which is to say that one should not try anything trusting in other people.¹²¹ Taught by his own experience, he saw that what is begun trusting in others is tried without luck. To return to the matter at hand, Cicero, Demosthenes, the greatest men, did not expect the outcome in their dealings that did come to pass. That the matter turned out differently from what they expected did not happen because they did not make prudent enough plans for the state, but because of their own fault—they wanted to have the glory, not only in themselves, but also from others, as the citizens were supposed to say: Behold, we followed this man; he carried out these matters, etc., as this saying by Cicero shows:

Oh, how fortunate was Rome when I became consul!¹²²

Was this not an exceedingly arrogant statement, most worthy of reproach? This is why his final song was different, as one sees in his letter to Octavius. This is what it means to turn a gift of God into a work of human, or rather satanic, arrogance.

When their wisest plans failed, even Cicero and Demosthenes wondered what to do, whether one should set aside wisdom and resign from government, etc. Solomon responds: No, you must rule

¹¹⁹ "Follow my example. I opposed the pope, indulgences, and all the papists but without violence, without blasphemy, without raging. I simply urged, preached, and wrote God's word. Beyond that, I contributed nothing. While I was asleep or had fun, that word accomplished so much that the papacy became weak and powerless. No prince or emperor has ever inflicted such damage upon it. I did not do this. The one word, preached and written by me, has accomplished and done all this." SLE 20:20-21; see AE 51:77.

¹²⁰ "Erheben # 1," Wander, *Sprichwörter-Lexikon*, I:841.

¹²¹ "[The prince] must beware of the high and mighty, his counselors, and so conduct himself toward them that he neither despises nor trusts them to the point of entrusting everything to them. For God cannot tolerate either." SLE 10:409; see AE 45:121.

¹²² Juvenal, *Satire X*, 122.

and govern the state by making plans. He commands a father of the household to take a wife, to acquire goods, to farm the field, etc., all the while leaving in place the following: “He gives it to his friends while they sleep,” so that the words “he gives” may remain. This is to say, that everything that is obtained would be acknowledged as a gift. Also, that the “he gives his friends,” even “while they sleep,” so that it may be a gift given to the friend and given without difficulty. This is the brief summary, briefly explained, which he will then expand on in its parts. In this way, you may acknowledge that everything you look at—yourself, your life, your body, your wife, your children, peace, good success, etc.—is a gift of the Creator which he has given to no one but his friend.

This why the appearance and archetype of the world are depicted in the previous verse where there are no friends but demented, carnal people with their inborn seeking for divinity who want to govern and carry out everything by their plans. These have no gift because, although they have it, they do not acknowledge it as a gift and do not say: God has given this. But although Cicero and other philosophers sometimes call these things God’s gifts, they do not believe it but turn themselves into some kind of gods and creators who, by their plans, fortify states, expand the empire, turn away imminent turmoil, etc. By this arrogance, they challenge God so that he must send a Hannibal or Pyrrhus or must cause a civil war by Sulla or Pompey, or a conspiracy of shameful men by Catilina, so that they might recognize that they are not in charge of such great matters. In this way, even the godless have God’s gifts, although they do not acknowledge that they are gifts. But we must learn this: It is well if you have taken a wife; if you oversee a state or some other matter. But be prudent, listen to God’s Word, and recognize what you are and what you are not. You wife, your children, your employees, your goods, etc.—adorn them with the inscription that the Lord has given them to you. That is, wholeheartedly believe that they are God’s gifts which God has given you and for which he demands nothing but that you acknowledge them as his gifts with a grateful heart. But acknowledging God’s gifts as such is also a gift of God, as it is written in the Wisdom of Solomon 8:21: “I realized that I could not be chaste unless God gave it to me. This, however, was the greatest wisdom—to know whose gift it was.”

Thus, he who firmly believes that wife, children, government, etc., are God’s gifts, will not become puffed up by success because he knows that it is God’s gift, not his own work, not his own virtue, not his own fame. I therefore hope that Emperor Charles, whom God has given great fortune, believes that so many and such great things have been carried out gloriously by his men, not only because of the prudence of his or his men, but by God’s gift were carried out in this way, as has been said that he gratefully ascribed to God alone his glorious victory over the king of France at Pavia.¹²³ If a husband has this attitude, he will have pure joy in his wife and children because he believes that they are God’s gifts. He will enjoy them with thanksgiving for as long as God grants these gifts. But when God takes them away from him, he bears it with an even mind. He does not labor. He does not eat his bread with sorrows but sleeps because he is the friend whom God favors; who lives as if he were asleep; whose net is dragged as if he were asleep, as they say about Timothy. Even the pagans saw that fortune rules, as the poet says: Fate rules the world.¹²⁴ But they did not

¹²³ In March 1525, after receiving word of the victory, Charles “spent a good half-hour secluded, praising God.” Parker, *Emperor*, p. 149.

¹²⁴ E.g., Manilius, *Astronomica* IV, 14 (“fate rules the world”); Juvenal, *Satire* IX, 32 (“fate rules men”).

know the real reason why it happened that the wisest people were deceived, while things went as planned for others, who were less acclaimed for their wisdom.

When the empire was first transferred to Charles V, our invincible emperor, his gifts were generally despised. The pope, the French, the Venetians laughed at us because they admired their own wisdom and thought that Charles had nothing to match it. The admirable wisdom the enemies of the empire boasted about is now being destroyed and shamed, as Charles is victorious everywhere. Now they scream, throwing his fortune at him as an insult, saying that he has these glories not from his own efforts but that they came to him as if he was asleep. But if you look where his fortune came from, you will find that it is a gift of God. Because Charles recognizes this (as I hope and as his deeds and words attest), he is God's friend, and, as the psalm says, everything is given to his friend as if he were asleep. Now, when he experiences some misfortune (may God prevent it!), he will say, if he is a Christian: The Lord has given me success for so long. Now he takes it away. May the Lord's name be praised.

This is how the godly enjoys the things and the rule that God conceded him in Genesis 1:28. He eats; he drinks; he sleeps; he delights in his wife, his children, his goods with thanksgiving and says: Dear Lord God, it is your gift. It was your gift. If you take it away, it is yours again, etc. This is how the heart is properly and piously calm and still. The godless, however, eat their bread in cares and sleep not even at night. The godly, however, sleeps not only at night but throughout his entire life. This is to say, he has an idle heart and sleeps in his kingdom like in a soft bed. He leaves the supreme government to God and enjoys his gifts, knowing that he is God's instrument. It is as if he has everything by idleness while asleep by giving glory to God. And while doing nothing, he does everything. And while doing everything, he does nothing.

Thus, after having sufficiently rebuked man's arrogance relying on his own wisdom and human strength, he finally teaches the real cause and the supreme Lord and Ruler of the state and the household management, namely, the Lord himself. But he does so in extreme brevity: "He gives it to his friends while they sleep." But the sleep he talks about refers to the idleness and stillness of the heart or conscience, not to the idleness of the flesh or the body. One must labor and sweat with the body, but with a joyful conscience and trusting in divine blessing, as is written in Genesis 1:22, 28, that all things are preserved by God's blessing, not by our cares.

Now he continues by explaining in greater detail what he set forth in this short summary. And he does so in the same order he observed above, namely, addressing the household management first, then the state.

Behold, children are a gift of the Lord, and the fruit of the womb is a present.

Due to the fault of the Latin translator, there is an exceeding darkness in this verse. It is impossible for a Latin speaker to understand it. Not only the words, but even the manner of speaking the Holy Spirit and Scripture use, are from God. The meaning is this: Behold, this is the wisdom, rule, and manner to think rightly about household management that children are an inheritance from God, that is, God's gift; and that the fruit of the womb, that which is born from the womb, is a present, that is, God's gift. It is not unreasonable to believe that, to make a distinction in this verse, the first part refers to sons and the male sex, while the second part—fruit of the womb—refers to all female

offspring of all living things, especially among humans. The main point is really the same, namely, being father and mother does not depend on human strength but on divine strength. And even though a man begets through the woman, and the woman is impregnated by the man, both are God's gift and a divine blessing, as the text says: "God created them male and female" (Genesis 1:27). "He created," he says in order to indicate that they are not their own rulers and sculptors but that both the man and the woman are God's creatures. Then he adds: "And he blessed them: Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). This verse of the psalm flows from this passage in Genesis, because God's giving of children is not brought about by our work but by the divine blessing. But although the world experiences this, it does not understand it and does not pay attention to it. Because this begetting of offspring is a daily benefit, it is seen as of little significance. This is how the world, like a sow, rolls in the filth of its deeds and lust without acknowledging and admiring these supreme benefits of God in which the world lives and walks.

This too, however, is to be noted: God did not bless humans indiscriminately like the other animals. Rather, he adorned humans with a peculiar blessing so that we might believe more easily that it is God's gift when we have sons and daughters, lest the husband presume that he fertilizes the wife, or the wife presume that she conceives out of her own natural strength. In this way, they are to learn that these are truly divine works. This is why it happens at times that healthy and beautiful women who are joined to strong and healthy men, who have many goods and lead a prosperous life, are nonetheless infertile. This is how God shows that giving birth and begetting stems from his blessing, not from human strength or nature. By contrast, some other person who can barely fend off hunger, has the house full of children. The Germans recognize this when they say about children: Our Lord God has bestowed a child on me. But even though this expression is commonly used, there are few who admire or understand this blessing because it is obscured by miserable lust and other things showing the foulness of the flesh, namely, accidents, dangers, toils, labors, etc. These things obscure the divine blessing to the point that it does not appear to be a blessing but a curse. When the children are disobedient, the wife is recalcitrant, the parents die leaving the children behind as orphans, or the wife dies, etc., then the curse appears to be stronger than the blessing. This is why Holy Scripture calls us back to itself and commands us to consider the core and substance of marriage, which is the divine blessing. When we remain focused on this blessing, we will endure all the misfortunes and miseries of marriage.

But these misfortunes bring to light our weakness and our unbelief, because it is our nature to be moved more by one disadvantage than by a hundred advantages. We see that, when somebody has a healthy body, he is dismayed more by one sore on his knee or elbow than he rejoices about the health of the entire remaining body, as the German proverb says: If you carried someone to Rome on your back but put him down roughly, all thanks would be lost.¹²⁵ We also see this in ungrateful children. After the parents have raised them with greatest effort and many expenses, they either wait for their parents' death or they become disobedient and forget all the benefits received. This is how it happens that also in marriage the blessing is obscured by the curse. This is why the Holy Spirit nicely underscores the blessing so that we look to the Lord and to the Originator and Creator rather than to those burdens that are poured out over this exceedingly holy order of life. This is

¹²⁵ "Rom # 71," Wander, *Sprichwörter-Lexikon*, III:1717.

why are to commit to memory this verse and cling to it, as we read in Genesis 1:28: “And he blessed them.” By this word, we are to fortify ourselves against those evils and say: If our order of life is God’s blessing, I will rejoice in the Lord who blesses me, whether it turns out good or bad. And I will believe that this work pleases him, because the wife, children, house, and employees, etc. are his gift. In this way, you place this inscription on everything you have and own: It is God’s gift. And by mixing God’s blessing and majesty into your order of life, you will endure all misfortune, dangers, and burdens.

The pagans, however, and those who do not have God’s Word cannot do anything less than have this view of marriage. They, rather, believe that a man and woman are joined together by chance and that they have children like the pigs. When they have children, they raise them in hopes of riches and goods, but it most often happens that the children of great people turn out to be degenerate, as many examples show, not just in sacred history but also in our daily lives. The Holy Spirit, therefore, calls us back to God’s Word in Genesis so that we may learn that our bodies do not belong to us. If you are a man, you should recognize that everything that is male about you is a gift of God so that children are a gift of God, not your work. Therefore, remain a creature of God and persuade yourself that your male body and your life please God. Then you can, without extraordinary distress and in good conscience, enjoy what God has given you, namely, your life, your wife, your children, and your goods. And when there is some distress, you can overcome it by comparing it to the other gifts of which you will find more than disadvantages in your order of life.

Furthermore, by “children” the psalm does not simply mean the fruit of the womb, but also everything needed to feed, educate, clothe, and provide for the children. He who gives the children at the same time gives and creates that by which they are fed. Otherwise, the children could not last long. God gives these things more abundantly to the one than to the other but so that no one dies of hunger, unless he tests some in some special way. But as God acts generally and usually, the children who are born bring their food and clothing along, lest they die of want. To be sure, it happens that mothers eat their children out of unbearable hunger, but one or two such examples do not abolish the rule, because these were peculiar examples of God’s wrath and punishment. But there is a difference between talking about God who is angry and sends punishments and talking about God who governs and rules us. This is why we see that the children of those who barely survive on water and bread have rosy cheeks and healthy bodies, while the children of many who have the greatest wealth and live in prosperity walk about like shadows and look sickly pale. Why is this? Because the children are a gift of God whom God himself has created. He therefore gives at once that which the children cannot do without, as the first creation of man shows us: Before Adam was made out of the earth, God the Creator himself prepared the earth as his house in which he is to live, not leaving the house empty and useless, but adorning it with all kinds of goods and delights. God did this to show us who are Adam’s offspring that he would be our Father and govern us and provide everything to us richly, if only we believe.

Accordingly, while the fruit lives in the womb, it is nourished by God alone, without any labor and cares of its own. Indeed, what should the fruit do, as it lies there senselessly? And after the fruit is brought into this world by birth, the child finds a ready-made cellar—the mother’s breasts as a

fountain intended for this—a ready-made kitchen, baths, diapers, and other necessary things. And there are not only other women who work to care for the child but also the angels, as many very clear examples show. From where does all this come? Of course, because God himself preserves his gifts, he also richly bestows the things by which they are preserved. This is why “children” in this verse means not only the flesh, skin, and bones of children but everything what pertains to children.

In the same way, wife and husband also do not refer to their mere bodies but include a place to live, a hearth, food, drink and everything required for the household management. But these are God’s gifts, whether we have them in abundance or not, because God does not distribute his gifts in the same way. But God gifts are sufficiently great and abundant, even when they are given sparingly. Just as we value the gifts we receive from princes more as an expression of their feelings than based on the gift’s value, no matter how small they may be, so God’s goodwill and blessing should be sufficient for you when God gives you a small gift that barely keeps you and yours alive. Even the smallest gift lets you know for certain that God is gracious to you and has given you these gifts. If he takes them from you, you can endure it with an even mind because you know they were not your property, but God’s. In this way, your heart is calm and idle, whether you have abundance or lack. And because you put on God by receiving his benefits and, as it were, absorb him into your body, those benefits become richer and greater, no matter how small they may appear.¹²⁶

May this be sufficient about the meaning of the prophet. We still have to touch a bit on the grammar which is somewhat darker because of the Hebrew way of speaking. What the Hebrew states as: The inheritance of the Lord are children, a Latin speaker could state as: children are a gift from the Lord. The word “inheritance” has a very broad meaning among the Hebrews. They call an inheritance the land which Joshua distributed among the people (Joshua 1:6), which is why the word applies to all donations figuratively, because the land Canaan was simply given to the people of Israel as a gift. This is why they call all possessions, property, and gifts “inheritance.” Accordingly, it says in Psalm 119:111: Your law is my inheritance, that is, the gift you have given me, my greatest inheritance. We use the word inheritance somewhat differently as referring to something our parents left us. But for the Hebrews, it means a gift and a portion given by God.

The concept of reward is very widely used in Hebrew. In Jeremiah 31:16, it says: “It is wages for your work.” And in Job it says, This is the reward of those who sow wind.¹²⁷ And in Psalm 109:20, it says: “Let this be the Lord’s reward for those who are against me,” etc. It means a gift, wages for work, a divine present, as it is written in Isaiah 40:10 and 62:11. Accordingly, Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Stand firm, because your work will not be in vain.”

This, then, is the Holy Spirit’s domestic teaching and a truly Christian household management, that you believe that children and everything else is a gift from God. When we recognize for certain that we receive all things out of God’s giving hand, as it were, then we will soon learn, by a beautiful conclusion taught by the Holy Spirit, how we must bear and overcome all dangers,

¹²⁶ “[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.” LC II, 24.

¹²⁷ See Hosea 8:7: “They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.”

misfortune, and misery so that we can say with Job: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; praised by the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21), even if our wife or children die or some other misfortune strike us. Reason, already illumined by the Word, acknowledges the blessing and gives thanks. In adversity, however, it does not resist God’s will. This does not mean that losing God’s gift should not cause our flesh any sorrow, because we comfort, not the flesh, but the spirit. Even the saints feel those evils and are struck by them, but they are not overcome by them. Accordingly, Jacob, after he had lost Joseph, was very sad, but did not despair, did not blaspheme, but bore the misfortune because he saw that Joseph was a gift from God who took him back again. He who is prepared in this manner will never lack anything.

But it is not enough to learn this teaching from a book. Applying it and gaining experience in it is necessary, without which this household management will never be learned, as we see in those whose eyes are on nothing but fortune and chance. When they enter marriage with such a heart to feed their sexual desires and to raise their children to obtain great possessions and offices by their own wisdom, they will experience the opposite in all things, as they will perish with their children and wives and possessions, because they do not know that the divine blessing is necessary. Those, however, who receive these gifts as God’s blessing, have a calm and idle heart, even if fortune does not smile on them.

Like the arrows in the hand of a strong one, so the young men turn out.

This is a military simile. It is somewhat dark but pertains to the state. The bow in the hands of a strong archer is not drawn in vain, as David says about Jonathan: “Jonathan’s arrow never returned” (2 Samuel 1:22), that is, he never missed its mark but hits the mark and pierces it. This is why Isaiah calls the apostles arrows (Isaiah 49:2);¹²⁸ Zechariah does the same (Zechariah 9:13).¹²⁹ Thus, this is the meaning: It is God’s gift when one rules without strife at home and is victorious abroad. Without this gift, there is no happy government nor victory in war. In the state, there are always more enemies than friends, and the majority is always evil and generally prevails over the better part, unless God helps the latter. It is therefore entirely God’s gift when the condition of the state is happy both at home and abroad.

The Latin translator wrote “sons of the outcast,” but it says that the “sons of the youth” are to protect the state by weapons and wage wars. They are like arrows that hit their marks because they are sent and given by God. Old men are not fit for war, as the old verse says:

Action belongs to the young men; plans to the middle-aged men; prayers to the old men.¹³⁰

This means that the young men must do the work in the state, but the middle-aged men should do the planning, but those of old age should help the state by their prayers. Just as he wrote about male children in the household, so he writes about young men here. This way, he covers both things—nourishing and defending—because these two things are necessary for the political and bodily life.

¹²⁸ See AE 12:229; AE 17:171.

¹²⁹ See AE 20:293-294.

¹³⁰ Hesiod, Fragments.

But listen how he adorns the defense of the state with a very honorable title by calling these young men a gift of God which God turns into victorious arrows that pierce the enemies so that they win the victory. Experience taught even the pagans that victory does not depend on the size and might of the army but that it is a gift of God and that more depends on diligence and planning than on the weapons themselves. Accordingly, it has often happened that a small troop overcame the greatest armies. This does not mean that one should not prepare arms and armies. Rather, if necessity forces a government official to wage war, he should neither be arrogant on account of its large army nor despair on account of its small army. He should instead look to his calling that his office forces him to fight and to seek victory. He should ask God for this victory, saying: Lord, with you is strength and victory, be my help, etc. Again, you should not think that victory is assured if you have more men and might than your enemy, but request victory from God: Lord, yours is victory. I will thank you if you will give it. But if you will avenge our sins by defeat, behold, here I am.

If such confidence is even just in the leader who acknowledges his calling and who asks God for help, he will doubtlessly win the victory, as did Jephthah in Judges 11:30-32: He held the office of judge and would have liked to live in peace with his people, but the Ammonites did not allow it. Jephthah therefore put before God the necessity to fight imposed on Jephthah by the Ammonites and asked God for help against the enemies. This is how he won, because he acknowledged that victory was not his work, but God's gift. David similarly won many and glorious victories against the enemies, one after another. From where did these victories come? He had weapons, cavalry, infantry. But these, he said, do not help to win the victory. This is why he asked the Lord for victory and expected it from him. Certain victory followed this faith. Solomon therefore teaches in this verse that victory is truly a gift from God. And just like arrows pierce when they are shot and launched with strength, so the young men succeed in war by God's blessing, not on account of their own strength or arrogance. "Sons of youth" is a Hebrew expression which means "young men," just like those who are destined to die are called "sons of death" (1 Samuel 26:16).

Now he concludes the psalm:

Blessed is the man whose quiver is filled with them. They will not be put to shame when they speak with their enemies in the gate.

This is to say: Blessed is the prince, that is, happy is the state that has this blessing and recognizes it as God's gift. Then there must be victory and peace at home and abroad. But although it happens that some die and are killed (this is similar to scabs on the skin), the body is preserved, and the victory is accomplished. Victory is rarely won without the shedding of any blood. The greater the danger, the more glory the soldiers win. And there is more joy about a difficult victory than sorrow over shed blood. In the same way, household management—and any part of life in general—is also not conducted without undergoing some inconvenience. But it is not to be considered an inconvenience when the skin—this simile pleases me—gets some minor scabs, while the body as a whole is well. It is established, then, that those are blessed who have such young men as their defenders, even if some of them perish. That is, blessed are those who have this gift and know that it is God's gift.

“Speak in the gate” is a Hebrew expression. It means not simply speaking, but speaking in a political manner, that is, giving laws, governing by laws, issuing orders, restraining evildoers, etc., as if he wanted to say: Where there are such young men, they know how to speak in the gate, that is, they act rightly when it comes to the affairs of the state. They are rulers, founders, and preserves of the state and the laws. But listen to what he adds, namely, that they not only have enemies who attack them, but also adversaries who hate them. This is why a government official must learn to put up with these animosities. Otherwise, if he is deterred by this hatred and wishes to chase after the favors of the people, there will be anarchy, as we see at the courts of the princes. Because everybody there wants to be in the princes’ good graces, they do not dare to reprove or condemn anything, lest they fall out of the princes’ favor. But why do they seek a government office, why do they live at court, if their eyes are set only on reward and fame, not on the labors. This is why government nowhere has the proper form, and everything is administered in a very bad way. But those who do not want to expose themselves to the disfavor and hatred of men should stay away from government offices.

Who has ever governed a kingdom in a holier way than David? Still, his seditious son Absalom rose up who accused David among the mob and easily found those who believed him (2 Samuel 15). Why was that? Because David was a most holy king who did not overlook the crimes of his subjects but harshly punished those who deserved it. This was the first thing that caused the mob to hate and envy David. They also could easily be seduced to fall away from David because David’s son was added as the leader and originator of the sedition. It can be no different—those who earnestly carry out their government offices incur the hatred of the evil people. This is why those among us are smart who seek to retain governmental posts and offices without any burdensome labors. But this attitude represents a great danger for the state.

We must therefore take the words “speaking with the enemies in the gates” not in a simple way, as if it were an idle matter, because it means giving law, executing laws, coercing evildoers by prison, fetters, and harsh penalties, causing the anger of malicious people against oneself, etc. As a result, those who lead the state should do so not without fear of the greatest dangers as far as the daring of evil people is concerned. Governing is nothing other than taking on hatred and engaging with these teeth-baring and exceedingly angry beasts. When Aischines left Athens, he said that he was glad to be relieved of the state as of an angry dog.¹³¹ And Bias said: A governmental office shows what kind of a man someone is.¹³² Indeed, how many cities can keep their citizens in check? How many princes can keep their noblemen in check? Of all human works, governing is by far the most difficult. But it is here as in marriage: He who marries his wife to find sexual gratification and pleasure is greatly deceived and will be entangled in difficulties he never anticipated. In the same way, those who take on a governmental office enticed by the hope of rewards and fame will find that everything is quite different if only they want to do their duty.¹³³ This is why it happens that

¹³¹ Pseudo-Aischines, Letter V.

¹³² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* V, 1. Others attribute the statement to Pittacus of Mytilene, another one of the seven Greek sages. See J. C. Orellius, *Opuscula Graecorum veterum sententiosa et moralia* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1819), I:173.

¹³³ By carrying out his duties toward God and man, “[the prince’s] job will be done right, outwardly and inwardly, in a way that will please God and the people. But he must expect much envy and sorrow as a result. The cross will soon weigh down such undertaking.” SLE 10:414; see AE 45:126.

they, broken by the magnitude of the labors and by their impatience, become indignant and throw everything away.

One must therefore learn that one will encounter all these vices when administering a public office: hatred, rebellion, sedition, disobedience, ingratitude, a thousand dangers, disturbers of peace and quiet who go after your life, your goods, and your office. What, then, is a government official to do? Certainly, he must know, first, that government is an order established by God and firmly maintain that he has entered this office according to the will of God. Then, after making this determination, he should also strengthen and fortify his courage against all dangers and do his duty, regardless of whether the citizens become indignant or not. Then it will happen that God will give his blessing and will help you, not your enemies, as he says here: You will not be put to shame, even if you must deal with the enemies and with the disobedient and seditious citizens. Psalm 144:2 similarly calls God the one “who subdues my people under me.” Similarly, David, in Psalm 7:8, calls God “judge over the people,” as if David wanted to say: It is beyond my strengths, my prudence or wisdom to govern this people. It is therefore the Lord who gives obedient citizens and preserves the people who by nature hates the government, because they all want to be free and hardly tolerate it that their licentiousness is curbed by the bonds of the laws. We see this today in the nobility who demand impunity for all their actions. If a prince wants to restrain them, they fall away from him.

Against all these dangers, the Holy Spirit here comforts the government official: When you have given laws, he says, you will not be put to shame, because God will give you young men who are able to help you. In a state, it is often one or two good men who by their gravity and strictness keep all the other citizens in check. Others, however, who overlook everything to avoid becoming targets of hatred, are not government officials but only painted pictures of such and painted princes who are good for nothing.

Now you have this psalm that deals with the state and household management, showing how a godly heart is to carry out these orders of life, lest we fall into false security by prosperity or, broken by adversity, leave these offices. This happens to the godless who, without the fear of God, enter into marriage or government by chance. Because they do not know that these things are governed by God, they want to rule everything by their plans. This is why they either dangerously stumble or are sucked so deeply into false security that they cannot be called back to sound plans. We must therefore take care to learn this teaching that is necessary and useful to learn for all whom God has already placed in these orders of life or whom he may one day place there. By doing so, we will be of great benefit to ourselves and to the state. Then our office will also be pleasing to God who, as he has promised, will add success and prove by his actions “that he is pleased with all those who fear him and with those who hope in his mercy” (Psalm 147:11). Amen.