



A PRIMER ON LUTHER'S POLITICS

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

It seems like a good time to review Martin Luther's political theology. There's more to the story than the two kingdoms!

Luther's first major foray into such matters was the Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation in 1520. His main purpose was to break inflated ecclesiastical power over civil matters, not in order to award unlimited authority to the state but to allow the church to go back to being the church.

The tone of the Address was hortatory and practical, but a more solid theoretical foundation needed to be laid. Luther undertook that with his 1523 treatise *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*. In some ways it was the first assault on the notion of Christendom as a holy society in which faith and government merge into a seamless whole. Luther thought to the contrary that true Christians are rare, but the church's job is not to curb or reform inadequately Christian persons with civil penalties. The state instead takes up the inevitably violent business of governing the violent. But the state has no authority over the soul and therefore none over faith, so here Luther also lays down some of the first theoretical underpinnings for religious liberty.

Luther's next political imbroglio was the Peasants' War. Before it actually broke out, he had seen the peasants' twelve demands on their overlords, in which they invoked Luther's name. His response, *The Admonition to Peace*, harangued lords and serfs alike for their bad behavior and enumerated their proper duties to one another. Following the insights of *Temporal Authority*, he severely criticized the notion that one has a *Christian* right to rebellion. But neither nobles nor peasants listened to him, and the result was the bloodiest and the last of a century's worth of uprisings.

Whether Soldiers, Too, May Be Saved was written

by Luther in 1526 to elaborate his previous distinction between person and office. A Christian is to do no harm, but sometimes the state requires certain harm to be done in order to prevent worse harm. Luther thus explores the situations in which a Christian may rightly engage in coercive public offices for the sake of the community, and when a Christian must refrain from doing so.

Finally, in 1529 Luther and the rest of Europe were faced with the specter of Turkish invasion and occupation after the Ottoman empire's advance as far as Vienna. Military upheaval was certainly common coin within Europe, but this posed the new prospect of rulers of a different religion. Was the threat a punishment from God or a call to a new crusade? Luther again assigns distinct tasks to Christians-as-such and civic-leaders-as-such.

Needless to say, each of these writings is very much an occasional writing, responding to specific conditions that don't translate easily or obviously to our times, a topic we'll take up again below. But what is consistent throughout, and does time-travel rather better, are Luther's political principles. We'll glean from these treatises three basic convictions that are operative throughout Luther's political writings.

Radical Personal Pacifism

If you were to hear the name "Martin Luther" in conjunction with "radical pacifism" or "nonviolent resistance," you might well assume that it was another case of confusing the reformer with Martin Luther King Jr. It probably says something none-too-flattering about Lutheran history in the intermediate five hundred years that Luther's radical personal pacifism has all but vanished from view.

But, in truth, Luther advocated a personal pacifism of such extremity that it might make even a Mennonite blanch. In *Temporal Authority*, Luther tosses out the medi-

eval notion that the commands of the Sermon on the Mount—such as “Do not resist the one who is evil” (Matthew 5:39) and “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44)—are only counsels of perfection for aspiring saints but not enjoined upon all Christians. Quite the contrary, Luther insists that every single Christian without exception is called to suffer as suffering comes, without vengeance or even self-defense.¹ A true Christian doesn’t even demand justice but accepts whatever comes under the aegis of the omnipotent Lord, Whose ultimate good will is sometimes masked by temporal harm. “In what concerns you and yours,” Luther writes, “you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian...”²

This is precisely why Luther was so hard on the peasants, who claimed a divine right to revolution. Luther in no way denied that they were being ill-treated. Indeed, he berated the lords and warned them that rebellion would be their just deserts if they didn’t carry out their God-given duties toward their subjects. The peasants, for their part, may have had a *just* claim to protest, but not a *Christian* one.³ Likewise, Luther denied a *Christian* argument for battle against the Turks, even if they were of a hostile religion. He condemned those who “undertook to fight against the Turk in the name of Christ, and taught and incited men to do this, as though our people were an army of Christians against the Turks, who were enemies of Christ. This is absolutely contrary to Christ’s doctrine and name. It is against his doctrine because he says that Christians shall not resist evil, fight, or quarrel, nor take revenge or insist on rights [Matt. 5:39].”⁴

If people wish to be truly Christian in matters of justice, they need to adopt a different posture: a sponge-like absorption of all harm, on the model of the crucified savior. Luther explains:

Your Supreme Lord Christ, whose name you bear, says, in

Matthew 6 [5:39–41], “Do not resist one who is evil. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. If anyone wants to take your coat, let him have your cloak too. If anyone strikes you on one cheek, offer him the other too.” Do you hear this, O Christian association? How does your program stand in light of this law? You do not want to endure evil or suffering, but rather want to be free and to experience only goodness and justice. However, Christ says that we should not resist evil or injustice but always yield, suffer, and let things be taken from us. If you will not bear this law, then lay aside the name of Christian and claim another name that accords with your actions, or else Christ himself will tear his name away from you, and that will be too hard for you...⁵

In any case, among themselves true Christians need no laws and certainly no swords. That is because they not only fulfill the true law of God but go above and beyond it, willingly and joyfully. If there were a community of the holy, there would be no need of leaders, much less warriors and hangmen. But this unlikely community is not the church as it is now. “There are few true believers,” Luther says ruefully, “and still fewer who live a Christian life, who do not resist evil and indeed themselves do no evil.”⁶ Civil life, though, is an excellent training ground for a person who desires to be a true Christian, since obedience to the civil law (insofar as that law is harmless—more of this later) is a good exercise in death to self-will.

Self-will, in fact, is one of the main reasons Luther stresses radical personal pacifism so strongly. Pacifism is not meant to be the exclusive province of a handful of exceptionally fearless Christians. Pacifism is rather the mortification of the tendency to look out for number one that characterizes all of human existence. For Luther, as for

Augustine, this is the essence of original sin: not lust or violence or greed, but self-protection all the way down, to the point of distrusting God and putting on all kinds of shows of righteousness that are really a matter of securing one’s own position. That’s why, finally, the peasants can’t fight for their own cause. Luther observes, “[Y]our rebellion actually involves you in such a way that you make yourselves your own judges and avenge yourselves. You are quite unwilling to suffer any wrong. That is contrary not only to Christian law and the gospel, but also to natural law and all equity.”⁷ Civil law and theological law agree: a person cannot be plaintiff, prosecutor, and judge all in one!

Can a true Christian do absolutely nothing in the face of threatened evil? The only legitimate weapons to take up are prayer and repentance. Luther gives a startling account of these weapons and whom they fight against:

Since the Turk is the rod of the wrath of the Lord our God and the servant of the raging devil, the first thing to be done is to smite the devil, his lord, and take the rod out of God’s hand, so that the Turk may be found only, in his own strength, all by himself, without the devil’s help and without God’s hand. This should be done by Sir Christian, that is, by the pious, holy, precious body of Christians. They are the people who have the arms for this war and they know how to use them. If the Turk’s god, the devil, is not beaten first, there is reason to fear that the Turk will not be so easy to beat...⁸

In other words, the enemy is always first of all within—our own sin—against which God fearsomely battles. If we want to end this battle with God, our only recourse is prayer and amendment of life. Then, perhaps, God will show mercy and deliver us from temporal threats. We are never given permission to locate all evil in the other.

Thus, Luther can conclude, “Christians do not fight for themselves with sword and musket, but with the cross and with suffering, just as Christ, our leader, does not bear a sword, but hangs on the cross. Your victory, therefore, does not consist in conquering and reigning, or in the use of force, but in defeat and in weakness...”⁹ And if that results in being robbed of your belongings or forced into exile, so be it. God’s people Israel were not exempt from such treatment, so why should you be?

The Office of Temporal Authority

After such a forceful (!) account of Christians’ radical personal pacifism, one might well conclude either that Luther has indulged in useless dreaming with no purchase on the real world, or that the business of governing should be left to the pagans and unbelievers while Christians quietly consent to being extinguished. But of course, neither is the case.

Luther never concedes on the point of pacifism—*on one’s own behalf*. There is no dodging the crucified messiah: if the world’s injustice hounds you to death, then go to your death with the same faith and courage as the martyrs. This courageous suffering of evil doesn’t condone the evil but actively and loudly bears witness against it, exposing the violence by refusing to meet it with more violence.

But it’s not only *your own* life that’s in your hands. Quite often the lives of others are in your hands as well. Your realm might be as small as your own children or as large as a superpower. In that case, while still committing yourself to personal pacifism, your job is to protect those that God has placed in your care: “[I]n what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor.”¹⁰ As one holding authority, you are to check violence and evil and to prevent sin from running rampant. You love your enemy, but you also love your enemy’s victim.

“If people were good and wanted to keep peace,” Luther observes, “war would be the greatest plague on earth. But what are you going to do about the fact that people will not keep the peace, but rob, steal, kill, outrage women and children, and take away property and honor? The small lack

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of peace called war or the sword must set a limit to this universal, worldwide lack of peace which would destroy everyone.”¹¹ So temporal authority has a specific, divinely-appointed job: “the temporal sword and law be used for the punishment of the wicked and the protection of the upright.”¹² On these grounds Luther defends not only temporal authority in itself, not only devout and personally pacifistic Christians *obeying* temporal authority,¹³ but even devout and personally pacifistic Christians *exercising* temporal authority.

This poses a new and interesting set of problems. Some kinds of authority can be oriented according to divine love—for Luther, this is parental authority at its best, as he discusses at length in his explanation of the Fourth Commandment in the Large Catechism. But sin has forced upon humanity another order of authority that threatens, restrains, and punishes. Since this task of civil governance, even if retaining some parental features, still necessarily involves power

to the point of violence, how can Christians accomplish their temporal duties without destroying their souls in the process? It’s not altogether easy to detach personal pacifism from the public office of authority, especially when inflicting punishment and death on others is involved.

The first thing Luther has to say is that, in and of themselves, these tasks are good in the sense that God has ordained them to reduce sin and strife. “There must be those who arrest, prosecute, execute, and destroy the wicked, and who protect, acquit, defend, and save the good. Therefore, when they perform their duties, not with the intention of seeking their own ends but only of helping the law and the governing authority function to coerce the wicked, there is no peril in that,”¹⁴ he assures.

But leaders who do that are even harder to find than private Christians who willingly turn the other cheek. “You must know that since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince even rarer.”¹⁵ So Luther offers advice to those Christians in public office who would, after all, like to save their souls.

He enumerates four points. First of all, a just and Christian ruler

must give consideration and attention to his subjects, and really devote himself to it. This he does when he directs his every thought to making himself useful and beneficial to them; when instead of thinking, “The land and people belong to me, I will do what best pleases me,” he thinks rather, “I belong to the land and the people, I shall do what is useful and good for them. My concern will be not how to lord it over them and dominate them, but how to protect and maintain them in peace and plenty.”¹⁶

Service to others is paramount, but so is *attention* to others. Well-meant but ignorant service won’t do the trick.

Second, leaders have to be aware of the swarm of flatterers and traitors swirling all around. The wicked are drawn to power and will exploit their proximity to it, given half a chance. Yet leaders should not be so narcissistic as to suppose they can figure it out all on their own. Neither despise nor trust your advisers, Luther suggests, and never dismiss anyone as too lowly to have wisdom—after all, God “once spoke through the mouth of an ass,”¹⁷ and presumably the political realm is well stocked with many more.

Third, justice toward criminals must be a matter of wisdom and prudence. It’s not enough simply to enact the laws as written, for the extent of the harm must be limited, and some kinds of punishment cause even more hurt. Perhaps thinking of his own experience of monastic scrupulosity, Luther remarks, “[I]t is impossible to establish hard and fast rules and laws in this matter. There are so many cases and so many exceptions to any rule that it is very difficult or even impossible to decide everything accurately and equitably. This is true of all laws; they can never be formulated so certainly and so justly that cases do not arise which deserve to be made exceptions.”¹⁸

Fourth and finally, Luther comes to “what should really have been placed first,” namely, that a ruler “must act in a Christian way toward his God also; that is, he must subject himself to him in entire confidence and pray for wisdom to rule well, as Solomon did.”¹⁹ (And even then, things didn’t turn out so well for Solomon. Let the leader be warned.)

In his accounts of temporal authority Luther also discusses conditions for war.

No war is just, even if it is a war between equals, unless one has such a good reason for fighting and such a good conscience that he can say, “My neighbor compels and forces me to fight, though I would rather avoid it.” In that case, it can be called not

only war, but lawful self-defense, for we must distinguish between wars that someone begins because that is what he wants to do and does before anyone else attacks him, and those wars that are provoked when an attack is made by someone else. The first kind can be called wars of desire; the second, wars of necessity. The first kind are of the devil; God does not give good fortune to the man who wages that kind of war. The second kind are human disasters; God help in them!²⁰

War is never, ever to be aggressive or offensive (or, perhaps we would add now, pre-emptive). If disputes arise, every peaceful means must be exhausted before war can be considered, even if it means that a particular leader will lose power. For “[i]t is easy to start a fight, but we cannot stop the fighting whenever we want to.”²¹ The good of the people is paramount, not maintaining office—hence the call for leaders to make unpopular decisions against war and revenge.

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avoid public office, Luther actually urges them to it, hoping in this way to improve the overall conditions of society and justice. It is a legitimate calling, so long as it is exercised rightly. “Therefore, if you see that there is a lack of hangmen, constables, judges,

lords, or princes, and you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the position, that the essential governmental authority may not be despised and become enfeebled or perish. The world cannot and dare not dispense with it.”²²

The Duty of Disobedience

But Luther has already told us that true Christians are rare and true Christian rulers even rarer. And that means Christians will regularly find themselves not only suffering under the injustice of the ruler but being commanded to participate in that injustice. What then?

This dilemma brings us back to the problem of judging in one’s own case by selecting when to obey the temporal authorities and when to resist. Luther and his era had far more experience of anarchy than of totalitarianism, and his instincts lay in favor of order at (almost) all costs. Even so, just as he had limited the authority of the church, so also he limited the authority of the state, “for where it is given too wide a scope, intolerable and terrible injury follows; on the other hand, injury is also inevitable where it is restricted too narrowly.”²³ Still, given two bad choices, Luther argues that it’s better to punish too little than too much, “for it is always better to let a scoundrel live than to put a godly man to death. The world has plenty of scoundrels anyway and must continue to have them, but godly men are scarce.”²⁴

But suppose the state is punishing too much or overreaching its bounds, and Christians are snared in its traps. Luther still argues for the Sermon on the Mount ethic, but he distinguishes between nonresistance and obedience. “Outrage is not to be resisted but endured; yet we should not sanction it, or lift a little finger to conform, or obey.”²⁵ So, if the leader declares a war of self-defense, and the cause is just, then it is acceptable to fight—as long, Luther adds, as the soldiers do not rape the women among the con-

quered.²⁶ But if the leader does wrong in declaring war, then the people are released from their bond of obedience. And here Luther invokes a verse that would become important in the political fallout of the Reformation: “[I]t is no one’s duty to do wrong; *we must obey God (who desires the right) rather than men* [Acts 5:29].”²⁷

It’s certainly not Luther’s loudest trumpet blast. Between peasant uprisings and spiritualist interpreters of the Bible, Luther was not much interested in handing out any more grounds for rebellion than he already had. Romans 13 demands obedience to temporal rulers as a matter of conscience. And yet, despite all the trouble it could cause, Luther uplifted this other biblical theme: the right and even the duty to disobey when commanded to do

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evil. You can’t hand your conscience over to your ruler and excuse yourself on Judgment Day on those grounds.²⁸ You must refrain from evil, even if it involves civil disobedience.

This became important throughout the political evolution of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Acts 5:29 was quoted six times in the Book of Concord, mostly with regard to rejecting human traditions in the church, but also with regard to political affairs. In the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon declared that Christians are “obliged to be subject to political authority and to obey its commands and laws in all that may be done without sin. But if a command of the political authority cannot be

followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings (Acts 5[:29]).”²⁹ In the Apology, he expressed the reformers’ regret that they could not obey “His Majesty the Emperor, whom we revere not only on account of the dignity of the imperial office but also on account of the truly heroic virtues with which we have known him to be endowed,” since the conditions of peaceable reconciliation are at odds with the gospel, and they must obey God rather than human authority, citing again the verse in Acts.³⁰

This principle would live on during the sixteenth-century “interims,” during which “Catholic” forms of worship were imposed on Lutheran areas as the condition of peace. What we frivolously refer to today as “worship wars” were the real thing back then—not disputes of class and taste about vestments or grape juice but what faithful worship looks like under a situation of political coercion. Of paramount importance was that things are to be done because the gospel calls for them, not because the state’s official organ of violence imposes them. Unnecessary requirements are to be resisted; disobedience in church is a political act. Circling back to radical pacifism, Christians are to be prepared to suffer for their disobedience.

Translating Luther’s Politics

Direct correlations between Luther’s political situation and ours are few and far between. He lived at the tail end of an ancient marriage between church and state; we live in a secular democracy. He knew unalterable social class, limited education, and frozen capital; we have great if not limitless social mobility and universal if not perfect education, and we are awash in capital. He could tolerate the notion of serfdom; we have fought a war over slavery and despise it, though we are still reckoning with unjust labor practices. He knew an almost homogenous society; we live in a nation of extreme pluralism. He

could not abide the thought of subjects overthrowing their lords; we have the experience of a successful revolution followed by an improved system of government.³¹ He lived in a physically dangerous and unmonitored society; we have an extensive police force with ever-growing mechanisms of surveillance. He knew rulers with lifetime and often hereditary rights to rule; we know term-limited elected officials. And so forth.

Further, and perhaps more important than any of the foregoing, is how our technology has sped ahead of our capacity to deal with it. The surveillance mechanisms are one thing, but the weaponry we now have necessarily alters the way we talk about war and violence. Luther could say of a justified war of defense in his own time, “[I]t is both Christian and an act of love to kill the enemy without hesitation, to plunder and burn and injure him by every method of warfare until he is conquered.”³² In an era of nuclear weapons, chemical warfare, and drones, this is a horrifying prospect. On a smaller scale there is the question of personal weapons. Christians may be obligated to protect their families physically, but it’s hardly self-evident that this obligation extends to the point of owning and using sub-machine guns. We have to face the reality that the practice of protection may actually incur more violence, and that the ownership of weaponry may fatally compromise the radical personal pacifism that the Sermon on the Mount requires of us.

And finally, Luther’s rejection of self-defense as an expression of self-will may well be right, but it begs the question of putting an end to systemic oppression. In cases of domestic or sexual abuse, secrecy is often the paramount tactic of the assailant, which means the victims *must* act on their own behalf before anyone else can even begin to act for them. Persons of privilege, for their part, may be absolutely blind to their oppression of others until their victims force that recognition on them. It is a double

evil of the powerful that their failure to defend the helpless forces the helpless into greater sins. And if evildoers occupy all the seats of law and judgment, how is a neutral party to be found to adjudicate the conflict?

Despite these challenges specific to our time and unforeseen by Luther, his basic insights are sound. The New Testament offers no provision for Christian violence, so Luther's radical personal pacifism is a timely challenge to all-too-easy justifications of aggression and vengeance, whether physical, emotional, or social. He may have been less comfortable with widescale social and political change than we are, but he wasn't wrong to distinguish absolutely between the justice within human reach and the kingdom of heaven. There is no option simply to abdicate the need for a state, or for the state's violence; what's needed rather are ego-tamed civil servants who listen before they act and prefer losing power to hoarding it. Even at its best, such a state will be a provisional and flawed measure, not the kingdom. And that is why the faithful must be prepared for disobedience, at whatever cost, to bear witness against the violence instead of increasing it.

None of this can be done on a purely personal level, though. On rare occasions extraordinary figures rise up to remind us of what the public life of Christians might be. Sophie Scholl lived out her pacifism to the point of beheading at the hands of Nazis; Dag Hammarskjöld was not only one of the greatest Lutheran civil servants but one of the greatest civil servants in human history, full stop; Dietrich Bonhoeffer embodied faithful disobe-

dience as both Christian and citizen. But these ways of being Christian in the world call not for occasional heroes but for a whole committed community. We will be pacifists when we know that others are looking out for our best interests so we can be free from the inevitable snares of our own. We will serve well in the public sphere

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when we are part of a larger conversation about the shape and details of justice and hold each other mutually accountable when force seems necessary. We will have the courage to disobey evil policies when we are bound together by a greater hope and vision.

We dare not delay any longer. *LF*

Notes

1. Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW], 45:87–88.

2. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:96.

3. Martin Luther, "Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia," LW 46:32.

4. Martin Luther, "On War against the Turk," LW 46:165.

5. "Admonition to Peace," LW 46:28–29.

6. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:90.

7. "Admonition to Peace," LW 46:25.

8. "On War," LW 46:170.

9. "Admonition to Peace," LW 46:32.

10. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:96.

11. Martin Luther, "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved," LW 46:96.

12. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:87.

13. "[T]he Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to assist the governing authority, that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear. Although he has no need of these things for himself—to him they are not essential—nevertheless, he concerns himself about what is serviceable and of benefit to others..." "Temporal Authority," LW 45:94.

14. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:103.

15. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:113.

16. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:120.

17. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:121.

18. "Whether Soldiers," LW 46:100.

19. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:126.

20. "Whether Soldiers," LW 46:121.

21. "Admonition to Peace," LW 46:42.

22. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:95.

23. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:104.

24. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:105.

25. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:112.

26. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:125.

27. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:125. My italics.

28. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:108.

29. Philip Melancthon, "The Augsburg Confession," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC], 50.6–7, Latin text.

30. Philip Melancthon, "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," BC 294.24.

31. Though the American case may be the exception that proves the rule. Luther sagely observes, "There is as great a difference between changing a government and improving it as the distance from heaven to earth. It is easy to change a government, but it is difficult to get one that is better, and the danger is that you will not." "Whether Soldiers," LW 46:111–112. The revolutions of the past half-millennium tend to bear out his observation.

32. "Temporal Authority," LW 45:125.