

CHRISTIANS CAN BE SOLDIERS

Dedicated to my fellow soldiers
at the
10th Combat Aviation Brigade
Ft. Drum, NY
Fly to Glory

CHRISTIANS CAN BE SOLDIERS

FROM MARTIN LUTHER'S
*WHETHER SOLDIERS TOO CAN BE
IN A HOLY ESTATE*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>FOREWORD</i>	7
1	<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	11
2	<i>WHAT DOES WAR PREVENT?</i>	17
3	<i>AREN'T PRESENT-DAY WARS DIFFERENT?</i>	23
4	<i>HOW CAN THE SWORD BE ADMINISTERED JUSTLY?</i>	29
5	<i>IS REBELLION EVER JUSTIFIED?</i>	35
6	<i>THE SIN OF AUTHORITIES IS NOT CORRECTED BY SIN</i>	43
7	<i>CHANGING AUTHORITIES DIFFERS FROM IMPROVING THEM</i>	49
8	<i>SUBJECTS SHOULD NOT REBEL AGAINST AUTHORITIES</i>	57
9	<i>CAN EQUALS WAR AGAINST EACH OTHER?</i>	63
10	<i>A WAR IS MORE THAN SIMPLY WORDS</i>	71
11	<i>JUST CAUSE DOES NOT GUARANTEE VICTORY</i>	75
12	<i>MAY AN AUTHORITY WAGE WAR AGAINST THOSE UNDER IT?</i>	81
13	<i>MAY A SOLDIER JUSTLY EARN A SALARY AND BENEFITS?</i>	85
14	<i>WHAT ABOUT A SOLDIER'S HONOR IN AN UNJUST WAR?</i>	89
15	<i>HOW DOES A CHRISTIAN SOLDIER PREPARE FOR BATTLE?</i>	93
	<i>AFTERWORD</i>	99

FOREWORD

As the text that follows was being prepared for publication in the Winter of 2009, the armed forces of the United States were still engaged in conflict in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but also, for the first time in years, were meeting all recruitment goals. Families of those servicemen and women—and in many cases the companies and corporations for which they worked—were actively participating in all sorts of activities in support of their service. With the beginning of a new presidential administration, however, what the future holds for these conflicts, those serving within them, and their families at home, is anyone's guess.

Added to the mix of this reality are three movies from 2008 dealing with crucial aspects of military action remaining in wide release. The first, *Valkyrie*, a retelling of the plot by German officers to assassinate Hitler, raises the question as to whether or not a tyrant is to be tolerated, and if not, whose responsibility it is to depose him. The second, *The Reader*, a fictional account of the life of a former concentration camp guard in post-World War II Germany, raises the question of the responsibility of individual soldiers for actions taken while in military service. A third movie, *Defiance*, relates the true story of Jewish resistance fighters in Nazi-occupied Belarussian forests, and raises the questions

that come with armed resistance to an established authority. While all three movies deal specifically with German actions during World War II, they address questions of universal significance which in one way or another have confronted all Christians who have taken up arms for one reason or another.

Without a doubt the chief question posed is the morality of a given action by an individual in the midst of armed conflict. Specifically: How can a Christian know that what is being done is right or good in the eyes of God? If that Christian is serving in the military, does moral obligation cease to be an issue? If military service results in a chronically troubled conscience, can it ever be quieted?

This book offers answers to these questions. It describes chiefly how a Christian can indeed serve in the military, and serve in the military in the most dangerous and deadly of positions, with a clear conscience. It also addresses the role of armed conflict in general in Christian life. It is hoped that by offering this classic work in a new and fresh translation, it will provide comfort not only to Christian men and women serving in the military, but also to the Christian-on-the-street who himself is troubled by these questions.

Of course, the original work translated here (cf. Dr. Martin Luther's *Sämmtliche Schriften*, ed. by J. G. Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House: 1885) Vol. 10 C., Cols. 488-531) did not have chapters or study questions. These have been added to ease reading, study and reference. The greater historical and current theological context is treated in the extensive Afterword. Special thanks are due

to The Confessional Lutheran Education Foundation for their funding of this project. Responsibility for any shortfall and weakness within the text is mine alone.

Paul Strawn

1

INTRODUCTION

There are Christians who are troubled by the military and what it does. Some go so far as to doubt whether it should even exist. Other Christians serve in the military but do so only by ignoring the questions it raises about God, the human conscience, and the soul.

Why would a Christian ignore such critical questions? The logic is simple: If a Christian serving in the military actually thought about God, listened to his conscience, and feared for his soul, he would not serve.

But can anyone be a soldier without thinking about such things? Shouldn't God and the soul be just the things that

are thought of at the most critical moments of life?

In reality, a soldier can only fight to the best of his abilities if he fights with a good, well-trained conscience. Where there is a good conscience there is courage. Where there is courage, the body is more powerful, the mind is more alert, and circumstances and events work together for victory (which nonetheless is granted by God!).

If, however, the conscience is untrained and uncertain, courage cannot exist. It is impossible for a person with a bad conscience to be anything but frightened and cowardly.

Moses put it to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 28:25 this way: "If you are disobedient, the Lord will give you a fearful heart, so that when you go out against your enemies one way, you will flee seven ways."

What happens when an attack is disorganized? Soldiers move hesitantly and timidly, and victory is not achieved.

As for those consciences in a company of soldiers that are wild and evil, who are known to be foolish and reckless, success or failure for them is purely a matter of chance. What happens to them is the same thing that would happen to an animal that might find itself in the middle of a battle.

Victory is not achieved because of such soldiers. They are found in many companies, but are certainly never their core.

***This advice is for
Christians who want
to be good soldiers.***

What follows is a bit of advice for those who want to be good soldiers, but not good soldiers alone. This advice is for Christians who want to be good soldiers in such a way that they do not lose God's grace and eternal

life.

Toward this end it must be noted from the outset that the job a person does and who a person is are two different things. A specific job itself may be good and right. That job, however, can become evil and wrong if the person doing it is not good or right or does not do the job correctly.

The work a judge does, for example, is highly valuable and godly—even if the work of the executioner is considered to be part of it. But if someone does the work of the judge who does not have the authority to do so, or if a judge is corrupt, then his work is no longer right nor good.

Marriage is also highly valuable and godly. That still does not prevent many married people from behaving terribly and horribly.

The same holds true for soldiers. The work of a soldier is in and of itself right and godly. Care needs to be taken, however, that the person serving as a soldier is also righteous.

By the term *righteous* I do not mean the righteousness which makes a person right before God. Such righteousness occurs only by faith in Jesus Christ, given freely without any work or merit on our part. It is only by God's grace.

***The work of a soldier
is in and of itself
right and godly.***

Rather, the term *righteous* here refers to an external righteousness that has to do with jobs and work. The question this book addresses is whether or not the righteousness before God that is a Christian's by faith remains with a soldier who does what a soldier is to do: Go to war, kill,

damage and destroy. After all, is not the work of a soldier sin and injustice? Doesn't it burden the conscience before God? Shouldn't a Christian avoid military service? Do only good? Love? Injure and kill no one? (Remember: By work what is meant is something which, although good and right in and of itself, can nonetheless become evil and wrong when a person is evil and unrighteous.)

Here I will not deal in detail with the purpose and work of war. War is in itself right and godly. What the Word of God calls "the sword" (Romans 13:1 ff. and 1 Peter 3:14 ff.) was instituted by God to punish the wicked, protect the innocent, and maintain peace. These passages alone are powerful enough proof to demonstrate that waging war, killing, and whatever the course of war might take, have been established by God.

What is war other than the punishing of injustice and evil? Why is war waged unless peace and obedience are desired?

Even if killing and destroying do not seem like works of love, they are in reality nothing else. Uninstructed Christians think otherwise. They think that Christians should never do such things.

Even if killing and destroying do not seem like works of love, they are in reality nothing else.

But consider the work of an excellent surgeon. When infection is severe, he must remove or render useless a hand, foot, eye or ear to save the entire body. If the destroyed body part alone is considered, the surgeon certainly seems cruel and

merciless. When the saved body is considered, however, it is clear that the surgeon is in reality an excellent, faithful person doing a good Christian work.

Similar thoughts can also be applied to war. If the punishing of the wicked, killing of the unjust and the creation of calamity alone are considered, war appears to be a totally unchristian work and against Christian love in every way.

Yet when I consider how war protects the pious, how it preserves and guards spouse and child, home and business, goods, honor, and peace, war turns out to be a precious and godly work. In other words, war too cuts off a leg or hand so that the entire body is not destroyed.

-
1. Does the existence of the military trouble some Christians?
 2. What questions for the Christian should serving in the military raise?
 3. How can a soldier fight to the best of his abilities?
 4. Who grants victory in war?
 5. Is the job a person does and who a person is the same thing?
 6. Is the work of a soldier righteous and godly? How so?
 7. What does the Word of God call 'the sword'?
 8. How is the work of war like the work of a doctor?

2

WHAT DOES WAR PREVENT?

If the sword did not support and maintain peace everything in the world would be destroyed by conflict. This is why war is nothing other than a short period of conflict preventing endless conflict. War is a smaller misfortune preventing a bigger misfortune.

The frequently made assertion that “war is a massive plague” is certainly true. What is also true, however, is how much more massive the plague is that is prevented by war.

To be sure, if people were pious and gladly kept the peace, war would be the greatest plague on earth. Yet what can

be done about the fact that the world is evil? That people do not want to keep the peace? That people plunder, steal, kill, rape women and children, and destroy honor and possessions?

Such tremendous strife, common throughout the entire world, which no one can endure, must be counteracted by the little strife called war or the sword. This is why God honors the sword so highly that he calls it his own order. God does not want us to say or think that humans invented or established it.

Because of this, the hand that uses this sword and kills

In such a case, it is not man, but God who hangs, tortures, beheads, slays, and wars.

is no longer man's hand, but God's hand. In such a case, it is not man, but God, who hangs, tortures, beheads, slays,

and wars. All these are his works and judgments.

In summary, when it comes to war, one must not look at how it kills, burns, destroys and seizes. This is what narrow, simple children's eyes see. When it comes to a surgeon, such eyes look no further than the amputated hand or leg. Such eyes do not see that the point of the surgeon's actions is to save the entire body.

The work of war or the sword must be seen with the eyes of an adult. Such eyes must perceive the reason why it slays and acts so gruesomely.

When this is done, it will turn out that war is a work that is in itself godly. War is as necessary and useful for this world as eating and drinking or any other work.

That is not to say that war is never abused. War is clearly

abused whenever killing and injuring take place out of malice and not out of need. But this is the fault of the person waging the war, not war itself.

Then again, when has there ever been a job or work or anything so good that it has not been abused by malicious and evil people? Such people are like the deranged surgeons who amputate a person's healthy hand out of malice, not because there is a need to do so.

Such people belong to all those who cause strife in general. Such strife must be resisted and peace enforced by legitimate war and sword.

It has always been the case, and still remains true, that whoever starts a war unnecessarily is defeated. Such a person cannot escape God's judgment, that is, God's sword. In the end God finds and destroys him.

To confirm that this is true we need only to turn to the greatest preacher and teacher next to Christ, namely, John the Baptist. In Luke 3:14, soldiers came to John and asked him what they should do. He did not condemn their work. He also did not tell them to stop being soldiers.

Instead, John the Baptist approved of their work saying "Be content with your wages and do not do violence and injustice to anyone." By doing so, John praised the work of war. At the same time, however, he prohibited and forbid its abuse.

The abuse of work and work itself are two different things. So Christ, standing before Pilate, confessed similarly that waging war is not unjust. What did he

The abuse of work and work itself are two different things.

say? “If I were the king of this world, my servants would fight that I might not be handed over to the Jews” (John 18:36). Here also belong all the ancient war accounts in the Old Testament, such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, Samuel, David, and all the kings of the people of Israel.

Yet if waging war or the work of war is in itself unjust or displeasing to God, then we would need to condemn Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and all the other holy fathers, kings, and princes who served God in this way as well and who on account of this work are praised highly in Scripture. This is well known even to all who have read only a little of the Bible.



1. What would happen if the sword did not protect and maintain the peace?
2. What is the cause of war?
3. Whose hand is it that acts in war?
4. Must the work of war be seen with the eyes of a child or an adult?
5. Is war ever abused?
6. Is the abuse of war the fault of war, or the person waging war?
7. Did John the Baptist rebuke the Roman soldiers for being soldiers?
8. What happens to the person who starts a war?

9. Who would need to be condemned if war is in itself unjust?

3

AREN'T PRESENT-DAY WARS DIFFERENT?

Now some might suggest that present-day wars are different than those found in the Old Testament. At that time, the children of Israel had been chosen by God and set apart from other nations by his word.

God himself commanded the children of Israel to fight. The children of Israel therefore fought out of godly obedience to his command.

For a New Testament Christian this is hard to understand. We do not have the command of God to fight. Instead, we are commanded to suffer and lose everything.

Peter and Paul wrote clearly about this subject. Both

command the New Testament Christian to obey human order and the commands of worldly authority.

John the Baptist, as noted above, taught soldiers true Christian doctrine, and still allowed them to remain soldiers. John's only demand: Soldiers should not abuse their position. They should do no one injustice or violence. They should be content with their wages.

Clearly then the waging of war is confirmed by God's word and command in the New Testament as well. Those who use war rightly and fight obediently are obedient to his word and serve God by doing so.

If war is inherently unjust, however, then any such use

If war is inherently unjust, however, then any such use of physical harm would also be inherently unjust.

of physical harm would also be inherently unjust. If the use of physical harm in war is unjust, it would also be unjust as a punishment for evil and for preserving peace. In

other words, all physical harm would be unjust. But what is waging war rightly other than punishing wrongdoers and preserving the peace?

The punishment of a thief, murderer or adulterer is a punishment for an individual doer of evil. The rightly-waged war, however, punishes *collectively* multiple wrongdoers, who have done as much damage as their number allows.

If one use of the sword is good and right, than all such uses are good and right. According to Romans 13:4, what is being used is not a feather duster, but a sword, which is none other than the wrath of God.

Elsewhere I have responded extensively to the argument that Christians have no command to fight, but instead, have Christ's teaching that they should not resist evil but suffer everything. Christians, of course, have no authority to fight on the basis of their Christianity.

Christians as Christians have no worldly authority. Their government is by nature spiritual. As far as their spirits are concerned, Christians are subject to no one but Christ.

***Christians as
Christians have no
worldly authority.***

Yet the bodies and goods of Christians are indeed subject to worldly authority and owe it obedience. When Christians are called into the military by worldly authority, they should and must fight out of obedience. Not as Christians, mind you, but as those within the world, citizens, obedient people as far as their body and temporal goods are concerned.

When Christians serve as soldiers in war, they do not do so for themselves. They do not do so for their own sakes, but to serve and obey the authorities under whom they are.

Paul puts it to Titus this way (3:1): "They are to be obedient to the authorities." More about this topic can be found in my booklet on worldly authority.¹

In short we can simply state: The work of the sword is in itself a right, godly and useful work. God does not want it to be despised, but feared, and honored and obeyed. If not, punishment will follow, as Paul says in Romans 13:5.

¹ Cf. *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), p. 81 ff.

God has, after all, established two kinds of government on earth. One is spiritual. It acts through the word without the sword. By means of this kingdom men are made pious and righteous with a righteousness by which eternal life is attained. Such righteousness God administers through the word which he has commanded preachers to proclaim.

The other type of government within the world is that of the sword. Those who have no desire to become pious and righteous unto eternal life are forced by this government at a minimum to be pious and righteous before the world. Such a righteousness God administers through the sword.

Although God does not reward such righteousness with eternal life, he nonetheless wants it to be established. Why? So peace among men can be preserved.

God rewards this peace with wealth. This is why God gives authorities so much wealth, honor, and power. Owning them rightly above others, authorities thereby serve God in the administration of worldly righteousness.

God himself is the Author, Lord, Master, Promoter, and Benefactor of both kinds of righteousness, of the spiritual and of the bodily. It is not a matter of human order or power. It is all an entirely divine matter.



1. Who commanded the children of Israel to wage war in the Old Testament?
2. Do New Testament Christians have that same command?

3. Are Christians to obey worldly authority?
4. If the use of physical harm in war would be unjust, what else would be unjust?
5. Do Christians wage war on the basis of their Christianity?
6. How many kinds of government are there on earth?
7. What are they?
8. With what does God reward peace?

4

HOW CAN THE SWORD BE ADMINISTERED JUSTLY?

Of utmost importance is to understand who and how one should administer the sword. The common tendency is to establish all sorts of rules, and regulations. So many exceptions arise, however, that it is impossible to comprehend everything precisely and without bias.

This is also the case in the practice of law. Laws can never be established so certainly and fairly that there are not cases demanding exceptions. When such exceptions are not granted, and laws are followed to the letter, the greatest injustice results.

The pagan Terence noted that “The strictest application

of the law is the greatest injustice.” Solomon, in Ecclesiastes (7:16) teaches that one should not be overly just, and at times, not wish to be wise.

A good example of this occurred during last year’s insurrection of the peasants. Several of the rebels, especially those

Laws can never be established so certainly and fairly that there are not cases demanding exceptions.

who themselves were wealthy, participated only grudgingly.

Since the rebellion was aimed at the rich and powerful, it was assumed that no wealthy person

would take part. Nonetheless, several were forced against their will to participate.

Several others got involved by thinking they could somehow control the mad rabble. Good advice, it was thought, would hinder evil intentions and do less damage both to the authorities and to the ones offering the advice. Still others participated only after receiving permission from their superiors.

There were certainly many more such exceptions. No one can imagine them all or comprehend them by law.

But what does the law say? All rebels are guilty of death. These three groups found themselves caught up in the rebellion. What should happen to them?

Should there be no exception? Should the law be strictly applied as it reads concerning the external act of rebellion? Even though they had an innocent heart and good will toward the authorities? If so, they must die along with those who, along with participating in the external act, did

so with guilty hearts and wills.

And that is what happened. Several of the minor authorities, when they realized they could enrich themselves with the possessions of the unwilling wealthy rebels, applied the law in just such a way.

All they did was say to them: You were among the rabble. You must die.

In just such a way a great injustice was done to many people. Innocent blood was shed. Widows and orphans were created. Goods were stolen.

In such cases the law should give way to equity. The law flatly states: "Rebellion is guilty of death. It is a sin against authority." Equity, however, replies: "That is true. But it just can be that two people who do the same thing externally do so with different hearts and minds."

In such cases the law should give way to equity.

Judas kissed the Lord Christ in the garden (Matthew 26:49). That is a good work externally which was normally practiced good-heartedly among the disciples. Judas' heart, however, was evil and betrayed its Lord. Peter, on the other hand, stood next to the servant of Annas at the fire, warming himself with the godless (Luke 22:55), which was not good.

If the law would be strictly applied, Judas would be considered pious and Peter a scoundrel. Judas' heart, however, was evil, and Peter's was good.

This is why equity in this case must be superior to the law. Equity, therefore, acquits those among the rebels who acted in good faith. It also deems them doubly worthy of

mercy.

They are just like pious Hushai the Archite (2 Samuel 15:32 ff. and 16:16 ff.). Hushai submitted to the rebel Absalom, pretending to be obedient. But David had commanded him to do so, in order that David might be helped in thwarting Absalom.

Viewed externally, Hushai was rebellious along with Absalom against David (2 Sam. 17:7-13). Yet in reality, Hushai deserved great praise and honor eternally before God and all the world. Now, if David had judged Hushai as a rebel, that judgment would have been as praiseworthy as the one that is now being done by our authorities to equally innocent, deserving people.

The wisdom which should govern the law on a case by case basis, judging the same good or evil deed by its intent, is called in Greek *epieikeia*, in Latin *aequitas*. I call it equity. Since the law must be written clearly in plain and simple words, it is not able to comprehend all circumstances and exceptions.

This is why in this case judges must be prudent and pious and apply equity in a reasonable manner, upholding or disregarding the law as is fit. A master of a house, after all, establishes rules for his servants. There is the law. Whoever does not do it, ought to suffer punishment.

Yet one might become sick or be hindered through no fault of his own. There the law ceases. It would be a bad master of the house who wanted to punish his servants on account of such failure. All laws addressing external acts must be subject to equity for the sake of the manifold, countless, uncertain accidents that may happen and that

no one can imagine or comprehend beforehand.

1. What is the common tendency in administering the sword?
2. What is the cause of "the greatest injustice"?
3. How many groups were caught up in the rebellion?
4. How was a great injustice done?
5. When should the law give way to equity?
6. Who would the law have preferred: Peter or Judas? Why?
7. On what basis should a deed be judged?
8. What is another name for "the wisdom which should govern the law on a case by case basis"?

5

IS REBELLION EVER JUSTIFIED?

In general there seems to be three types of war: 1) An equal warring against an equal; 2) An authority warring against those under it; 3) Those under an authority warring against it. We begin with the third type of war.

Concerning the third type of war, the law dictates that no one ought to fight or war against an authority. Those under an authority owe obedience, honor, and fear to that authority (Rom. 13:1). As the saying goes, “whoever chops above his head gets chips in his eyes.” Solomon says (Prov. 26:27), “The stones a man throws up in the air will fall back on his head.”

This is, briefly put, the law which God has instituted and men have accepted. Obedience and resistance, being subject to and rebelling against authority do not go together.

Since equity is the mistress of the law, however, a circumstance could arise that directs, commands, and permits the law to be broken. The question therefore must be asked:

Could equity ever allow a person to break the law?

Could equity ever allow a person to break the law, i.e., to be disobedient toward authority? To fight against

it? Depose it? Imprison those who represent it?

There is a vice among men called *fraus*, that is, trickery and malice.¹ When *fraus* hears that equity trumps the law, it plots and plans ceaselessly as to how it might disguise itself as equity and destroy the law, freeing itself of authority. So the proverb: “As soon as there is a law to tell, Miss *Fraus* is quickly there as well.”

The Gentiles thought differently. They knew nothing about God nor recognized worldly authority as God’s order.

Instead, they considered worldly authority to be created and established by man. They thought it was not only equitable, but also praiseworthy, to depose, murder, and exile useless, evil authorities.

By law the Greeks awarded jewels and gifts to anyone who murdered a tyrant. The Romans followed their example and killed most of their emperors themselves. Hardly any

¹The Roman goddess *Fraus*, a helper of Mercury, was the goddess of treachery. The modern word “fraud” is derived from her name and its meaning, her actions.

Roman emperors were killed by enemies. Very few were allowed to die of natural causes. The nations of Judah and Israel murdered many of their kings as well.

Yet these examples are really not that helpful. We are not asking what the Gentiles or Jews did. We are asking what is right and equitable to do before God in the spirit, and in the divine external order of worldly government.

There is nothing to stop citizens from rising up today or tomorrow and deposing their government. Authorities must expect this to be inflicted upon them by God.

But that does not mean it is done equitably or justly. In fact, I have never heard of a case when it was equitable nor can I think of one.

The peasants who rebelled recently alleged that the authorities did not allow the gospel to be preached. They also exploited the poor. This is why they had to overthrow them.

My response? The fact that the authorities acted unjustly did not make it equitable or just for the peasants to act in the same way. They had no right to be disobedient and destroy the order which is not ours but God's.

Enduring injustice, the peasants should simply have moved to another location where the gospel was preached. Christ himself says (Matthew 10:23): "If they persecute you in one city, flee to another."

Now it is certainly equitable to depose and imprison an authority who has gone insane. Since he no longer possesses reason, he cannot even be considered a human being.

"That's right!" you say, "A tyrant is also insane! He should be considered even worse than an insane person for he does

much more damage!”

Here an answer is difficult. It is a powerful argument which seeks to establish equity by force.

Yet I must maintain that a madman and a tyrant are not the same. A madman does or experiences nothing that is reasonable. In that he is void of all reason, there is also no hope that his situation will change.

A tyrant, however, is still well aware of the evil things that he does. He knows when he commits injustice. He still possesses a conscience and reason.

***There also is the issue
of the consequence of
deposing a tyrant.***

There also is hope that the tyrant might improve. He might be open to counsel. He might learn and follow.

In that a madman is like a piece of wood or a stone, he can do none of these things.

There also is the issue of the consequence of deposing a tyrant. Whenever the killing or driving away of tyrants begins, it soon spreads and becomes a general maliciousness. Other authorities are then called tyrants who clearly are not. They are killed as the mob decides.

Roman history teaches this very clearly. The Roman people killed many a fine emperor simply because they did not like him.

At other times, emperors were deposed because they would not allow the people themselves to be the emperor, or did not wish to be merely the people’s servant or simply a figurehead. This happened to Caesar Augustus, Pertinax, Gordianus, Alexander, and several others.

If a mob is allowed too much leeway, it will go mad. It is better to drive a mob back ten yards, then to allow it to move forward a foot, or even an inch. It is better for a tyrant to do a mob injustice a hundred times rather than a mob the tyrant injustice once.

In that a person is to endure injustice (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:7), it is better to suffer at the hands of authorities, than the authorities suffer at the hands of their subjects. A mob knows no limit. Each member of a mob individually is more than five tyrants. It is better to suffer injustice at the hands of one tyrant, that is, authority, than at the hands of countless tyrants, that is, a mob.

***It is better to suffer injustice
at the hands of one tyrant
... than at the hands of
countless tyrants.***

It is said that long ago the Swiss killed their authorities and set themselves free. Just recently the Danes deposed their king. Both justified their actions on the basis of the unbearable tyranny they had to suffer.

As I wrote above, however, my topic here is not what Gentiles do or did. I am instead concerned about what a Christian should and might do with a good conscience in order to be certain that a particular action is not unjust before God.

Having read many histories, it is certain that Jewish, Greek and Roman subjects often killed or drove out their authorities. God allowed them to do this, even permitting them to grow and prosper.

In the end, however, it was all for nothing. The Jews were

crushed and subjugated by the Assyrians. The Greeks by King Philip. The Romans by the Goths and Lombards.

The Swiss have paid and continue to pay dearly for their independence with blood. Their end is easily seen. The Danes also are not free and clear.

As far as I am concerned, I do not see a more stable government than that in which authority is held in honor. This is done among the Persians, Tartars, and the like. They not only remained independent of the Romans and all other powers, they also conquered the Romans and many other countries.

My reasoning for all this is based on that which God says, Rom. 12:13: “Vengeance is mine. I will repay.” Likewise, Matt. 7:1: “Judge not.”

Additionally, in the Old Testament it is strictly and frequently forbidden even to curse or speak evil of the authorities, Ex. 22:28: “You shall not curse the prince of your people.”

And Paul, 1 Tim. 2:2, Acts 23:5, teaches the Christians to pray for those in authority. Solomon also in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs teaches everywhere to obey the king and be subject to him, Prov. 24:21.

When subjects set themselves against authorities they are their own avengers and make themselves into judges.

When subjects set themselves against authorities they are their own avengers and make themselves into judges (Eccl. 10:20). This is not only against the

order and commandment of God—who wants to retain

judgment and revenge for himself—but is also against all natural laws and equity.

As it is said: Let no one be his own judge. And again: Whoever strikes back is in the wrong.

1. How many types of war are there?
2. Should anyone fight against an authority?
3. Can equity ever permit the breaking of the law?
4. Did the Gentiles recognize worldly authority as God's order?
5. How did the Gentiles view the killing of tyrants?
6. Is there anything to stop citizens from rising up and deposing their government?
7. Does the unjust action of an authority give subjects the right to overthrow it?
8. Is a tyrant the same thing as a madman? What is the difference?
9. What are some of the consequences for deposing a tyrant?
10. What happens eventually to those that rebel against an authority?

6

THE SIN OF AUTHORITIES IS NOT CORRECTED BY SIN

The question you will ask now is this: “Why should we suffer under tyrants? You are too easy on them! Based on your teaching their evil will only increase! Is everyone’s life, spouse, children and assets to remain in such danger? Who will want to do anything worthwhile in such a situation?”

I reply: I cannot teach anyone who wants to do only what seems to them to be right and good. Such people will simply go ahead with their plots and plans and kill all their authorities. We’ll see how that works out eventually.

I can only teach those who truly want to do what is right. To such people I say that those in authority are not

to be kept in check with sacrilege and rebellion, as did the Greeks, Romans, Swiss, and Danes. There are other ways to accomplish this.

***I can only teach those
who truly want to do
what is right.***

First of all, when it is seen that authorities completely disregard their own souls' salvation by being unjust, what is it to you that they destroy your property, body, spouse and child? They cannot harm your soul.

In fact, by doing such things authorities harm themselves more than you. How? They condemn their own souls. A destruction of their own lives and possessions follows. Is not their injustice then sufficiently avenged?

In the second place, what would happen if these same authorities waged war? Would not then your own life, property, spouse and children be in danger of annihilation? Would not you be put in danger of being captured, tortured and killed for your authority's sake? Would you kill your authorities in that case?

During the time of Emperor Maximilian, many good people lost their lives in the wars he waged. Yet no one did anything to him.

If all of those good people had died at the hand of a tyrannical Maximilian, however, it would have been considered the most gruesome thing ever done. Yet, Maximilian, by means of the wars he waged, did indeed cause them to die. After all, they were killed for his sake.

In short, a raging tyrant is nothing else than a horrible war that destroys many fine, decent, innocent people. It

could even be asserted that an evil tyrant is better than an evil war, as your own reason and experience proves.

Everyone wants to see peace and good days. But what if God keeps such things from you by wars and tyrants? In such a case, which one would you rather have?

In actuality we deserve and are liable before God for both. We want, however, to keep sinning and avoid punishment for it.

We also want to resist God's punishment and justify our sin. As surely as a dog bites the stick with which he is poked, this we will most certainly do.

Thirdly, even if authorities are evil, God is present. God has at his disposal fire, water, steel, stone and all sorts of other ways to destroy.

***Even if authorities
are evil, God is
present.***

How quickly God has slain tyrants! In fact, God wants to slay tyrants, but our sins do not allow it. So Job 34:30: "He lets a knave¹ rule because of the sins of the people."

We are quick to acknowledge that we are governed by a knave. No one, however, wants to acknowledge that a knave does not rule on account of his knavery, but on account of the sin of the people.

The people do not recognize their own sin and think that the tyrant rules because of his knavery. This is how blind, perverted, and mad the world is.

This is also why it went as it did with the peasants in the rebellion who wished to punish the sin of the authorities—as if they themselves were altogether pure and innocent! This is why God had to show them the log in their

¹ A knave is an untrustworthy, dishonest person with no principles.

own eye so that they might forget the speck in the other.

In the fourth place, tyrants, by the imposition of God, always run the risk that their subjects will rebel and depose or even kill them. Additionally there remains the great mass of heathen, godless, and unchristian people, who, if God imposes it, resist their authorities unjustly and wreak havoc, as the Jews and Greeks and Romans often did.

This is why you cannot contend that on the basis of my writings tyrants and authorities feel safe to do evil. They are by no means safe!

I teach that authorities, whether they do good or evil by God's will, should remain safe. Yet I myself cannot furnish them with such safety.

Where God does not grant his grace, I cannot force the mob to follow my teaching. I teach as I please. The world does as it pleases.

God must help and I must teach those who would like to do what is right and good. Perhaps they can help stop the mob.

The authorities remain as secure with my teaching as without it. In that most people do not listen to me, your complaint is not necessary. It is in God's power alone to uphold those in authority. He is the only one who has established them.

Do not be confused by the fact that the authorities are

***Do not be confused
by the fact that the
authorities are evil.***

evil. Their punishment and ruin are closer than you think. It was the tyrant Dionysius who confessed that his life was one lived with a sword hanging

over his head by a silken thread and a great fire burning below him.

In the fifth place, you need not avenge yourself, for God has yet another way of punishing those in authority. He can raise up an alien authority, such as the Goths against the Romans and the Assyrians against Israel.

In other words, there is certainly enough avenging, punishment, and danger to keep tyrants and authorities in check. God does not let them be evil in joy and peace. He is right behind them. Indeed, he surrounds them. Like a rider on his horse, God has tyrants between his spurs and keeps a tight rein on them. This agrees also with the natural law which Christ teaches in Matt. 7:12: "Do unto others what you would have them do to you."

Of course, no head of a household wants to be driven out of his house or killed by his family. He does not want to lose everything on account of his evil actions.

If his family were to do such a thing, it would be sacrilegious. They themselves would become judges and avengers without any prior complaint before another higher authority.

Likewise, it should be unjust for every subject to act against his tyrant.

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1. Are authorities to be kept in check by rebellion?
 2. Which is more valuable: Your family and possessions or your soul?
 3. What follows the self-condemnation of the soul?

4. How are a raging tyrant and a horrible war the same?
5. How is an evil tyrant better than an evil war?
6. We wish to continue sinning, but what do we want to avoid?
7. How does our sin prevent the destruction of tyrants?
8. Should authorities remain safe?
9. Who alone establishes authorities?
10. How does God punish those who abuse their God-given authority?

7

CHANGING AUTHORITIES DIFFERS FROM IMPROVING THEM

A couple of examples of what I spoke about in the last chapter are worth noting. The first is that of a pious widow who prayed for her ruler who was a tyrant.

This widow was known to pray for her tyrant with the greatest devotion, even asking God to prolong his life. Hearing about her prayer, the tyrant was surprised and thought it was quite strange.

Why? He knew that he had caused her much pain. Since he was normally not the beneficiary of such prayers, the tyrant asked the widow why she prayed for him.

Her answer? “When your grandfather was alive I had

ten cows. When he took two of them from me, I prayed against him, hoping that he would die and that your father would become lord.”

“When that actually happened, however, your father took three cows away from me. I then prayed against him hoping that he would die and you become lord.”

“Now that you are lord, you have taken four cows away from me! So in fear that whoever comes after you will take my last cow and everything else I have, I pray *for* you.”

A second example is that of a beggar who was covered with sores that were filled with flies that bit him and sucked his blood. Now it just so happened that a merciful man, wanting to help the beggar, chased all the flies away.

The beggar’s response? He screamed at the man and said: “What are you doing? Those flies were almost full and satisfied and so no longer bothered me so much. But now the hungry flies will come and will plague me even more!”¹

***Change can be easy.
Improvement is difficult
and full of risk.***

Do you understand these parables? Changing authorities and improving authorities are two different things. They are as far from each other as heaven is from earth.

Change can be easy. Improvement is difficult and full of risk.

Why? It is not a matter of our will or ability. It lies in God’s hands and is only according to his will.

The rampaging mob, however, does not ask how to improve things. As long as things change they are satisfied. If

¹ See Aesop’s fable, “The Fox and the Hedgehog.”

things then get worse, the mob again only wants change.

This is how mobs exchange bees for flies and wasps for bees. It is just like the frogs in the fable that did not want the block of wood to be their ruler. The stork they established in its place hit their heads with his beak and ate them.²

It is simply horrible that no one can rule a mad mob better than a tyrant. They are the stick tied to the neck of the dog.

If a mob could be ruled in a better way, God would have established some other order above them than the sword and tyrants. The sword itself indicates what type of people live under it, namely, those who if given the chance to do as they would like to do would be nothing other than desperate knaves.

My advice? Whoever wishes to have a good conscience and do the right thing should be content with worldly authority. Considering that worldly authority cannot harm the soul as can false spiritual teachers, it should not be attacked.

Use David as an example. He suffered as much violence from king Saul as you could ever endure. Yet David did not lay his hand on Saul.

Certainly David was given every opportunity. But he left the matter to God, and allowed it to go on as long as God wanted it to continue. David endured until matters came to an end.

If there should arise a war or strife against the authority above you, allow those who wish to war and strive to go

² See Aesop's fable, "The Frogs and the Stork."

ahead. For, as was said, if God does not hold the mob back, we cannot hold it back.

You, however, who want to do well and keep your conscience safe, leave armor and shield alone and do not strive against your authority or tyrant. Instead, endure everything that can happen to you. The mob will find its judge.

Now here is a good question: What if an authority of some sort swears an oath to govern his subjects according to certain articles, but then does not obey them. Is he not then obligated to resign?

The king of France, for example, must govern in accordance with the parliaments in his realm. The king of Denmark has also sworn to abide by certain articles.

My answer? It is all well and good that authorities do not govern according to whim but according to laws and actually obey them. It must be remembered, however, that a king promises not only to keep the laws of his kingdom, but promises to be pious, as God himself has commanded the king to be.

Does that mean then that if a king disregards both the laws of God and the laws of men that you should attack him, judge him, and have your vengeance? Who has given you the authority to do so?

Shouldn't another authority be called upon to come between the two of you, hear the case of both you and the king, and then condemn the guilty party? If not, you yourself will not escape the judgment of God who says in Deut. 32:35 and Rom. 12:9: "Vengeance is mine;" likewise: "Judge not," Matt. 7:1.

Since this question applies specifically to the citizens

of Lübeck, other member cities of the Hanseatic League, and the Danes themselves, who recently rebelled against the king of Denmark, I will give an even more complete answer.

There may be some who have a misinformed conscience in this matter. Maybe some will even rethink and reevaluate their actions.

It is certainly the case that the king of Denmark was unjust both before God and the world. True also is the fact that the law was entirely on the side of the Danes and the people of Lübeck. This is the one side of the coin.

The other side of the coin, however, is this that the Danes and the people of Lübeck acted as if they themselves were the judges and authorities over the king and punished and avenged his injustices themselves. They therefore usurped judgment and vengeance.

Here now the question and the matter of conscience begins. When this matter comes before God, he is not going to ask whether the king is unjust or the people are just, for that is already clear.

Will not God rather ask: “People of Denmark and Lübeck, who has commanded you to carry out such vengeance and punishment? If I have commanded you, or the emperor, or another in authority, then present proper documentation to prove it.”

If the people of Denmark and Lübeck can do this, then everything is fine. But if they cannot, God will judge them in this way: “You rebellious thieves

***Who has commanded
you to carry out
such vengeance and
punishment?***

of God interfere with my work! It is a sacrilege that you usurped divine vengeance! You have sinned against the divine majesty! You must die!”

Why is this so horrible? There is a great distinction between being unjust and punishing injustice, between the law and the fulfilling of the law, between justice and the administration of justice.

Every human being has a share in justice and injustice. But the authority to define and administer what is right and wrong belongs alone to God, the Lord of right and wrong. God alone delegates such authority to earthly authorities and their representatives. No one is to usurp this power unless it is certain that he has received such authority by the command of God, or from his servants, the earthly authorities.

What would become of the world if everyone in the right would themselves punish those in the wrong? If that would be the case, male servants would strike their master, female servants their mistress, children their parents and students their teacher.

That would really be good order! What need would there be for judges and worldly authority established by God?

The Danes and the people of Lübeck can figure this out for themselves. Would it truly be equitable if their own servants, townspeople, and subjects would rebel against them whenever they suffer injustice?

Why do they then not do to others what they themselves want to be done? Why do they not treat others as they themselves want to be treated, as Christ, Matt. 7:12, and the natural law teach?

To be sure, the people of Lübeck and the other cities assert in their defense that they were not the subjects of the king, but acted as an enemy acts toward an enemy and an equal acts toward an equal. Yet the poor Danes, as subjects, acted against their authorities without God's command.

The people of Lübeck therefore aided and abetted them. By doing so they burdened themselves with the same sin as that of the Danes. This is how the people of Lübeck became entangled and embroiled in the rebellious disobedience of the Danes against both divine and royal majesty. They therefore also then despised the command of the emperor.

I have used this recent incident as an example of how a subject is not to rebel against an authority. It is a remarkable story that ended with an exiled king. It well serves the purpose of warning all others to beware of the example.

Let it also serve to stir the consciences of those responsible so that some might change for the better and give up this vice before God himself comes and wreaks his vengeance upon those who robbed him and are his enemies.

Not all will repent. Why? As was said above, the great crowd does not care about God's word. It is a lost crowd that is only being prepared for God's wrath and punishment.

Rather, I am content that some will take what I have said to heart and no longer associate with the deed of the Danes and the people of Lübeck. If they were indeed associated with it, they should disassociate themselves from it and no longer be found guilty of someone else's sin. For we all indeed have more than enough sin of our own.

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1. Why did the widow pray for her tyrant?
 2. Why did the beggar become angry with the man who chased the flies away?
 3. Which is easier: Change or improvement? Why?
 4. Is a mob interested in improvement?
 5. What does the sword itself say about those who live under it?
 6. Can worldly authority harm the soul?
 7. What if an authority breaks the laws it has sworn to uphold?
 8. To whom does the authority belong to define what is right and wrong?
 9. What would happen if every person who has been wronged punished those who wronged them?
 10. What was the sin of the Danes?

8

SUBJECTS SHOULD NOT REBEL AGAINST AUTHORITIES

Here again I will have to suffer abuse and hear my own judges scream: “This is exactly what it means to kiss up to the authorities! Do you Luther now submit to them and seek mercy from them? Are you now afraid of them?”

I will let these bees buzz around my head and fly on. Whoever can write something better than what I am writing here go ahead and do so.

My goal here is not to preach to the authorities. In any case this apparent flattery of mine will not earn me much mercy from them. The authorities will certainly not rejoice in it because I endanger their positions.

Countless times I have asserted and it is only all too true, unfortunately, that most of our authorities are godless tyrants. They are enemies of God who persecute the gospel and certainly are not favorably disposed toward me.

Each person is to know how to act in this matter.

I also do not really care. Rather I teach simply this: Each person is to know how to act in this matter, to support his authority, and to do what God has commanded him.

Let authorities fend for themselves. God will not overlook tyrants and authorities. God is quite capable of dealing with them and has done so from the beginning of the world.

Moreover, this booklet of mine is not to be applied simply to peasants, as if they alone are subjects, and not also to the authorities. Not so. But what I say about subjects applies to everyone whatever their position in society.

For everyone, whatever their position, is subject to someone else. And just as one disciplines a rebellious subject, so one also ought to discipline a rebellious authority. The one should be treated just like the other. Then no one suffers injustice.

Emperor Maximilian was well acquainted with disobedient and rebellious authorities under him. They would have loved to band together and make war against him.

And how often might have one group of these authorities under him, complaining and moaning, banded together, and waged war against another such alliance of lesser authorities? How much did the Franconian authorities scream because they respected neither their bishops nor

the emperor?

Of course, one must not describe such petty authorities as being prone to rioting and rebellion, even though they are. Their subjects ought to put up with them and endure it.

Yet, if I am not completely wrong, in reality, God punished the rebellious authorities by means of their rebellious subjects. One knave punished the other.

Maximilian, after all, had to bear with the rebellious authorities under him. Although forced to restrain them with his life, he was ultimately unable to punish them.

And it just could be true: If the peasants' rebellion had not taken place, there would have been a rebellion among the lesser authorities against those above them. Perhaps even against the emperor himself. This is how all of Germany stood in jeopardy.

Yet now that the peasants have rebelled, they alone are blamed. And it just so happens that in the matter the lesser authorities appear to have done nothing wrong.

Yet such a worldly appearance does not deceive God. He has with the rebellion warned the authorities to be obedient to their superiors. Let this be my flattery of authorities.

Yet the question remains: Should one suffer in such a way at the hands of an authority? Should that authority be allowed to be such a scoundrel that his land and people are destroyed?

The authorities would put the same question this way: "I am an *authority*! Should I let a tyrant shamefully destroy my wife, child, body and goods?" My reply: I cannot teach you anything. Just go right ahead. You are smart enough. You do not need to listen to me. All I need to do is to watch

how you sing such a lofty little song to the end.

To others, to those who would like to protect their conscience, I say this: God has thrown us into the world

***We should be prepared
at all times to face
misfortune.***

under the devil's dominion in such a way that we do not have a paradise here. We should be prepared at all times to face misfortune of body, wife, child, goods, and honors.

And when in one hour you are not afflicted by ten misfortunes, in fact, when you get to live one hour, you should say: "Oh, what great goodness does my God show me that I have not been afflicted by all misfortune this hour! How can this be? Living under the dominion of the devil, I am not supposed to have such a blessed hour."

This is how I teach those who want to listen. You, however, feel free to do it differently. Build a paradise for yourself where the devil may not enter and you will not have to suffer such raging from any tyrant. I will watch you. Just keep thinking: "Oh, we are all well and in high spirits. We do not know God's goodness. We also do not believe that God protects us and that the devil is that bad. We want to be utterly evil knaves and still receive utterly good things from God."

This is enough concerning the first question as to whether any warring or striving against an authority can be right. Suffice it to say that even though it has often happened, and people are daily tempted to do so, when God has imposed rebellion and has not hindered it, it has not ended well. It does not remain without vengeance—even though people

may enjoy luck for a time.

1. When it comes to rebellion, what is each person to do?
2. Is there anyone who is not subject to someone else?
3. Can an authority justly rebel against its authority?
4. How did God punish the rebellious authorities under Maximilian?
5. Under whose dominion do we live in the world?
6. What should we at all times be prepared to endure?

9

CAN EQUALS WAR AGAINST EACH OTHER?

We now return to the question of the first type of war: Is it right for an equal to war against an equal? The question is properly framed this way: It certainly is not right to begin a war solely on the basis of the musings of every mad ruler. From the outset it should simply be said that whoever begins war is in the wrong.

What is right is that whoever draws the sword first is defeated or at a minimum, punished in the end. It is a common fact of history that those who begin a war lose that war. Conversely, those who are forced to defend themselves are rarely beaten.

Worldly authority is, after all, not instituted by God to destroy peace and begin war. It is, instead, instituted to maintain peace and hinder war.

***Whoever begins war
is in the wrong.***

This is what Paul, Romans 13:4, asserts, when he notes that the work of the sword is that of protecting and punishing. The sword protects the pious with peace and punishes the evil by war.

God, who does not endure injustice, also arranges matters in such a way that those who would make war must be resisted. So the proverb: “No one is ever so evil that he does not run into someone more evil than he is.” This is also what God allows to be said about himself, Ps. 68:30: “The Lord scatters the nations that delight in war.”

Beware! God does not lie! Listen to this advice: Dig a deep, deep ditch between what you want and what you need, what pleases you and what truly is necessary, the desire to make war and the will to fight.

Even if you find yourself to be the Turkish emperor, do not be tempted! Wait until the time of absolute necessity arrives and you must go to war without any desire or willingness.

Even then you will have enough to do and experience so much of war that you will say in your heart: “How much I long for peace! If only my neighbors would!”

This is how you can defend yourself with a good conscience. There stands God’s word: “He scatters those who delight in war.”

Consider the true soldiers who have been there. They

do not quickly engage in battle. They do not act spitefully. They do not wish to fight.

But when you force them to fight, then beware! They will not complain. Their sword does not come out easily. But when forced to draw it, they will not return it to its sheath without blood.

***This is how you can
defend yourself with
a good conscience.***

On the other hand, the crazy fools who first make war in thoughts and begin to devour the whole world with their words are truly the first to draw the sword. But they also are the first to drop the sword and flee.

The mighty empire of the Romans conquered much because they were forced to go to war. Everyone wanted to pick a fight with them and prove themselves by engaging them in battle. In defending themselves, the Romans did so in a thorough manner.

Hannibal of Carthage harmed the Romans to the extent that he almost defeated them. But what shall I say? He started. He also had to be stopped. God-given courage remained with the Romans, even when they were losing. Where courage remains, deeds follow.

Ultimately it is God who acts. God wants peace and is an enemy of those who begin war and destroy peace.

The elector Duke Frederick of Saxony must also here be mentioned. It is a shame that the sayings of such a wise prince died with his body. Frederick had to endure much evil both in general and from his neighbors. He therefore had so many good reasons to go to war that another, mad prince, who desired to go to war, would have started ten

wars.

Frederick, however, left his sword in its sheath. He always used words wisely, and pretended to be very frightened and to run away. He let others yell and scream while he remained seated before them.

When asked why he let himself be verbally abused in this way, he replied: “I do not want to begin. But if I must

This is how he, even though many dogs snarled at him, remained unbitten.

go to war, you will see that I will bring it to an end.”

This is how he, even though many dogs snarled at him, remained unbitten. He saw that they were all fools. But he did not hold it against them.

If the king of France had not started a war against Emperor Charles, he would not have endured the shame of being beaten and captured. And even now, as the Venetians and Italians make war against the emperor—although my enemy as well, such injustice is no delight—and begin to fight, may God grant that they too must be the first to stop. Thus the saying will remain true, Ps. 68:30: “God scatters those who delight in war.”

All this God confirms with good examples in Scripture. This is why he let his people first offer peace to the kingdoms of the Amorites and Canaanites. He did not want his people to begin the fight. He wanted this teaching to be confirmed.

When those kingdoms began, however, and forced God’s people to defend themselves, they all had to go to pieces. Indeed, to defend oneself is an honest reason to fight.

This is why all the laws affirm that self-defense remains unpunished. The person who kills someone in self-defense is guiltless before everyone.

Again, when the children of Israel wanted to strike the Canaanites without necessity, they themselves were defeated, Num. 14:35. When Joseph and Asariah wanted to do battle and make a name for themselves, they also were defeated, 1 Macc. 5:56ff.

Amaziah, king of Judah, wanted to wage a war of delight against the king of Israel. To see how things turned out, read 2 Kings 14:8ff.

Likewise, King Ahab began a war against the Syrians at Ramoth, but lost the war and his life, 1 Kings 22:2ff. The Ephraimites wanted to devour Jephthah and lost 42,000 men, Jdg. 12:6.

But this is how it goes. Almost everyone who starts a war loses that war.

The blessed king Josiah had to be killed because he began to fight against the king of Egypt, 2 Kings 23:29. God had to let the saying stand: "The Lord scatters those who delight in war."

This is why my countrymen, the inhabitants of the Harz Mountains, have a saying: "I have truly heard that he who strikes will be struck in return. Why is this so? Because God rules the world with great might and does not allow injustice to go unpunished."

He who does injustice, unless he repents and satisfies his neighbor, will receive his punishment as surely as he lives. I think Müntzer and his peasants should also have to confess this.

Suffice it to say, that waging war is not right, even between equals, unless it is a situation in which the conscience can say: “My neighbor forces and pushes me to war. I would rather not do it.”

In this case, war is not only called war, but also dutiful protection and self-defense. When it comes to war, a distinction must be made. Unnecessary wars are started by whim or desire simply with an order to attack. Other wars become a necessity after an attack has been made.

The first may be called a war of delight, the other a war

The first may be called a war of delight, the other a war of necessity.

of necessity. The first is the devil’s war and may God grant it no success. The second is a human calamity and may God be here of help.

Authorities be warned: Be wary of war unless it is to defend and protect or the responsibilities of your office [i.e. alliances and treaties] necessitate war. If you must go to war, have at it and hit hard. Be courageous and prove your mettle.

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1. According to history, who usually loses a war?
 2. What is worldly authority instituted by God to do?
 3. What is the work of the sword?
 4. What does God do to those who delight in war?
 5. Is self-defense an honest reason to fight?

6. How are unnecessary wars started?
7. If wars must be waged, how should they be conducted?

10

A WAR IS MORE THAN SIMPLY WORDS

War is war and cannot be of words alone. If such were the case, a given situation would become so convoluted that the angry, spiteful, and arrogant hotheads who are as tough as nails would become so weak that they would not be able to cut through butter when war finally began.

After all, every ruler is duty-bound to protect those under his authority and maintain peace. That is his work. For this purpose a ruler bears the sword, Rom. 13:4.

This is also to be his conscience on which he relies. After all, he should be certain that such work is right before God and commanded by him.

With these comments I am not teaching Christians what to do. We Christians have nothing to do with your government. Instead, we serve you and tell you what you are to do before God in your own government.

A Christian is his own person. He believes for himself and for no one else. Yet a ruler is not a person for himself, but for others. He is to serve them, that is, to protect and defend them.

Yes it would be good if a ruler were also a Christian and believed in God. Then he would be truly happy. Yet to be a Christian is not a requirement of government. This is why it must be that so few rulers are Christians, as the saying goes: A ruler is a rare thing in heaven.

Now, even if they are not Christians, rulers nonetheless ought to act justly according to God's outward order. God requires this of them.

However, whenever a ruler does not fulfill the duties of his office, and thinks that he is an authority not for the sake

Even if they are not Christians, rulers nonetheless ought to act justly

of those under him, but because of his good looks (as if God had made him a ruler so that he might rejoice in his power, wealth, and honor, and having his delight and confidence in them, grow to rely on them), this man belongs among the heathen. In fact, he is a fool.

Such a ruler would start a war on account of a discarded candy wrapper. He would think about nothing except his own desires.

God opposes such a ruler with other rulers who also

have weapons and other peoples outside of the borders of the country of that ruler. This is how one sword keeps the other in check.

A reasonable ruler, however, does not use his position for his own desires. It is enough for such a ruler that his subjects are obedient.

When his enemies or neighbors ring or knock, taunting with many evil words, he remembers that there are always more foolish men than wise. Many words do indeed fit in a sack. Silence is often the best reply.

***Silence is often
the best reply***

A good ruler does not care much about words until he sees that his subjects are attacked, or about to be attacked. At that point he defends as many as he can, should, and must.

On the other hand, the ruler who is such a weakling that he feels he must reply to every word spoken is simply looking for a reason to go to war. That ruler truly tries to catch the wind with his coat. Yet as for the peace and prosperity such a ruler gains from this course of action, let he himself describe. Then you will truly learn whether such a war is beneficial.

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1. For what purpose does a ruler bear the sword?
 2. How does a Christian relate to the government of the world?
 3. Does a Christian believe for anyone besides himself?
 4. Must a member of the government be a Christian?

5. Can non-Christian rulers act unjustly?
6. Should a ruler use his position for his own desires?
7. When does a good ruler begin to care about words?

11

JUST CAUSE DOES NOT GUARANTEE VICTORY

Another point must also be remembered. When you are certain and sure that you yourself are not beginning a war, but are being forced to wage war, you must nonetheless fear God and keep him before your eyes.

Do not think this way: “I have been forced into it. I have a good reason to go to war.” If you would think this way, you would rely on such reasoning alone and recklessly plunge into war. This is not how it should be.

It is true: You have a just cause for war and a good reason to defend yourself. But this does not mean that you have a certified letter from God guaranteeing your victory.

In fact, even though your cause for war is just, your spiteful confidence alone should bring about your defeat. After all, God cannot endure any pride or spite that is without humility and fear of him.

God cannot endure any pride or spite that is without humility and fear of him.

God is pleased when we do not fear man and the devil, when we are bold and defiant, when we are courageous and unyielding against them, when they begin and are in the wrong.

Yet it simply is not true that our possession of such wonderful attributes guarantees victory. Rather, God wants to be feared and wants to hear a song like this sung within our heart:

“Dear Lord, my God, you see that I must wage war, although I’d rather not. Yet I do not base my confidence on my just cause, but on your grace and mercy. For I know that if I defiantly relied on a just cause you should justly let me fall as one who would justly fall, because I rely on my right, and not on your mere grace and goodness.”

What did the Gentiles, that is, the Greeks and Romans, who did not know anything about the fear of God, think about this? They believed that they alone were the ones who waged war and won the victory.

However, by experience—when a great, well-armed army was defeated by a handful of barely armed men—they learned, and confessed freely, that there is nothing more dangerous in war than being overly confident. This is why

they concluded that one should never underestimate the enemy, regardless of how few he may be.

A soldier should also not overlook any detail of guard duty, watchfulness, and being alert: Regardless of how insignificant it may be. All such things can prove to be as valuable as gold.

Foolish, arrogant and careless people do not contribute anything to war except defeat. The heathen considered the phrase, *non putassem*, “I did not mean to do it,” to be the most shameful expression of a soldier. It indicated a cocky, defiant, careless person who, in a single moment, destroyed more with one step or one word than could be undone by an entire company of soldiers. Afterwards, of course, he would say: “I did not mean to do it.”

Hannibal routed the Romans as long as they remained defiant and arrogant. Other historical accounts demonstrate the same principle. It can still be observed today.

Well, the heathen experienced this and learned from it. They were, however, unable to discover any cause or reason for it except assigning it all to the god Fortune, who they then feared.

However, as I said, the real reason and cause is that God wants to have attested in and through all such historical events that he is to be feared. In such matters God cannot and will not endure any defiance, contempt, presumption, and arrogance, until we learn to receive everything we want and ought to have by pure grace and mercy from his hands alone.

This is why it is a remarkable thing: A soldier who has just cause ought to be both courageous and disheartened at

the same time. How can a soldier fight being so disheartened? Well, the problem is that if he fights undauntedly, he is also in grave danger.

This is what a soldier should do. Before God, he should be disheartened, fearful, and humble. The soldier should commend the matter to God, so that God might work it out, not according to our right, but according to his goodness and grace. In this way, God is won beforehand by a humble, fearful heart.

A soldier who has just cause ought to be both courageous and disheartened at the same time.

Against the enemy, however, a soldier ought to be bold, free, and defiant. The enemy is, after all, in the wrong. This is how a soldier is to defeat the enemy with a defiant, confident heart.

For why should we not treat our God like the Romans, the greatest warriors that ever lived, treated their idol, Fortune, which they feared? When the Romans did not do so, they fought at great risk or were beaten very badly.

Let's conclude simply with this: Waging war against an equal should: 1) Be something which is forced; and 2) Occur with the fear of God. 'Something which is forced' means that a war begins because an enemy or neighbor attacks, and even though you are ready to go to court, negotiate, forge an agreement, and are willing to endure slander and malice, he still wishes to have at it.

Of course this advice is only for those who want to do the right thing before God. I really can do nothing for those

who do not want to do, and accept, what is right.

‘Fear of God’ means that a person does not rely on the justness of his cause. That does not mean, however, that we should cease to be careful, diligent and cautious in even the most unimportant matters.

It must also be remembered: God’s hand is not somehow bound. It could just be that he might command us to wage war against those who have not given us cause—as he commanded the children of Israel war against the Canaanites. God’s command was necessity enough to wage war.

Even this kind of war, however, should not be waged without fear and caution. As God shows in Josh. 7:1 ff., the children of Israel overconfidently attacked the city of Ai and were soundly defeated.

The same kind of necessity exists when citizens fight because they are told to do so by the authorities. God, after all, commands us to obey the authorities. His commandment is a necessity.

Only everything is to be done in fear and humility. We will treat this below more extensively.

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1. Should a soldier rely solely on just cause to guarantee victory?
 2. On what should a soldier’s confidence be based?
 3. What is the most dangerous aspect of war?
 4. What do foolish, arrogant and careless people contribute to war?

5. How can a soldier be both courageous and disheartened at the same time?
6. What are the two essentials of waging war against an equal?

12

MAY AN AUTHORITY WAGE WAR AGAINST THOSE UNDER IT?

A third question: May an authority wage war against those under it? I've noted already how citizens ought to be obedient—even to the point of suffering injustice from tyrants. If everything works as it should, however, authorities interact with their subjects only by administering laws, justice, and judgment.

If citizens, however, revolt against authority and rebel, as the peasants did recently, it is right and fair for that authority to wage war against them. And this is also what a ruler should do in relation to commanders under him when rebellion occurs and war begins.

Again, such an action must be undertaken with the fear of God and without reliance upon the justness of the cause. Otherwise, it could just be that God punishes the authorities by means of their subjects, even though the rebellion of the subjects is unjust. As was noted above, this happens frequently.

Being right and doing right do not always go hand in hand.

Being right and doing right do not always go hand in hand. Actually, they never go hand in hand unless God grants it.

So even though it is right that a citizen sits still, suffers everything and does not rebel, it is not in man's powers to make him do so. God has, after all, established the citizen as an individual person and has taken the sword away from him as such an individual and locked it up. Yet if a citizen bands together with other citizens, riots, breaks loose and takes the sword, he is liable of judgment and death before God.

A ruler is also an individual person. A ruler, however, does not receive the obedience of those under him and the sword for himself alone.

When a ruler, for example, appeals to the authority over him as his superior, then he is no longer an authority himself, but an individual person, obeying his higher authority like every other individual under him. Yet when that same ruler addresses those under him as his subjects, then that ruler is just as many individual persons, as many heads, as he has beneath him and are obedient to him.

In the same way, when a ruler who has no other gov-

ernmental authority over him on earth turns to God, that person is not a ruler but an individual person, as everybody else is before God. Yet when that ruler turns to his subjects, then he is a ruler for as many times as he has subjects beneath him.

All other authorities must be understood in the same way. When they appeal to authorities above them, they themselves have no authority and are divested of all authority. When they address those below them, however, they are adorned with all authority.

In such a way, all authority ends with God, whose alone it is. It is God who is president, senator, general, officer, soldier, policeman, judge, and everything. He distributes these offices of authority as he wills to be exercised in relation to those governed. At the same time he cancels them in relation to himself.

No individual person ought to oppose the community or gather the community to himself. If he would do such a thing, he would indeed be “chopping at wood above him” and surely “get chips in his eyes”!

And from this you see how people “resist God’s order who strive against the authority,” as St. Paul teaches, Rom. 13:2. And accordingly he says, 1 Cor. 15:24, “that God will cancel all authority,” when he will rule himself and turn everything to him.

***You see how people resist
God’s order who strive
against the authority.***

That’s enough about the three parts of the question as to which wars should be waged, and which should not.

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1. Is “being right” and “doing right” the same thing?
 2. When do “being right” and “doing right” go hand in hand?
 3. What does it mean that “the sword had been taken away from an individual citizen?”
 4. When is a ruler an individual person? When is he not?
 5. With whom does all authority end?
 6. What does it mean to “chop at wood above”?

13

MAY A SOLDIER JUSTLY EARN A SALARY AND BENEFITS?

No authority or ruler can wage war by himself. He must have an army to serve him for this purpose.

He also cannot administer justice and the law by himself. He must have councilors, judges, lawyers, jailers, executioners, and whatever else pertains to the courts of law.

So the question is raised: Is it right to be hired by a governmental authority to serve it when the times require as is now customary? To provide an answer we make a distinction between various servants of war.

First of all, there are those who are required to assist the government with body and possessions and to obey its

commands—in particular members of the armed forces.

Now, St. John the Baptist, Luke 3:13, confirmed that these servants of war rightly earn their salaries and benefits and do right in helping the government to wage war and serve as they should. When the soldiers asked John what they should do, he replied: “Be content with your wages.”

If their wages were unjust or their employment as soldiers contrary to the will of God, John the Baptist would neither have permitted nor confirmed it. Rather, as a godly, Christian teacher John would have chastised the soldiers and prevented them from continuing in their service.

This is my reply to those who from an uninformed conscience allege that it is dangerous to work for a salary at a job which consists in nothing else than shedding blood, killing, and inflicting all kinds of suffering on one’s neighbor, as war demands. Such people are to instruct their consciences in the following manner: Soldiers do not fulfill their duties out of brashness, delight, or aversion.

What soldiers do is God’s work. They owe it to their government and to God to carry it out. In that it is a good work, ordered by God, a soldier ought to receive his due in salary and benefits, as Christ says, Matt. 10:10: “A worker is worth his wages.”

Still it is true: If one serves in the military with a heart and mind that seeks and thinks of nothing but acquiring wealth; if wealth is the soldier’s only motivation to the point that he does not gladly welcome peacetime; if a soldier is sad because there is no war—this man certainly goes beyond what is good and is the devil’s; even if he waged war out of obedience to the call of his government. Why?

That soldier makes an evil work out of a good work. He does not care as much about serving in obedience and out of duty as enriching himself.

***That soldier makes
an evil work out of a
good work.***

This is why such a soldier does not have a good conscience. This soldier could not say: “I would gladly stay home, but because my government demands and requires me to go, I go in God’s name and know that I serve God by doing so and will accept the wages given me in return.”

A soldier should have a conscience that is certain that he serves God as a soldier. Such a soldier should be able to say: “I myself am not shooting, stabbing and killing, but God and my government, whose servants now my hands and body are, are doing so.”

This is what the cry in battle means: “Here is the Emperor,” “Here is France,” “Here is Lüneburg,” “Here is Brunswick.” This is also how the Jews cried against the Midianites, Jdg. 7:20: “Here is God’s and Gideon’s sword.”

The greed of a person spoils all other good works, as for example, when a person preaches the gospel for the sake of wealth. He also is lost, although Christ says, Matt. 10:10, Luke 10:7, 1 Cor. 9:14: “a preacher is to get his living from the gospel.”

To do something for wealth is not evil. Wages, pay and interest, after all, are also wealth. If it were not so, no one would do anything. Ultimately all such things are done for the sake of wealth.

But to be greedy for wealth and to make a Mammon out

of it is in all offices and work unjust. Let go of greed and other evil ideas. Then serving as a soldier will not be sinful. For your work accept your wages and whatever benefits are given you. This is why I said at the beginning of this book that the work of a soldier in itself is right and godly. But when a soldier is unjust or does not serve rightly, then his work as a soldier also becomes unjust.

1. Can an authority wage war by itself?
2. How did John the Baptist treat the soldiers who came to him?
3. Do soldiers do God's work?
4. How does a soldier make an evil work out of a good one?
5. Of what should the soldier's conscience be certain?
6. What should such a soldier be able to say?
7. What makes the work of a soldier just or unjust?

14

WHAT ABOUT A SOLDIER'S HONOR IN AN UNJUST WAR?

Another question is this: “What if my government wages war wrongly?” Answer: If you know for certain that your government is in the wrong, then you should fear and obey God more than men, Acts 5:29. You should not go to war and serve, for there you cannot have a good conscience before God.

You say: “Ok, but my government forces me to serve. It will take my freedom from me and send me to prison. What is more, I would be despised and humiliated before the world. I would also be considered a coward, and an ungrateful citizen who abandons his country in its time

of need”

Answer: You must risk it and lose for God’s sake what is taken from you. He can give it back to you a hundredfold, as he promises to do in the gospel, Matt. 19:29: “Who leaves

***You must risk it and lose
for God’s sake what is
taken from you.***

house, farm, wife, goods for my sake, will receive it back a hundredfold.”

But a person must also anticipate such danger in all other lines of work when

the authorities force you to commit injustice. Yet because God wants to have father and mother forsaken for his sake, one must certainly also forsake governments as well for God’s sake.

However, if you do not know or cannot ascertain whether your government is in the wrong, then you are not to weaken uncertain obedience by an uncertain right. Seek instead your government’s best interest in the manner of love. “For love believes all and does not think evil,” 1 Cor. 13:7. In such a way you are safe and do rightly before God.

If you have to endure shame for it, or are called unfaithful, then it is better that God praises you as faithful and upright than that the world praises you as faithful and upright. Of what use would it be for you, if the world thought you were as good as Solomon or Moses, but God considered you to be as evil as Saul or Ahab?

Still another question is this: “But what is one to say about the person who goes to war not only for the sake of wealth, but also to prove to others that he is courageous?”

Being greedy for fame as a courageous person and being

greedy for wealth are both forms of greed, the one being as unjust as the other. Whoever goes into battle with such a mindset, battles himself into hell.

Honor is to be left and given to God alone. We should be content with wages and food. This is why it is unchristian to exhort soldiers before battle in this way: “Fellow soldiers, be alert and confident! Today, God willing, we will become rich and famous!”

Rather, in this way one ought to admonish them:

“Fellow soldiers. We are here because it is our duty to serve and obey our government. We owe such service according to God’s will and order to aid our country with our strengths and abilities. Even though we are sinners before God like our enemies!”

“But because we know (or at least do not know otherwise) that our government is in the right in this case, which makes us certain and sure that we serve God in such service and obedience, let each of you be fearless and alert! Do not think anything else than that your hand is God’s hand, your weapon is God’s weapon, and cry with heart and mouth: ‘Here is God and our country!’”

“Should God give us victory, then let God be honored and praised, and not us. God, after all, triumphs by means of us poor sinners. Wages and benefits, however, we will accept as something given us unworthy men from his divine goodness and grace as a gift and thank him for it wholeheartedly. Now may God grant it, and off with rejoicing!”

Without a doubt where one seeks God’s honor and leaves

the matter to him, as it is only right to do in war, there will be more honor than one could ever seek. God has promised, 1 Sam. 2:30: “Whoever honors me I will honor in return; but whoever dishonors me I will dishonor in return...”

According to such promises God cannot help it. He must honor those who honor him.

One of the worst sins is to seek one's own honor. One of the worst sins is to seek one's own honor. To do so is to do nothing other than to steal divine majesty.

Let others boast and seek honor. You remain obedient and silent. Your honor will not be forgotten.

Many a war was lost that could have been won, had vain glory permitted it. Honor-greedy soldiers do not believe that God is present in war and gives victory.

This is why they also do not fear God, are not joyful, but rather impudent and mad. In the end they go down to defeat.

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1. Who should be feared more: God or man?
 2. What must the Christian risk for God's sake?
 3. Can a government be forsaken for God's sake?
 4. What if a soldier cannot determine whether or not a war is just?
 5. Is greed for fame the same as greed for wealth?
 6. To whom is honor to be left and given?

15

HOW DOES A CHRISTIAN SOLDIER PREPARE FOR BATTLE?

Equally as troubling are soldiers who distract themselves, and let themselves be distracted before battle by thinking about their lovers. Such soldiers let themselves be told: “Think about your lovers!”.

Had I not heard from two veterans that this actually takes place, I would have never believed it. How can man’s heart be so forgetful and flippant in such a serious business, when the danger of death is before him?

To be sure, no civilian does this when struggling with death! But here, among fellow soldiers one distracts the other in such away, so that no one considers what is at stake

for everyone involved.

Yet it is terrible to think that a Christian heart in the hour when it prepares for God's judgment and the danger of death, gladdens and comforts itself first and foremost with carnal love. Those who are killed or die in this state send their souls directly and immediately to hell.

"Well," such soldiers respond, "if I had to think of hell I would never go to war!" That one should maliciously erase God and his judgment from his mind, not wanting to know, think, or hear anything of it, is even more terrible!

This is why most soldiers belong to the devil. Many are so filled with demons that they do not know how to show their joy in any other way than to speak disrespectfully of God and his judgment. It's as if swearing, torturing, cursing, and defying God in heaven makes them tough as nails! Such soldiers are a lost bunch and chaff, just as there is much chaff and little grain in all other lines of work.

Consequently, it may not be well before God with the mercenaries who run blindly through the world seeking wars. They could be at work and make a living until they are called to duty. Instead they simply waste time out of laziness or their rude, wild nature.

Such mercenaries cannot give any good reason or good excuse before God for their way of life. All that they have is a rash desire or brashness for war or for leading a free and wild life. Living in such a way some of them will in the end simply become criminals.

Yet if they took up work or a craft and earned their bread, as God has commanded and imposed on all people, until their government called them up for service or permitted

and allowed them to serve someone else, then they could awaken with a good conscience. They then would know that in what they did they served at the pleasure of their government. Such a good conscience they could not have otherwise.

That God the Almighty does a great favor for us by establishing authorities as external markers and signs of his will should be a comfort and joy to the entire world. This alone is a powerful reason to love and honor authorities.

We are certain that we please God's divine will and do the right thing whenever we do what the authorities want and wish. For God has attached and tied his word and his will to them, when he says, Matt. 22:21: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," and Rom. 13:1: "Let each be subject to the authority."

Finally, soldiers entertain many superstitions in battle. One commends himself to St. George, the other to St. Christopher, one to this, the other to that saint.

Some are able to enchant iron and flint. Others bless horse and rider. Others carry with them a copy of the Gospel of St. John or something else on which they rely.

All such soldiers are in a dangerous situation. They do not believe in God, but rather sin against God with unbelief and false belief. If they died, they should also be lost.

This is what soldiers are to do instead. When a battle begins and the admonition mentioned about above has been given, one simply ought to commend oneself to God's grace and behave in this matter now as a Christian. For the previous admonition offers merely the manner in which one should carry out the external work of war in

good conscience.

However, because no good work saves, after such admonition each soldier himself ought to speak in this way, either to himself, or out loud:

“Heavenly Father,

I am here according to your divine will in this external work and service to my government. I owe it first to you and then to the government for your sake. I thank you for your grace and mercy that you have placed me in such work where I am certain that it is not sin, but right, and in pleasing obedience to your will.”

“Yet because I know and have learned from your grace-filled word that not one of our good works may help us, and no one can be saved as a soldier, but only as a Christian, I do not at all want to rely on my obedience and work. Rather, I want to work and obey freely to serve your will.”

And I believe wholeheartedly that I am redeemed and saved only by the innocent blood of your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, which he obediently shed for me according to your gracious will.

On this I stand. On this I live and die. On this I fight and do everything.

Dear Father, keep and strengthen me in this faith by your Spirit. Amen.”

If you wish, you may then say the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. Then it is enough.

In such a way commend your body and soul into God’s hands. Then take up your weapon and fight hard in God’s

name.

If there were many such soldiers in an army, who do you think could do anything to them? They might well devour the entire world without firing their weapons once.

I think if nine or ten of such soldiers in a single unit could say this with a true heart, it would be better than all guns, knives, vehicles, and armor.

So bring on the enemy with all his might. Christian faith is no shameful or petty matter. As Christ says in the gospel, Mark 9:23, it can do all things.

Yet where are those who believe this way and are able to do this? Still, even if most do not do it, we must teach it and know it for the sake of those, however few they might be, who will do it.

God's word does not proceed in vain, says Isaiah, chapter 55:11. It still brings some to God.

The others who despise the wholesome doctrine unto their salvation have their Judge to whom they must answer. We are absolved and have done our duty.

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1. Why should a Christian love and honor authorities?
 2. Do we please God when we obey the authorities?
 3. What should a soldier do when battle begins?
 4. Is a soldier saved by being a soldier, or by being a Christian?
 5. Should a Christian fight as a soldier to his utmost?

Luther's Book and Its Current Relevance

Martin Luther wrote this book—explicitly dedicated to establishing what is morally right and wrong, according to God's word, in this world—as a pastor and father-confessor, that is, as one charged with caring for souls and counseling consciences. In this capacity, not as a person who in his leisure writes in a generally pleasing way about various topics, Luther had been approached by a group of professional soldiers in 1525 when the new prince-elect of Saxony (John the Steadfast (1468–1532), who had succeeded his brother, Frederick the Wise (1463–1525)), visited Wittenberg for the first time. Being plagued by pangs of conscience due to their profession, these men asked Luther to address the question as to whether, and when, a Christian could, in good conscience, take up the sword. Luther, in the opening paragraphs of this treatise refers readers back to his 1523 booklet on government, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (AE 45:81 ff.),¹ in which he had shown that the exercise of political authority is a good work commanded by God. Therefore legitimate wars, as one form of the exercise of political authority, are good works of love selflessly serving the neighbor, despite their cruel outward circumstances with which Luther and his contemporaries were extremely familiar. Therefore, Christians may, in good conscience, hold the

¹ AE = Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955 ff.).

vocations of rulers and soldiers. This position would be affirmed as biblical in Article XVI of the *Augsburg Confession* (1530) and its *Apology* (1531).²

In this work from 1526, the Reformer turns more attention to the question of which wars are good or just wars, and which wars are not—in other words: Which wars are in agreement with God’s law? The question of resisting legitimate political authority is obviously featured prominently due to the specific historical situation that will be addressed below. Luther also focuses, corresponding to his opening praise of equity, on the question of how, with what kind of heart, a Christian may safely engage in a legitimate war—in other words: How is God’s law truly kept? Luther arrives at this answer: First, only wars between equals (sovereigns) are just wars—and this only when they are waged to defend the physical lives and possessions of one’s subjects and when they are entered into with great reluctance, that is, after enduring much provocation and even an actual attack.³ Second, only those whose heart believes, neither in the justness of their cause nor in supposedly protective reli-

² Interestingly, the author of these two Lutheran statements of faith, Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), seems to have held at first that Christians should not be engaged in these particular vocations. See Luther’s 1521 letter critical of his associate’s position in this matter (AE 48:258-262).

³ Luther, thus, was by no means a “hawk.” He would express an analogous thought a few years later when stating what keeps a political community together on the inside: In his 1530 *Sermon on Keeping Children in School*, the Reformer states that the secular government—“a glorious ordinance and splendid gift of God, who has instituted and established it and will have it maintained as something men cannot do without” (for without it, we would become “wild beasts” after the fall)—established by God to protect his created gifts to man, is maintained primarily, albeit not exclusively, by wisdom in the form of laws, not by force of arms: “the laws are indeed the true armor and weapons which maintain and protect land and people, yes, the empire and worldly government itself, . . . and pious jurists are the true knights who defend the emperor and the princes” (AE 46:237f., 245). This is the context for Luther’s remarks in his *Large Catechism* on the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer (LC III, 73-75), which he penned in the previous year, 1529. Luther would agree: “The pen is mightier than the sword” (E. Bulwer-Lyton, *Richelieu or The Conspiracy*, 1839).

gious paraphernalia or practices, but in Christ's righteousness alone, are engaged in battle in a manner that is spiritually safe. While they are humble, even desperate, towards God, they are, in keeping with their vocation in this world, bold and fierce toward their enemies. Christians are thus not generally timid "door mats;" in relation to their fellow men, they behave in accordance with their vocation.

In other words, the vocation of soldier is no different than other godly vocations: On the one hand, no work is good that is not in agreement with God's moral law. On the other hand, good works do not make a person good, but a person who is good by faith in Christ does truly good works. Not just the bloody work of war, but any work done without faith in the gospel, is a mortal sin (Rom. 14:23), even if it externally agrees with God's law. This is the "program" of Luther's *On Christian Liberty* (in this Lutheran-Press series: *How to Live a Christian Life*) now applied to the concrete vocation of soldier.

Because of the broad scope of Luther's text, we have decided to alter the title of the book that, e.g., in the *American Edition* of Luther's works is called *Whether Soldiers, too, Can Be Saved* (AE 46:93ff.). The new title, *Christians Can Be Soldiers*, seeks to reflect this scope, as the book is not just for soldiers but for all Christians and, as Luther points out frequently, for Christians only: It is intended only for those who wish to heed God's Word and not blindly follow famous historical precedent at their conscience's and soul's peril.

We today live about 500 years after Luther. History teaches us about many a revolution and rebellion in the years since Luther, including the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s, and various "liberation struggles" in countries on the African and Asian continents in the wake of 20th-century decolonization. History and present-day experience also teach us about wars that, while not necessarily more

cruel than the mostly up-close killing that took place in the 16th century, have become more efficient and distanced at the same time, even with global nuclear annihilation being out of the picture for the time being. The push of a button thousands of miles away wipes out human lives by means of the missile of an unmanned aerial vehicle, the “kill” being documented in real time by the drone’s camera. And history also teaches us about lying, tyrannical, warmongering governments that, in their manipulative ways, lead their subjects to become mass-executioners of the politically, economically, or racially stigmatized innocent: Think of 20th-century events in Turkey, the Soviet Union, Germany, China, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan.

Many are therefore the churches and Christians who, today, side with certain voices emerging at Luther’s time—often referred to as “historic peace churches” (i.e., the Hutterites, Mennonites, and Quakers)—and cannot imagine that war waged by a legitimate government could ever be a good work of love.⁴ “Revolutionary” wars, on the other hand, are at times zealously defended. Warm admiration is often extended to German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) and his participation in a conspiracy to kill the tyrant Adolf Hitler and replace his government to prove the point that Lutherans,

⁴ Most recently, the leader of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) and bishop of the largest Lutheran territorial church there, Margot Käßmann, spoke out against a German participation in the war in Afghanistan and, in fact, against all war. In a January 03, 2010 interview with the newspaper *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, she stated: “For me, war is not justifiable. And everything that has been said about it theologically – e.g., that civilians are not to be involved – reinforces that a justification is impossible. War always brings violence, destruction, rape in its wake. The churches have said after 1948: War must not exist for God’s sake. There can only be just peace.” She here refers to a resolution of a committee of the World Council of Churches at its first meeting in Amsterdam in 1948 that has since become the mantra of modern Christian pacifism. In Luther’s judgment, she, fixated on the cruelty of the thing, looks at war with the eyes of one who is spiritually immature and raises grave doubts in the consciences of the soldiers under her care.

contrary to Calvinistic calumnies, are not “quietists.”⁵ One also has a hard time understanding that the properly recruited warrior, engaged in a legitimate war, is not only the extension of his government on the battlefield, but also a tool in God’s hand as He governs His world among believers and unbelievers alike and, seeking His glory first and last, mercifully grants victory to whom He wills. Likewise, Luther’s high praise for all legitimate government as a good institution and gift of the Creator, even as a marker and indicator of God’s will for us, many will want to lay aside as an overly uncritical relic of a past, unenlightened authoritarian era of human development,

⁵ U. Siemon Netto, in his defense of Bonhoeffer, points to Luther’s famous saying “sin boldly,” indicating that Bonhoeffer, despite his attempts at theological rationalization, still considered the murder even of a tyrant a sin (cf. *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 2007), 88f.). Luther’s words, contained in the conclusion of a 1521 letter to Melancthon from his exile at Wartburg Castle (AE 48:277-282), historically have offered ammunition to Catholic polemicists that seek to paint the Reformer as morally lax, even though Luther here, as elsewhere, merely spoke, as W. H. T. Dau points out, against “morbid self-incrimination,” not for unapologetic sinning (*Luther Examined and Re-Examined: A Review of Catholic Criticism and a Plea for Reevaluation* (1917, republished: Teddington, Middlesex: Echo Library, 2007), 93-95). This was also Bonhoeffer’s view in his 1937 *The Cost of Discipleship*, tr. R. H. Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1995, 51-53): “Sin boldly” must not be taken as an ethical premise or principle but as a gracious “conclusion.” However, in his resistance years, Bonhoeffer seems to have embraced the notion that, in exceptional cases, the breaking of the law (“sinning boldly”) has to be consciously and deliberately done to restore law and order (cf. his 1943 “After Ten Years,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 10f.). In his fragmentary *Ethics*, written between 1940 and 1943, he advocates a “willingness to take on guilt” in loving service of the neighbor (cf. C. J. Green, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 6:13f.). However, is this still the teaching of Luther (see also Rom. 3:8)? To be sure, Luther was familiar with the proverb: “Necessity knows no law,” meaning that laws may be broken in emergency situations, but, as far as I can see, he never applied it to justify “armed resistance” to tyrants or to bring about some better state of affairs in general. In fact, the concrete laws that should be broken in necessity, according to Luther, do not have the same standing as the law of nature but were of an ecclesiastical or evangelical character (see AE 31:114; 36:255, 260; 40:18). And while Luther did characterize war as an “evil,” this evil was clearly not an absolute, moral evil.

especially since the Vietnam War and its extensive and continuing political fallout.

It seems we today not only have seen it all, we have also seen it all go to pieces. Luther's stance seems naïve at best, cynical and dangerous at worst. We are disappointed by the "powers that be." As Christians, we might still speak piously of "holy" matrimony in keeping with modern religion's private nature, but "holy" government? Well, no, that's a bit too much even for the most conservative among us, especially for those who think that "the government is the problem." And "holy" war? Please!

Why should we give Luther a hearing despite all this? First, considered on a purely military level, soldiers can relate to Luther's surprising knowledge of and warm appreciation for the military profession. This includes its necessities of attention to detail and careful preparation, the absence of which, combined with overconfidence, can easily let victory slip through one's fingers. Yet this also includes taking seriously the soldier's fear of dying or getting seriously wounded in battle. Luther here offers a potent antidote that is centered on the Christian's justification by grace through faith in Christ alone and that is, therefore, spiritually far superior to the warrior's self-made protections and distractions.

Second, the view of just war as a continuation of law enforcement and punishment of evil doers, held by Luther and others, has gained a new acceptance in the last couple of decades as one of the lessons learned from the Vietnam War that are now being put into practice, e.g., in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The point of war is not to kill as many people as possible—without the distinction between combatants and non-

combatants required by the classic doctrine of just war⁶—which was the philosophy that still drove the carpet bombing raids in Indochina that proved fruitful only in swelling the ranks of those fighting against the South Vietnamese government and its US allies. Rather, the point of intelligent warfare, of modern counterinsurgency strategies, is to identify carefully, and then eliminate, the few bad apples that can incite a whole population to resistance while “winning the hearts and minds” of the remainder of the populace, including even enemies fighters, with social, economic, and political support programs.⁷

Third, turning now to the theological level, parting ways with Luther at this junction leaves the world and its history (and future) strangely devoid of concrete instances of the presence of God the Creator, as if he had, like in Epicurean philosophy, retired to some otherworldly realm of perpetual bliss. Seeking refuge in some utopian,⁸ inherently unspecific attempt to establish God’s kingdom of perpetual peace and perfect justice on earth is no real consolation prize for this loss since it failed already during Luther’s lifetime, namely, at Thomas Müntzer’s defeat at Frankenhausen in May 1525.

⁶ The demand that just wars had to be waged, not only by a legitimate political authority and for just reasons, but also in a just manner led, e.g., John Gerhard to reject the use of bombards, not only because they caused the end of true military virtue, but, chiefly, because they work mass destruction of men and buildings (cf. loc. XIV, para. 423). What appears quaint, at best, when the objective of warfare is mass destruction and collective punishment, seems rather prudent and timely when the objective is basically judicious law enforcement.

⁷ See, e.g., H. J. Poole, *Tequila Junction: 4th-Generation Counterinsurgency* (Emerald Island, NC: Posterity Press, 2008). Cf. also H. J. Poole, *Tactics of the Crescent Moon: Militant Muslim Combat Methods* (Emerald Island, NC: Posterity Press, 2004), 228: “Noncombatants made little strategic difference in the conventional wars of the 20th Century, but they make a tremendous difference in the unconventional or 4th-generation wars of the 21st.”

⁸ In 1516, Thomas More (1478-1535) published a famous book in Latin by the title, *On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia*, in which he described his social and political ideals.

Fourth, while some believe that dehumanizing one's enemy is the only way in which one can "mentally" prepare soldiers for the serious and psychologically traumatic act of killing a fellow human being,⁹ Luther need not take this route due to his understanding of being a soldier as a godly vocation in and through which God himself is at work (cf. LC I, 180-182). The soldier as the government's and, therefore, God's agent is elevated to high honors in this way; consequently, his enemy need not be degraded to a subhuman level. Of course, as Luther points out also in the book at hand, this divine dignity of this vocation cannot be learned from its cruel and seemingly loveless externals; it must be learned and relearned from God's Word itself.

Fifth, Luther's anthropological realism—taking seriously the old Adam's unwillingness and inability to submit to God's law (Rom. 8:7) and, therefore, to live in peace with God and one's neighbor—shows why every attempt to establish heaven on earth must lead straight to hell on earth. And it also shows why the little evil of legitimate war remains, until Christ returns, a necessary "evil" of last resort to stem the tide of the unspeakable evil of an outright, permanent war of all against all.

Sixth, Luther's realism concerning man's true nature shows itself also in that the booklet at hand frequently draws on examples from several thousands of years of human experiences in war and peace: Those of the Gentiles recorded in their history books; those of God's people recorded in God's Word; and those of Luther's own day and age. In light of his thorough grasp of the human condition, our negative, disillusioning experiences with war, government, and people in general would have hardly been news to Luther. Regarding these, there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9).

Yet why is there this unabated, not optimism, but confidence

⁹ Cf. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. 1st Paperback Ed. (Little, Brown, and Co.: New York, Boston, London, 1996).

displayed in the writing at hand? One can again only point to Luther's trust in God and his unchanging promises in his Word (First Commandment): He will punish the wicked and defend his people, that is, those who sincerely believe Christ's gospel; he will continue to give good physical things to the good and the evil, including good government and just war; he will do this every day anew, not from some far-away Epicurean heaven but as the ever-present almighty Creator of the world. And he is concretely present and specifically at work in this world behind and through the masks of fallible human beings placed in the various vocations and "holy orders" instituted and preserved by him, including the government and its military.

It is as if the Christian's daily return to baptism makes him new in repentance and faith, also in that it lets him again see God's creaturely gifts, not in light of man's constant and unsurprising abuse and failure, but in light of God's gracious Word and ever-surprising promise and preservation. Properly relating to all of these gifts of God—without falling prey to chronic despair, mistrust, cynicism, or blind enthusiasm—thus starts again with baptism, every day anew. This is true for one's spouse in holy matrimony as well as for one's superiors in holy government, holy economy, and holy church. In other words, as stated above, only keeping the First Commandment from the heart truly leads to keeping the Fourth Commandment.

In summary, Luther offers to the Christian a conscientious compass along a "third way" when it comes to war. Luther distinguishes clearly between which kind of war is and which kind is not in agreement with God's Word. He sees its legitimate form as a necessary and God-given "evil" to prevent a greater physical evil. The Reformer does not shun it completely like

pacifists old and new. He also does not glorify it like Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*¹⁰ who saw in war the necessary, desirable means to end mankind's current state of weakness and bring about the *Übermensch*, the superman, who unapologetically cares about himself and no one else.¹¹ Both Nietzsche and the pacifists agree in disconnecting from war the God who became man in Jesus of Nazareth. This fatal disconnection we do not see in Luther. This might just make Luther a teacher that is worth our study and consideration at a time such as this.

Luther on Armed Resistance to the Government Then and Now

Some remarks on the concrete historical situation of the treatise at hand are in order. These not only explain why Luther's treatment of rebellion takes up a major part of his 1526 work. They will also shed light on modern attempts to contemporize Luther's position.

Martin Luther wrote this booklet in 1526, the year after the end of the German Peasants' War that had come to a head in May 1525 in the Battle of Frankenhausen, Thuringia. There the

¹⁰ Copies of Nietzsche's book were handed out to German soldiers in WW I, along with the New Testament and J. W. von Goethe's *Faust: Christ, and Antichrist* in one package, so to speak. Cf. S. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1994), 135f.

¹¹ This, and his disdain for the state expressed in the same work, makes him into one of the forefathers of modern Libertarianism, as, e.g., H. L. Menken was an admirer of Nietzsche's "thought and values" and Ayn Rand was influenced by the "heroic ideals" expressed in his thinking, cf. R. Hamowy (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 324, 355f., 413. – Hitler, on the other hand, did not have much (positive) to say about Nietzsche. Leading Nazi philosopher, A. Bäumler, to be sure, praised Nietzsche's "heroic" will to power, but he appropriated him only with "enormous distortions of Nietzsche's ideological substance," e.g., his individualism, his contempt for anti-Semitism, his condemnation of Christianity in general and Luther in particular (cf. Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 105f., 111f.).

peasants were defeated and Thomas Müntzer (ca. 1488 – 27 May 1525), one of their leaders, was captured and soon killed. This rebellion, centered in Southwest Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, was one of several such movements at the end of the middle ages and the beginning of the early modern age. It was preceded, in roughly the same area, by the *Bundschuh*-movement, active between 1493 and 1517, which used the customary footwear of the peasant, the tied shoe, as the symbol of their uprising. Although the Peasants' War, like many of its predecessors, was triggered by excessive taxation, it was not the poorest farmers that were at its forefront. Rather, it was the local village leaders, such as mayors and judges, who led the way, inciting their poorer neighbors to join them. An era of economic and social change, the same period witnessed the rise of the monetary economy and the growing importance of cities. These developments undermined traditional feudalism, e.g., by giving rise to mercenary armies. Consequently they occurred at the expense of the petty nobility who, in reaction, resorted to the practice of feuding and looting (and also leveling excessive taxes), making them the original robber barons.

Luther had been drawn into the German Peasants' War because—as his detractors were quick to point out—its leaders seemed to be in agreement with his work of reform, in particular with one of its early catchwords of “liberty” (esp. Luther’s 1520 treatise *On Christian Liberty*). The first of the 1525 *Twelve Articles* of the Swabian peasants,¹² for example, declared it a right of a congregation to elect its own pastor to preach the gospel, a right championed also by Luther himself (AE 39:305ff.). Additionally, Luther’s early supporter and former fellow professor at Wittenberg, Andrew Karlstadt (ca. 1480-1541), had himself been active in violent activities as early as 1521/22, when he led the Wittenberg iconoclasm that forced Luther to return to

¹² An English translation of these articles is found in AE 46:8-16.

that city from his hiding place at the Wartburg Castle. Luther responded to Karlstadt's actions in 1522 with his *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to all Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion* (AE 45:57ff.), his *Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* (AE 51:70ff.), and, in 1523, his treatise on *Temporal Authority: To what Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, mentioned above. The events leading up to the Peasants' War of 1525 also prompted Luther to reply directly to the *Twelve Articles* with his *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia* (AE 46:17ff.) from 1525 and was followed by further pertinent treatises by Luther.

Given that the times were characterized by unrest and strife seemingly provoked by Luther's reformation writings, it is not surprising that answering the question of whether a Christian has the right to rebel against unjust superiors takes up a major portion of the work which has been translated in this volume. The fact that Luther had already answered this question in the negative in earlier works had exposed him to serious criticism from supposed allies as a spineless lackey of the princes. Luther responded by noting that, on the one hand, "subject" is meant to include not just peasants and townsfolk, but also dissatisfied nobility and princes in their relation to the emperor. On the other hand, Luther—after having taken the nobility to task already in his 1525 writing in reply to the Twelve Articles of the peasants, faulting them and their luxurious life for driving their peasants to rebel (see AE 46:19ff.)—sharply criticizes the princes and other members of the nobility who, in their greedy and self-righteous victors' justice, failed to exercise the virtue of *equity*, or fairness, as they indiscriminately prosecuted participants in the peasants' insurrection.

Here, as elsewhere, Luther, following Aristotle and other ancient political philosophers, speaks highly of equity as the mistress of the law. It is equity that considers the heart of the accused instead of blindly applying the law in all its indiscrimi-

nate harshness merely to his actions. It appears then that, in this gracious virtue of wise judges and rulers known as ‘equity,’ Luther had found the closest political correspondence to God’s grace that, against the just accusation of the law, justifies the heart that believes in Christ as its sole Savior from the law.

Luther’s characterization as a blind supporter of the powerful—in modern times he has been credited with paving the way in Germany for Hitler and National Socialism¹³—also fails to be accurate for another reason, namely, his scriptural belief in God as the final Lord of all human lords (1 Tim. 6:15) and final avenger of all injustice (Rom. 12:19).

While Luther in this context emphasizes, first of all, that those who wish to be Christians should not rebel against their unjust superiors, from the outset he acknowledges that there are indeed unjust superiors in matters of war and peace who, on account of their impenitent temporal injustice, will forfeit their soul’s eternal salvation. Obviously then, according to Luther, might is not automatically right. If man’s orders conflict with God’s Word, Christians are called to obey God rather than man

¹³ For leading National Socialists—be they Protestant, Catholic, or Neo-Pagan—Luther was important as a “nationalist and antisemitic hero,” according to R. Steigmann-Gall’s study *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 84. Especially powerful, chiefly on the side of Lutheran theologians and party leaders, proved the notion of “created orders” that, in the form promoted at the time, originated in the 19th century (38f.). The problem here is not the assertion of such “created orders”—including marriage and the state—as such, but the assertion of an absolute autonomy of these orders (“Eigengesetzlichkeit”). This notion denies the fact that, due to man’s loss of the image of God in the fall, even our ability to know God’s moral will from creation has been damaged along with creation and its order themselves. Simply put, the way things are is not the way they ought to be. See the brief discussion in A. Pawlas, *Die lutherische Berufs- und Wirtschaftsethik: Eine Einführung* (Neuenkirchen: Neuenkirchener Verlag, 2000), 67-72. To remedy this in part, God had to reveal the natural law again in the form of the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai (cf. *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), 186-189, 216f., 320f.; John Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, loc. XII, para. 26). Luther’s treatise at hand clearly shows that he did not endorse such absolute moral autonomy or self-evidence of creation’s orders.

(Acts 5:29, see Luke 14:26), even if this, as a concrete instance of following Christ, means condemnation and cross-bearing in this life, in addition to “breaking” the Fourth Commandment. Yet this is how the First Table of the Ten Commandments (nos. 1-3), mandating love of God, “governs” the Second Table (nos. 4-10) that is about love of the neighbor (see AE 6:29f.; 45:277).

Moreover, Luther provides examples from history demonstrating that God has many tools at his disposal to bring a tyrant’s life to a quick end. Christian subjects therefore can confidently leave all such things to God’s direction, not because they do not care about injustice committed by their superiors, but because they believe in Him who is the living Author and eternal Guardian of all law and justice. Without considering this transcendent, metaphysical anchor and reference of the legal order—which, it needs to be emphasized, in Luther is by no means a dead, static philosophical abstraction but the living God himself who is actively present in his creation—Luther indeed must be misunderstood as a naïve political amateur and willing puppet in the hands of the mighty.

It is here, then, that the First Commandment intersects with the Fourth. Without the heart’s fear, love, and trust in God, fulfillment of the Fourth Commandment—as well as any other of the Ten Commandments—is impossible, as Luther demonstrates so masterfully in the exposition of the Ten Commandments in the *Small Catechism* by introducing each by “We should fear and love God, so that we . . .” Not only will the keeping of this law be mere heartless moralism—the commandment is thus already broken by an impenitent heart from within. It will also not even be fulfilled outwardly: Time and again, the unbeliever will take recourse to his own rebellious actions to thwart a seemingly out-of-control government, as the possibility of God’s relieving action in history is not even given a thought.

Some today, in an attempt to improve on the Reformer's defense against the accusation of being one-sidedly for the mighty and powerful, detect a change in his attitude to resisting the unjust use of authority, that is, tyranny. The claim is made that Luther later endorsed "active, armed resistance to the emperor;"¹⁴ that he later "explicitly sanctions armed resistance to the monarch."¹⁵ Much is made of Luther's *Warning to his Dear German People* (AE 47:11ff.) which first appeared in 1531. Is the scope of this writing the endorsing of "armed resistance" as a specific form of "political activism" and "self-defense," as already Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) held after Luther's death?¹⁶ To arrive at an answer, one need not resort to reading between the lines. Luther says quite openly what he at that time taught in these matters (AE 47:13):

... we wrote and taught so emphatically not to resort to rebellion, but to suffer the madness even of tyrants, and not to defend oneself. This is what I teach, but I cannot create the doers of this teaching, since they esteem so little all the other articles of our teaching. If now the masses should reject our teaching against rebellion, especially if they were provoked by such a godless outrage and wanton war, then the devil would make real fools of them and expose them very nicely and neatly.

This is certainly a more or less veiled threat against those

¹⁴ This view is held, e.g., by M. Bertram in his 1971 "Introduction" to his translation of the *Warning*, AE 47:6. According to Bertram, Luther articulates his new position in a rather veiled way.

¹⁵ U. Siemon Netto, *The Fabricated Luther*, 90. In his work, this thesis not only serves to defend Luther against modern critics who find "political activism" only in Calvin and his followers (91f.) but also seeks to defend Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his participation in a plot to kill Hitler as faithful to Luther's own views (89, 96ff.). As an aside that is interesting and perhaps not coincidental, the secondary works referenced by Siemon Netto in this part of his book were all published around 1970.

¹⁶ See St. Louis ed., 10:534f.

who play with the fire of waging war against the Lutherans. Yet this kind of threat against tyrants who wage an unjust war of aggression was not new to Luther. It can already be found in the work at hand written five years earlier. According to Luther, he could teach the masses, but he could not control them. Such obedience lies in God's hands. At times, God grants obedience to his Word but at times uses a rebellious mob to punish tyrants, as could be seen in the peasants' rebellion of the early 1520s.

In other words, Luther's main point is this: While the book with a similar title from 1522 warned all Christians to guard against participating in insurrection in general, the *Warning* of 1531 called on all Germans not to follow a possible summons by the emperor to rise up and rebel against the princes and lands who had adopted Lutheranism, especially since the Imperial Diet meeting in the city of Augsburg had agreed that their doctrine was biblically sound (AE 47:30):

This is my sincere advice: If the emperor should issue a call to arms against us on behalf of the pope or because of our teaching, as the papists at present horribly gloat and boast—though I do not yet expect this of the emperor—no one should lend himself to it or obey the emperor in this event. All may rest assured that God has strictly forbidden compliance with such a command of the emperor. Whoever does obey him can be certain that he is disobedient to God and will lose both body and soul eternally in the war. For in this case the emperor would not only act in contravention of God and divine law but also in violation of his own imperial law, vow, duty, seal, and edicts.

Again, the main point of the work from 1531 is to dissuade potential soldiers from joining the emperor in an unjust war. This was no new idea, having already been asserted in the work at hand in 1526. Acts 5:29 is quoted in both instances (cf. AE 47:54).

In light of pertinent writings by Luther from the 1530s, two other items stand out in this brief quote in relation to the question of resistance to the government: First, the emperor is here described as an agent of the pope. Second, if the emperor were to go forward with this war, he would be in violation of his realm's own positive law¹⁷ and his own vows, presumably those made when he became emperor.

As to the first item, the emperor functions as a mere pawn in the army of the pope and his, as Luther called them in his 1531 *Warning*, “bloodhounds.” The theses for a 1539 disputation on Matth. 19:21 assert: If the legitimate secular authority, out of its own volition, would persecute one for the sake of the gospel, one would have to leave earthly possessions and life undefended. Yet if the pope, who is no legitimate authority at all—“neither a bishop nor a heretic; neither a prince nor a tyrant(!)”—would do so, then it would be necessary to band together to resist him and his secular allies by all means.¹⁸ Accordingly, these were Luther's last words on the matter in the *Warning* of 1531 (AE 47:55):

I testify here again that I do not wish to incite or spur anyone to war or rebellion or even self-defense, but solely to peace. But if the papists—our devil—refuse to keep the peace and, impenitently raging against the Holy Spirit with their persistent abominations, insist on war, and thereby get their heads bloodied or even perish, I want to witness publicly here that this was not my doing, nor

¹⁷ “Positive law” is a technical term that, in distinction from the law of nature or of God, denotes a law given by man.

¹⁸ St. Louis ed., 10:580-583, theses 36-70 (Weimar Edition of Luther's Works (WA), vol. 39/I:41-43). Even in the case of the pope Luther, thus, does not advocate “tyrannicide,” the killing of tyrants: Being a dual-natured werewolf, the soul-destroying antichrist, killing him would be killing the devil incarnate (WA 39/I:60f.). This echoes what Luther wrote nine years earlier, just before the Augsburg Diet of 1530 in a letter to Elector John (AE 49:278): If the emperor himself were to attack the Lutheran princes and their subjects due to their confession of faith, the princes should not resist him. Then each should defend his faith for himself.

did I give any cause for it. It is they who want to have it that way. May their blood be on their heads! I am exonerated; I have done my duty faithfully. Henceforth I shall let Him judge who will, must, and also is able to do so. He will not tarry, nor will he fail.

This puts into proper context what Luther wrote in the same tract on self-defense: He does not wish to offer a general justification of the practice, but a justification for the case when an illegitimate authority, such as the pope and his “bloodhounds,” is to be resisted along with its associates (AE 47:19):

I will direct them in this matter to the law and to the jurists. For in such an instance, when the murderers and bloodhounds wish to wage war and to murder, it is in truth no insurrection to rise against them and defend oneself. Not that I wish to incite or spur anyone on to such self-defense, or to justify it, for that is not my office; much less does it devolve on me to pass judgment or sentence on him. A Christian knows very well what he is to do—namely, to render to God the things that are God’s and to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s [Matt. 22:21], but not to render to the bloodhounds the things that are not theirs. I want to make a distinction between sedition and other acts and to deprive the bloodhounds of the pretext of boasting that they are warring against rebellious people and that they were justified according to both human and divine law.

On the second issue, that of positive law, it needs to be pointed out that while Luther lived in the age of feudalism, and not democracy, he did agree, in his 1526 booklet at hand, that rulers should govern according to the law of both man and God. Commenting on a constitutional arrangement in France, according to which the king would forfeit his right to rule if he broke the agreement, Luther again does not endorse the mob’s self-justice.

However, if another ruler would be the (neutral) judge, then an impeachment of a sitting sovereign could be initiated. The modern constitutional theory of a separation, limitation and oversight of powers in different coequal branches of a single government, it appears, would be a further development of what Luther, based on the positive law of his time, envisioned, by involving another sovereign state's head who alone had the God-given (i.e. the natural law's) authority to judge a fellow sovereign. In this way, the old legal maxim that no one ought to judge his own case was preserved by the Reformer.¹⁹ In fact, in later statements on the issue, Luther recognizes that based on the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire the seven electors were the equals of the emperor. They were, therefore, something like a second branch of the government.²⁰

Luther's antipathy against mob-rule was not his alone but shared by many ancient and contemporary political philosophers, e.g., Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527). It was also shared by framers of the American constitution, e.g., the Federalists, who were well aware that democracy can easily degenerate into mob-rule. This is why they, most notably James Madison (1751-1836) in *Federalist No. 10*, advocated a more stable representative, not a more volatile direct form of democracy. This representative democracy they called a republican form of government. Luther's observations remain timely for those advocating "regime change," also by means of war: Merely *changing* a government is easy. Actually *improving* it is an entirely different matter.

In later writings Luther further developed the notion that positive law might allow for "resistance" where natural and divine laws do not.²¹ In a letter to Lazarus Spengler from 1531 Luther

¹⁹ Cf. P.J. Malysz, "Nemo iudex in causa sua as the Basis of Law, Justice, and Justification in Luther's Thought," *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007), esp. 374-377.

²⁰ See note 26 below.

²¹ To be sure, the so-called *Fourth Opinion of the Wittenberg Theologians on Resistance*

draws on what jurists had recently pointed out, namely, that according to the positive law of the empire resistance against the emperor is legitimate and mandated when he acts in an openly unjust manner. If this is indeed what the positive law calls for, Luther states, then one has to respect this and act accordingly, based on Matth. 22:21: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”²² After all, as is confessed in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (XVI, 3), the gospel does not establish new positive laws but calls for obedience to the existing ones.²³ By way of extension, one could then also say this about voting, term limits of presidents, etc. according to modern constitutions: Voting is not forbidden resistance but a legitimate rendering of Caesar’s things to him.

(see note 27), not unlike the *Third Opinion* (St. Louis ed., 562-567), asserts that natural law itself abrogates duties between subject and superior in the case of the latter’s openly unjust, extra-official violence. Does this represent a change in Luther’s attitude? For Luther, the Ten Commandments are the best expression of the law of nature (cf. AE 40:98; LC II, 67), the Fourth Commandment obviously urging obedience, not resistance. On the other hand, Melancthon believed and taught that self-defense against unjust rulers is part of nature’s law (see his preface from the late 1540s to a 1530 writing on the issue by Luther, St. Louis ed., 10:532-534, where he also references Luther’s 1531 *Warning*, seemingly to support his own view). It thus seems that, while Luther is the cosigner of these opinions, Melancthon seems to have been their (lead-) author (see K. Aland, *Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium*, 4th ed. (Bielefeld: Luther Verlag, 1996), 79, no. 238: “Author Melancthon.”) Of course, in Siemon Netto’s argument in defense of Bonhoeffer, natural law should play an important role because the positive law of the Third Reich—unlike that of the Holy Roman Empire—very likely did not allow for armed resistance by lower, relatively independent magistrates against the *Führer* if he failed to defend the poor (e.g., the Jews) or the true religion (i.e., Lutheranism). However, Siemon Netto does not develop this point.

²² Cf. AE 50:10f. (St. Louis ed., 10:570-573), see also AE 49:276f. In this letter, just like in the abovementioned *Warning* from the same year, Luther again points out that his duty as a theologian is simply to point to what is biblically sure: The emperor is to be obeyed. What the positive laws allow or do not allow falls within the domain of the lawyers and jurists which the gospel confirms.

²³ In his 1530 letter to Elector John he had still maintained that, even if the positive law of a state would allow for resistance to an unjust emperor, Christian leaders and subjects may not take advantage of this concession (AE 49:274f.).

Thus, to sum up the findings so far, one can say that, for Luther, resistance to one's superior is possible and even necessary if that superior acts on behalf of an actual illegitimate authority, e.g., the pope, or if he is found in open, persistent violation of the positively recognized duties and bounds of his office. Who is to be the agent of this resistance? Just about anyone who feels passionately about a certain issue? A quote from Luther's 1531 *Warning* answers this question (AE 47:34f.):

I do not wish to advise or incite anyone to engage in war. My ardent wish and plea is that peace be preserved and that neither side start a war or give cause for it. For I do not want my conscience burdened, nor do I want to be known before God or the world as having counseled or desired anyone to wage war or to offer resistance except those who are enjoined and authorized to do so (Romans 13). But wherever the devil has so completely possessed the papists that they cannot and will not keep or tolerate peace, or where they absolutely want to wage war or provoke it, that will rest upon their conscience. There is nothing I can do about it, since my remonstrances are ignored and futile.

Two points can be learned from this excerpt: First of all, as seen already in other quotes from this writing, Luther's office as preacher and teacher of God's Word does not allow him to be engaged in inciting a general rebellion against those placed in authority. This is consistent with his earlier claims that natural and divine laws, both of which he is charged to teach, do not allow for this kind of resistance, while the law of the realm, the domain of lawyers, does. Secondly, the reference to "those who are enjoined and authorized to do so" sheds interesting light on the whole treatise: While Luther's main purpose is to urge peace and to warn individual Christians in Germany not to join the unjust war effort of the emperor "possessed" by the pope by giving him their bodies and physical possessions for this purpose,

he regards the political authorities below the emperor—and not random groups of well-intentioned “Christians”—as those who have the duty and authority to resist.

To be sure, this is not totally new in comparison to the booklet of 1526 that authorized war between two sovereign rulers for the purpose of defending one’s subjects after much verbal abuse had been endured and an attack had indeed already taken place.²⁴ And this was indeed the situation of the Lutherans, as Luther saw it by 1531: They held their peace above and beyond what could be expected of them. If they were now attacked, they would have every right, and even the duty, to defend what God gave them to defend. What is different from the writing of 1526,²⁵ however, is that in the tract of 1531 princes are authorized defensively to resist the emperor, who, in a sense, was their superior, if and when he, as was feared at the time, would start a war against the Lutherans, while in the earlier tract such resistance was not seen as legitimate because it was not between two equals.²⁶

There is, therefore, some change to be observed in Luther that is largely due to a greater knowledge and appreciation of the importance of the empire’s pertinent positive laws, as demonstrated above. This, thus, should not be misunderstood as an early example of “situational ethics.” After all, the “situation” for those to whom Rom. 13 did not apply as political authorities remained unchanged: Do not resist. What had changed was

²⁴ And an attack, according to the *Fourth Opinion* (see notes 21, 27), has already taken place as soon as an imperial ban, as a “declaration of war,” has been issued.

²⁵ And the 1530 letter to Elector John the Steadfast, referenced above (see note 23).

²⁶ Based on the concrete positive law of the German Empire, Luther in 1539 describes the seven electors as the equals and parts of the emperor (WA 39/I:77f.; St. Louis ed., 19:1961). If they, therefore, resisted him in a legitimate cause, then it would be a war against their equal. According to this assessment of the legal realities of the German Empire, there is no fundamental change in Luther’s argument between 1526 and 1539 at all.

how those who could rightly claim to be political authorities constituted and described in Rom. 13, and protected by the Fourth Commandment, were correlated by Luther, and the duties that resulted from this new correlation.

This position is also reflected the so-called *Fourth Opinion of the Wittenberg Theologians on Resistance* from the late 1530s:²⁷ Lawful authorities have not only the right but also the duty to defend their subjects against unjust violence—even when perpetrated by superior authorities—that is, violence that is against the God-given duty of those superiors to defend the poor and the one true religion. For in that case, those superiors would be acting outside of their office, that is, as private individuals.²⁸

To summarize the findings, there is a change in Luther's position on active, armed resistance to the government from an absolute No to a modified No. This means that, in keeping with the Fourth Commandment, obedience, not resistance, is and remains the overarching moral rule in this area. The modification of the No is due to Luther's evaluation of the papacy as a physically and spiritually destructive agent without any legitimate authority and due to his growing appreciation of the importance of the concrete secular positive legal order.²⁹

²⁷ St. Louis ed., 10:566-569. The Wittenberg theologians signing it were Luther, Justus Jonas, Martin Bucer, and Melancthon, the latter being its author (see note 21).

²⁸ This is also the position set forth and defended by early 17th-century Lutheran dogmatician John Gerhard in his *Theological Commonplaces* (loc. XIV, para. 484-488): He denies that subjects have the right to depose an evil magistrate but affirms the right of lower magistrates to resist a tyrant by force of arms because he sees them as being not simply subjects but also authorities in the sense of Rom. 13. He bases his affirmation on, among other things, general natural and concrete positive laws. As an aside, Gerhard seems to have believed Luther to be the (main) author of the *Opinion* cited above.

²⁹ The position of the Roman Catholic Church on armed resistance is, based most recently on the 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* by Paul VI, summarized by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (para. 2243) as follows: "Armed resistance to oppression by political authority is not legitimate, unless all the following conditions

These factors are to be taken into consideration when looking for Luther's "blessing" for armed resistance to the government. Especially, one may not disregard the concrete political order to postulate a general right of resistance. For this is where the paths between genuine Lutherans and Calvinists seem to part: While the former, including the Magdeburg theologians during the Augsburg Interim (1547), argued based on the specific political constitution of the German Empire with the dual power centers of emperor and relatively independent nobility, the latter (notably, Theodore Beza (1519-1605)) disregarded positive law and postulated an inherent right to resistance, e.g., in France, where a different constitution, one tending more toward absolute monarchy was in place, thus developing a general theory of resistance.³⁰

The Translator

are met: 1) there is certain, grave, and prolonged violation of fundamental rights; 2) all other means of redress have been exhausted; 3) such resistance will not provoke disorder; 4) there is well-founded hope of success; and 5) it is impossible reasonably to foresee any better solution." In other words, the doctrine of just war is applied to internal conflicts (cf. para. 2309), significantly under the duties of *citizens*, without any regard for the diverse political orders under which these citizens as members of a global church body might live. Here lies an important difference between the Lutheran and the Catholic teaching on this matter.

³⁰ Cf. "Lic. Ströbel's Darstellung der lutherischen Lehre von der Obrigkeit der calvinischen gegenüber," *Lehre und Wehre* 10 (1864): 263-274, esp. 268-272. By constructing the genealogy of armed resistance from Luther via Magdeburg to Beza the "Calvinist" way, Siemon Netto, *The Fabricated Luther*, 93-96, omits this important distinction. While Beza did refer to the "inferior magistrates" in quoting from Magdeburg theologians (see D. M. Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* (St. Louis: CPH, 2001), 99), was that reference based on the actual positive law applicable to him and his intended audience? It appears that Beza's general theory of resistance did not need the positive law of his country. It relied on his theory of the government as a "covenant" between the governed and the governing in a theocratic context (cf. Whitford, *Tyranny*, 100f.). Could it, therefore, be that Bonhoeffer, while seemingly referring back to Magdeburg's genuine Lutheranism (cf. Whitford, *Tyranny*, 103, pointing to Siemon Netto's work), was, under Karl Barth's influence, in fact merely reaching Geneva's spin on Magdeburg?

NOTES

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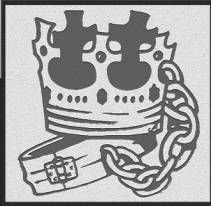
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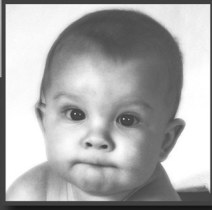
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Heavenly Father,

I am here according to your divine will in this external work and service to my government. I owe it first to you and then to the government for your sake. I thank you for your grace and mercy that you have placed me in such work where I am certain that it is not sin, but right, and in pleasing obedience to your will.

Yet because I know and have learned from your grace-filled word that not one of our good works may help us, and no one can be saved as a soldier, but only as a Christian, I do not at all want to rely on my obedience and work. Rather, I want to work and obey freely to serve your will.

And I believe wholeheartedly that I am redeemed and saved only by the innocent blood of your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, which he obediently shed for me according to your gracious will.

On this I stand. On this I live and die. On this I fight and do everything.

Dear Father, keep and strengthen me in this faith by your Spirit. Amen.