

How Did Luther Enter Dialogue with Society  
and How Does His Underlying Theology Apply to Us Today in a Secular Society?

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Like all intellectuals, Martin Luther lived in an ivory tower. This axiom applies not only to intellectuals, of course. Plumbers spend a lot of their time thinking about pipes and wrenches, and farmers spend a lot of their time discussing rain, soil, and seed. Luther's earliest lecture notes, sermons, and letters deal almost exclusively with matters of the church and his Augustinian order.

However, that is not the whole picture. the Augustinian Hermits were a preaching order; its members lived together as brothers, but they actively served the world. Luther rose to being district vicar for his order and traveled to the more than a dozen cloisters under his supervision, dealing with local officials as well as the Augustinian brothers. Luther aided the priests of the Wittenberg congregation by hearing confessions and preaching. In the small town of Wittenberg, with some four hundred buildings and less than 2,500 people when he arrived there in 1508, his effectiveness in the pulpit quickly brought him into contact with leaders in the town. Though he left little record of early conversations with prominent citizens such as the court painter and town apothecary, Lukas Cranach, they apparently became friends early on. Luther became acquainted with members of the court who resided in Wittenberg and undoubtedly heard their conversations. While his thoughts often turned to Aristotle, William of Ockham, Gabriel Biel, and others whose materials he used in lectures, he was immersed in the society surrounding him.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, his fundamental perceptions of the ways in which the world works were set in his childhood. He grew up in the village of Mansfeld, among peasants engaged in the mining and smelting industry. At his parents' supper table he heard much talk about the local counts and the elector of Saxony, who supervised mining in that area. His paternal grandparents lived in a part of the Saxon domains, in Möhra, south of Eisenach, where

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<sup>1</sup> Biographical details are taken from Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*. Vol. 1: *His road to Reformation, 1483-1521*; vol. 2: *Shaping and defining the Reformation, 1521-1532*, trans. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), and Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther, Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

peasants had a good deal of independence but lived nonetheless well aware of the jurisdiction of their princes over them. He encountered through his father's dealings the bankers, with their capitalist structures and *modus operandi*.

At age 13, in early 1497, young Martin left Mansfeld for Magdeburg and his introduction to secondary education. Magdeburg was one of the six largest cities in Germany, with some 25,000 inhabitants. After a year he went to much smaller Eisenach, where his mother's family and a circle of friends from the merchant class certainly gave him a picture of the changing economic circumstances of the time. In 1501 he matriculated at the University of Erfurt, with an independent municipal spirit despite the fact that it was technically ruled by the Archbishop of Mainz. Its nearly twenty thousand inhabitants also had a lively tradition of citizens' participation in the municipal government.

But despite these exposures to the more republican way of life in these larger towns, Luther's view of good government remained framed by the experiences of his childhood, reinforced by the nature of life in the shadow of the electoral court at the other end of Wittenberg's main street. For instance, commenting on Erfurt, he once mentioned the city's prominence and power but called its government directionless, "feet without a head." It possessed four counties, five castles, seventy-two villages in the best soil in Thuringia, but its government did not function well.<sup>2</sup> Commenting on another occasion on the four forms of secular government, monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and oligarchy, Luther ranked aristocracy the best because it took care of the needs of the population with understanding, respect, and virtue. He recalled that Erfurt, in contrast, was subject to an oligarchy, which permitted only a few to possess power.<sup>3</sup> However, attempts to introduce new leadership through revolt brought no good results, Luther informed his students, lecturing on Isaiah 3:6 in 1527.<sup>4</sup> In 1509/1510 bloodshed accompanied tensions between artisans and merchants, respectively allied with the city's legal overlord, the archbishop of Mainz, and its neighbor, electoral Saxony. Luther told his table companions that he had gone to Johannes Staupitz with his despair at the way in which God governed his world and that Staupitz had explained that God calls people to repentance and teaches them righteousness through such a collapse

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<sup>2</sup> WA TR 5:638-639, §6392, 6393.

<sup>3</sup> WA TR: 4:238,12-15, 240,39-45, §4342.

<sup>4</sup> WA 31,2:30,10-15, LW 16:42.

of order.<sup>5</sup> Luther criticized lower class uprising with the example of what he considered the unjust execution of the city counselor Heinrich Kellner in 1514, after Luther had left the city.<sup>6</sup>

These experiences with rebellious violence, coupled with the general mood current among established people of the time that stemmed from worries generated by the thirty-four peasant revolts that took place in German lands between 1509 and 1517 and one hundred twelve in the next six years, shaped Luther's belief that stable and just government was absolutely necessary and that rebellion against established authority never brought a good solution and often worsened the general state of society. Because his grandparents had lived as peasants without heavy restrictions or extremely burdensome obligations, his view of the peasantry contrasted with some colleagues who lived in areas where serfdom imposed poverty and suffering upon the population. Luther's engagement with economic developments through the experience of family and friends in his early years also determined the way he thought about societal relationships and the principles that should life together in village or town.

Luther lived and thought in a person-oriented and person-defined world. Recent scholarship has suggested that Luther experienced three significant "breakthroughs" – I prefer to say stages of maturation – in the development of his mature theology. The third occurred toward the end of the 1510s or early 1520s and brought together a number of his hermeneutical principles, including the distinction of law and gospel, of two aspects of humanity or two kinds of human righteousness, the two realms of human life, his theology of the cross, and his understanding of bondage and freedom. That breakthrough was based upon an earlier shift from a path of salvation that depended on human performance more than upon God's grace, his move from an Ockhamist understanding of salvation to an Augustinian doctrine of grace. But these developments stemmed from an even earlier transformation of his perception of reality.

His teachers had trained him to think in terms of Aristotle's substances as the fundamental units of reality. He learned that eternal rules and regulations held them the order of the world together – rules and regulations that were clear to human reason. Reason serves

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<sup>5</sup> WA TR 1:35-36, §94, see Brecht, *Luther*, 1: 33-36; cf. WA TR 1:213-214, §487. Luther recalled the political maneuvering between Saxony and Mainz, cf. WA TR 2:669, §2800.

<sup>6</sup> TR WA 2:487-488, §2494a and 2: 609, §2709b. On these Erfurt experiences, see Robert Kolb, "Luther's Recollections of Erfurt. The Use of Anecdotes for the Edification of His Hearers," *Luther-Bulletin, Tijdschrift voor interconfessioneel Lutheronderzoek* 10 (2010), 6-16.

as every individual's means of dealing with the substances of what exists that constitute reality. Without a personal god, Aristotle posited an unmoved mover, but movement, once generated, operated within this substantial framework of reality according to eternal law, managed by human reason. Early in his study of Scripture Luther had come to recognize that the biblical writers perceived reality as fundamentally relational rather than substantial, a totally different way of beginning to think about creation and life. At the core of human existence then stands trust in the Creator and in service to him and to other human creatures that proceeds from that faithfulness.

This way of viewing reality meant among other things that Luther did not grasp how human institutions function in a way that helps us. He was obviously not an individualist in the modern sense. No one in sixteenth-century society could afford to be. He knew from Genesis 2 that it is not good for anyone to be alone. But the social theory of the Middle Ages also thought in personal terms within the structures of three "locations" for human life that constitute society. So Luther focused on the obedience to God's commands and the faithfulness to God's callings that directed the performance of individual bankers, merchants, courtiers, town council members, artisans, parents, and children. He could treat "trade and usury", for instance, in his treatise of 1524, but his counsel intended to guide individuals in their own actions and not to assist them in exercising responsibilities within the institutions that were shaping the range of possibilities they had for their actions.

Luther simply accepted the medieval social theory that structured and molded the world in which he grew up and functioned his entire life. It presumed that societal life took place in three "status," or "Stände," – situations or walks of life. The first provided teaching of the great truths that guide human life, the *ecclesia*, the "*Lehrstand*." The second provided the exercise of justice and defense of good order, the *politia*, the "*Wehrstand*." The third, the vast majority of the population, constituted the *oeconomia*, "the *Nährstand*," which embraced both family life and economic activities. In each of these situations or walks of life individuals exercised their "officia," or "Ämter," their responsibilities, which embraced both role or position in society and the functions that these roles or positions demanded be exercised for the good of the neighbor. Medieval theory placed each individual in one of these situations and held that those in the "ecclesia" were by virtue of their office as priest, monk, or nun holier than those engaged in the mundane activities of this worldly existence.

They had a “calling” – “Beruf” or “vocatio” from God which gave them a steeper but shorter way to heaven.<sup>7</sup>

Luther overturned this theory in certain critical details even if he retained its structure. All people are called by God, he taught, and are equally worthy in his sight by virtue of their trust in the work of Christ. All are equally valuable in his sight as servants and instruments of his love and his providing for other people. He also perceived that each individual has responsibilities in all three situations, while treating the third in its two distinct aspects: family and economic life, along with their callings in the church and in society. In his Table of Christian Callings, which completes the Small Catechism, he labeled every one of these situations a “holy order and walk of life.”

This new definition of the shape of daily life as a series of callings from God to serve others fit into his redefinition of what it means to be a Christian, a child of God. Being Christian meant for medieval believers above all performing God’s will, particularly in sacred or religious acts. When rulers converted their tribes to Christianity in late antiquity or the early Middle Ages in northern Europe, they lacked sufficient catechists and preachers to reconstruct the fundamental worldview of the populace. Thus, traditional religious structures absorbed some elements of the Christian faith, but the understanding that human beings find the good life by pleasing whatever is Absolute and Ultimate by conforming to the demands for sacred honor and religious adoration and obedience remained in place. Sacred rituals, conducted by a holy hierarchy, secured the world for individuals and the village. Thus, for most medieval Christians, attendance at mass – not necessarily reception of Christ’s body – sufficed to command God’s grace and aid for immediate needs and eternal blessings.

Luther found in Scripture instead a very personal God, an emotional God, whose love for his people stirred up his wrath when they sinned. Instead of waiting for human beings to please him, which Luther saw was impossible anyway, this God of Scripture comes to the human creatures he had made to be in relationship, or fellowship, with him. First, he spoke with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when they no longer wanted to talk to him. Then he called Israel to repentance and faith generation after unfaithful generation. Finally, he

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jane C. Strohl, “The Framework for Christian Living, Luther on the Christian’s Callings,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and Lubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 365-369, and Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

communicated with humankind in human flesh itself – giving flesh to the voice, as Jesus of Nazareth.

This God re-creates human identity, from sinner to child of God, and he does that just as he created Adam and Eve in the first place, according to Luther, “without any merit or worthiness in me, out of pure fatherly divine goodness and mercy.” That free gift of our identity as God’s own righteous and holy people does mean, however, that the children of God display the traits of the family in living out their responsibilities or callings in society. Because of God’s fatherly divine goodness and mercy, “I owe it to God to thank and praise him, to serve and obey him.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Luther spent a great bit of his preaching calling his hearers to repentance for not “thanking, praising, serving, and obeying him” by carrying out the responsibilities of their callings according to God’s commands. He dedicated large sections of his sermons to instructing his hearers in the proper exercise of the righteousness which God had given them out of his unconditioned mercy and favor. Also in his occasional writings on societal issues, the upright performance of responsibilities to which God had called his readers claimed his attention almost exclusively, and that performance was important for the honor of God, the welfare of the neighbor, the peaceful order in society. In this regard his demands on princes and nobles did not differ from his admonitions to merchants, artisans, and peasants.

Perhaps Luther’s most famous, or infamous, statements about societal matters are found in his writings on the peasants revolt of 1524 to 1526.<sup>9</sup> His first treatise addressing the demands of the revolting peasants, his *Admonition to Peace*, criticized peasants and princes with equal severity although in this work he tended to favor the peasants. He recognized their just demands and criticized the princes and nobles for the misuse of their office as ruler on the side of. But he also objected to the “Twelve Articles” used by many peasant groups as a summary of their demands because it tried to prove from Scripture what God had left to human wisdom and justice. When he himself experienced peasant threats of bodily harm as he toured his native area in Thuringia, with memories of violence in the streets of Wittenberg four years earlier when his colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt fomented riots in the

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<sup>8</sup> Small Catechism, Creed, First Article, BSELK 870/871, BC354-355.

<sup>9</sup> Much of the following is cited directly from Robert Kolb, “Luther on Peasants and Princes,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009): 125-146.

streets in behalf of reform,<sup>10</sup> Luther called for restoration of public order as quickly and effectively as possible, in a treatise entitled *Against the Robbing, Murderous Hordes of Peasants*. Such public disobedience came from Satan's efforts to discredit the Reformation as the Last Day approached, Luther was convinced.<sup>11</sup> After the Peasants Revolt he told students at his table that the Revolt had indeed hindered the progress of reform, without giving any specific details.<sup>12</sup>

His comments on the peasantry usually were fashioned to make another point, often one of moral censure. Such critical remarks sometimes mentioned peasants alone, sometimes mentioned them among other social groups,<sup>13</sup> as violators of God's law. His most frequent comments on peasants, as on nobles and townspeople, were negative. The peasants were arrogant and greedy,<sup>14</sup> but so were bankers; both groups "ride the Thaler," and thereby oppress the poverty-stricken.<sup>15</sup> Luther probably knew of poor people in Wittenberg who could not afford the prices the local peasants were charging in the market for their product. He once commented that peasants frequently displayed ingratitude, presumably toward God.<sup>16</sup> Once Luther vented his spleen against some unnamed scoundrels with the off-hand observation that children of nobles and townspeople were raised to be well-behaved, but that the children of peasants and princes always want to avoid punishment.<sup>17</sup>

Luther particularly criticized the contempt for God's Word among the peasantry<sup>18</sup> and objected to the way they often treated village pastors. He complained about peasants who had told the governmental Visitors who came to inspect their congregations that they should not have to pay their pastors since they had to pay those who tended the sheep that supplied their physical needs, "and we must have shepherds."<sup>19</sup> He told of the pastor in Holsdorf, in Saxony, who refused to admit some peasants to the Lord's Supper because they did not know the catechism and could not pray. When this pastor admonished them, they replied that they

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<sup>10</sup> James M. Estes, *Peace, Order and the Glory of God. Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melancthon 1518-1558* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 42-44.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Greschat, "Luthers Haltung im Bauernkrieg," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 56 (1965):31-47.

<sup>12</sup> WA TR 3:627, §2802.

<sup>13</sup> WA TR TR 1, §50, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> WA TR 3:231, §3238; cf. WA TR 3:204-205, §3163b.

<sup>15</sup> WA TR 4:99, §4046; cf. 5:513, §6149.

<sup>16</sup> WA TR 2: 100, §1435; 2:282, §1967; 2:318, §2087; 2:524-525, §2560.

<sup>17</sup> WA TR 3:415, §3564.

<sup>18</sup> WA TR 1:43-44, §115; 1:146, §352; 3:292-293, §3366.

<sup>19</sup> WA TR 4:68, §4002; cf. 2:260-261, §1909; 2:252, §2622.

did not have to know how to pray because they were paying the pastor to pray for them.<sup>20</sup> However, Luther grouped peasants with townspeople and nobles who also objected to their pastors' denunciation of their pride and godlessness.<sup>21</sup> He could also attribute the peasants' faults to misgovernment and lack of proper discipline from the nobility;<sup>22</sup> the princes and nobles had provoked them to rebellion, and the Peasants Revolt was only a primer on rebellion, an introduction to revolt before the catastrophe which the misgovernment of the princes and nobles would bring upon Germany.<sup>23</sup>

Alongside all the criticism of the peasantry he made with one degree of seriousness or another to his students, it must be noted that he also praised peasants for their strong trust in God, which arose from their receiving the fruit of the earth directly.<sup>24</sup> It must be noted that he did not address the institution of serfdom in any of his protests against mistreatment of peasants, nor did his support of their pleas for justice address the system-based flaws that inevitably led to what Luther perceived as a sin-ridden world to injustice.

Luther is often labeled a “today of the princes,” but in fact few theologians have been so openly critical of government structures as he. It was not particularly daring for him, once excommunicated and outlawed, to enter into public criticism of the theology and ecclesiastical policy of King Henry VIII of England, Duke Georg of Saxony, or Duke Heinrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, all ardent partisans of Rome, from the safe ground of electoral Saxony. His criticism of members of the Saxon court and even implicitly his prince, John Frederick, risked more though even in that case his reputation and his relationship with the courtiers' boss, Electors John and after him John Frederick, minimized that risk. John Frederick had grown up with Luther's presence looming large in the decision-making of his father, Elector John, and his admiration bordering on adoration gave Luther room to criticize.

To be sure, Luther had the highest appreciation for the office of public officials. In 1530 he composed a “mirror of the prince” in a commentary on Psalm 82. It differed from Niccolo Machiavelli's *Il Principio* (1531/1532) more than from Erasmus's *Institutio principis christiani* (1516/1518), but reveals his own unique understanding of the relationship between

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<sup>20</sup> WA TR 6:163, §6752.

<sup>21</sup> WA TR 4:73, §4007.

<sup>22</sup> WA TR 2:371, §2230.

<sup>23</sup> WA TR 5:284, 285, §5835.

<sup>24</sup> WA TR 1:193, §443.

God and prince, prince and subjects. Luther labeled princes “saviors, fathers, and deliverers” of their subjects. God placed them in office to give aid to these subjects, to provide for them and protect them and to support the church without interfering in its conduct of the preaching of God’s Word.<sup>25</sup>

Scholars distinguish between advice given to princes for knowing what is right, or virtuous, and instruction on how to carry out their office wisely, with the proper practical activities.<sup>26</sup> Luther’s treatment of Psalm 82 concentrated on the proper activities of the ruler. They consist of “doing justice to the God-fearing and thwarting the wicked,” or promoting the preaching of God’s Word and the salvation of many people; aiding and supporting the poor, suffering, orphans and widows, and giving them justice; and protecting subjects from every kind of attack and evil, establishing and preserving peace.<sup>27</sup> Luther then condemned three princely vices: doing nothing to promote God’s Word, not giving proper attention to their governing responsibilities and thus not providing justice and protection to the poor and needy; and practicing a sinful way of life, conducting their office in a selfish manner, as if God had given them their authority for their use and honor, their own desires and arrogance, their own pride and splendor, and acting as if they have no obligation to help or serve anyone.”<sup>28</sup>

Four years later, in 1534, Luther again wrote a commentary on a psalm, Psalm 101, and again fashioned it into a “mirror of the prince.” In this work the reformer did not hesitate to criticize John Frederick’s advisors and even the elector himself.<sup>29</sup> That criticism emerges

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<sup>25</sup> WA 31 I, 189-218; cf. Estes, *Peace*, 181-188. What follows is largely translated from Robert Kolb, “Die Josef-Geschichten als Fürstenspiegel in der Wittenberger Auslegungstradition. ‘Ein verständiger und weiser Mann’ (Genesis 42,33),” in *Christlicher Glaube und weltliche Herrschaft. Zum Gedenken an Günther Wartenberg*, ed. Michael Beyer, Jonas Flöter, and Markus Hein (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), 41-55.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Maigler-Loeser, *Historie und Exemplum im Fürstenspiegel. Zur didaktischen Instrumentalisierung der Historie in ausgewählten deutschen Fürstenspiegeln der Frühmoderne* (Neuried 2004.), 11.

<sup>27</sup> WA 31,1: 199, 4-5, 200, 5-6, 201, 26-27; cf. 205, 19-18.

<sup>28</sup> WA 31,1: 214, 20 - 215, 12.

<sup>29</sup> On the relationship between the electoral court and the team of reformers around Luther, see Günther Wartenberg, “Luthers Beziehungen zu den sächsischen Fürsten,” in: *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. Helmar Junghans (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 554-561; Georg Mentz, *Johann Friedrich der Grossmächtige, 1503-1554* (Jena: Fischer, 1903-1908), 1:30-41. On the relationship of Elector Johann Friedrich and his estates with the faculty at Wittenberg in introducing reforms, see Siegrid Westphal, “Die Ausgestaltung des Kirchenwesens unter Johann Friedrich – ein landesherrliches Kirchenregiment?,” in: *Johann Friedrich I. – der Lutherische Kurfürst*, ed. Völker Leppin et al., (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2006), 261-280.

gently but firmly in the commentary on the psalm.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the treatise secular princes among the readers are admonished to follow the pattern of life described in the psalm; its descriptions of the ideal prince from David's pen serve as a textbook for ruling officials, according to Luther. David is the true "model of the proper ruler."<sup>31</sup> In other works Luther forthrightly discussed David's sins, including his sins in the conduct of his office of ruler of Israel, for example, in commenting on Psalm 51,<sup>32</sup> but here he ignored king's flaws and vices: "dear David is so highly gifted and such a wonderful, special hero, that he is not only innocent of all deception and murder, which took place in his realm, but he opposed such liars and murderers and could not tolerate them. He turned on them so that they had to yield,"<sup>33</sup> an interpretation of the Israelite king's life that stands, at least in part, at odds with the biblical record and Luther's own judgment elsewhere.

Especially in commenting on Psalm 82, Luther emphasized that preachers of God's Word are also obligated to call governing officials to repentance. "It would lead to much more rebellion if preachers would not condemn the vices of their rulers," he wrote. For failing to hold rulers accountable makes the mob angry and discontented, and it also strengthens the tyrants' wickedness. The preachers become accomplices of such evil and bring guilt upon themselves when they avoid such a preaching of repentance to government officials. For "the office of the Word is not the office of a courtier or a hired hand. He is God's servant and agent."<sup>34</sup> Luther's political theory in this treatise, as in all his comment on secular government, proceeded from his concept of the walks of life which constitute human existence and its social structures as well as the responsibilities God has built into each. God exercises his providence and his rule through his human creatures as they fulfill the callings he has given them in life.

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<sup>30</sup> WA 51: 200-264; on the implicit critique of the elector, see p. 198, in the introduction by E. Thiele and O. Brenner. Cf. Estes, *Peace, Order*, 193-205.

<sup>31</sup> The phrase is from Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. and RutchC. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 9. WA 51: 227, 37-38. Cf. Wolfgang Sommer, *Gottesfurcht und Fürstenherrschaft: Studien zum Obrigkeitsverständnis Johann Arndts und lutherischer Hofprediger zur Zeit der altprotestantischen Orthodoxie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 23-73, and Robert Kolb, "David: King, Prophet, Repentant Sinner. Martin Luther's Image of the Son of Jesse," *Perichoresis* 8 (2010): 203-232..

<sup>32</sup> See his draft of 1532, WA 31,1:539,5-540,2; the printed version of the 1532 lectures contains similar and more extensive comments, WA 40,2: 317,34-327,28; 330,22-350,28; 415,24-417,17.

<sup>33</sup> WA 51: 234, 12-16, 235, 10-16.

<sup>34</sup> WA 31,1:, 196, 19 - 198, 18, esp. 197, 3-198, 2 and 198, 12-13.

His admonitions to princes continued into his last years, when he was lecturing on the Joseph narratives in his Genesis lectures. He outlined how Joseph had modeled God-fearing, prudent, and just rule. Joseph's example provided Luther a framework for sharply criticism of princely tyranny and negligence in office. The ambition and arrogance of rulers enflame them against God and their people.<sup>35</sup> They do not listen to the proclamation of God's Word, and they fail to exercise their rule properly. They ignore crime.<sup>36</sup> They fail to support the church and its pastors.<sup>37</sup> They raise taxes unreasonably.<sup>38</sup> Worse than the princes were their counselors. Those who were efficient in the exercise of their duties too often administered their responsibilities to their own benefit rather than the benefit of their princes' subjects, for whom they were supposed to be ruling. They resemble wolves, foxes, vultures, and other birds of prey in their striving for their own advantage.<sup>39</sup> Luther directly criticized Johann Friedrich's court for its wastefulness to his students in the context of his exposition of the story of Joseph.<sup>40</sup>

Quite important in his own life in Wittenberg was also the institution of the town council. He had witnessed its benefits and its potential for corruption and injustice in Erfurt (and probably in Magdeburg). He seldom addressed the manner of governance in the towns apart from his concern that the town councils promote education. His *Open Letter to the Town Council Members of all Towns in the German Territory, That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524) recognized that the power to implement his wishes for public education lay with the council members, so he turned to them.<sup>41</sup> In 1530 he published his *Sermon, That Children Should Be Kept in School* as an address to those with responsibilities as government officials of all ranks as well as parents, urging them to invest in education and keep its standards high, for the good of the society and the church.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> WA 44: 665, 3-7, 436, 27-31.

<sup>36</sup> WA 44: 667, 32-35.

<sup>37</sup> WA 44: 670, 28 - 671, 18.

<sup>38</sup> WA 44: 417, 33 - 418,6.

<sup>39</sup> WA 44: 416, 13-17.

<sup>40</sup> WA 44: 451, 40 - 452, 5.

<sup>41</sup> WA 15: 27-53, LW 45: 347-378; cf. Irene Dingel, "Luthers Schrift *An die Ratsherren aller Städte Lands* (1524) – Historische und theologische Aspekte," and Henning P. Jürgens, "Luthers Schrift *An die Ratsherren aller Städte deutsches Lands* (1524) – Entstehungskontext und Druckgeschichte," in Ding und Jürgens, eds., *Meilensteine der Reformation, Schlüsseldokumente der frühen Wirksamkeit Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2014), 180-190, 190-197.

<sup>42</sup> WA 30,2: 517-588, LW 46: 213-258.

To summarize: Luther was not a toady of princes. Indeed, he counted on their support, but he held them to a high standard. However, he could not assess the larger systems and institutions of government from the vantage point of his person-based view of reality.

Likewise, his discussion of economic issues called for obedience, particularly to the seventh commandment but only skimmed the edges of the deeper systemic problems arising out of the development of capitalism and its replacement of the feudal system. Usury won a good deal of attention from Luther. His leading foe in the Roman Catholic camp, Johann Eck, had ventured into new moral arguments for permitting some charging of interest, defending at least some modifying and relaxing of the strict prohibitions of usurious practices of medieval ethics. It was said, even among opponents of his position within the Roman Catholic circles, that he did this in the pay of the Fugger banking family in Augsburg, with which he was in fact associated. Luther addressed wider economic concerns in his 1524 treatise *On Trade and Usury*.

Four years earlier his *Open Letter to the German Nobility* had focused on reform of ecclesiastical life but also called for five improvements in civic life. He criticized “extravagant and costly dress,” the spice traffic, usury, excessive eating and drinking, and brothels.<sup>43</sup> In 1524 he commented “buying and selling are necessary. They cannot be dispensed with, and can be practiced in a Christian manner, especially when the commodities serve a necessary and honorable purpose.” People need “cattle, wool, grain, butter, milk, and other goods.” “But foreign trade, which brings from Calcutta and India and such places wares like costly silks, articles of god, and spices – which serve only for ostentation and no useful purpose and drain away the money of the land and people – would not be permitted if we had proper government and princes.”<sup>44</sup> In this treatise, however, he wished to concentrate on usury and other abuses of the bankers. In general, he advised merchants, “where the price of goods is not fixed either by law or custom, and you must establish it yourself, one can truly give you no instructions but only lay it on your conscience to be careful not to overcharge your neighbor, and to seek a modest living, not the goals of greed.” Luther recognized that price controls would only have a limited effect and therefore suggested that only the conscience bring justice to the market place.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> WA 6: 465,25-467,26, LW 44:212-215.

<sup>44</sup> WA 15: 293,29-294,7, LW 45: 246.

<sup>45</sup> WA 15: 296,25-36, LW 45: 250.

Luther's treatment of economic issues in his presentation of the seventh commandment in his Large Catechism demonstrates the detail of his concerns in this sphere at the personal level. The Large Catechism stems from sermons on the ten commandments, creed, Lord's Prayer, and sacraments, and it was designed to serve as a model for them, which explains at least in part why the focus is intensely personal. Luther began with a call for repentance from servants:

Suppose, for example, that a manservant or a maidservant is unfaithful in his or her domestic duties and does damage or permits damage to be done when it could have been avoided. Or suppose that through laziness, carelessness, or malice a servant wastes things or is negligent with them in order to vex and annoy the master or mistress. When this is done deliberately—for I am not speaking about what happens accidentally or unintentionally—you can cheat your employer out of thirty or forty or more gulden a year. If someone else had filched or stolen that much, he would have been hung on the gallows,<sup>101</sup> but here you become defiant and insolent, and no one dare call you a thief!<sup>46</sup>

But Luther did not simply address the servants, most of whom were young and many from poorer circumstances. He also addressed “artisans, workers, and day laborers.” They act highhandedly and never know enough ways to overcharge people and yet are careless and unreliable in their work. These are all far worse than sneak thieves, against whom we can guard with lock and bolt. If we catch the sneak thieves, we can deal with them so that they will not do it anymore. But no one can guard against these others. No one even dares to give them a harsh look or accuse them of theft. People would ten times rather lose money from their purse. For these are my neighbors, my good friends, my own servants -- from whom I expect good -- who are the first to defraud me.<sup>47</sup>

Economic activity in Wittenberg had an important focal point in the market. Luther continued in the Catechism:

Furthermore, at the market and in everyday business the same fraud prevails in full power and force. One person openly cheats another with defective merchandise, false

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<sup>46</sup> BSELK 1008/1009, 10-20, BC 416; cf. Ricardo Rieth, “Luther's treatment of Economic Life,” in Kolb, Dingel, Batka, eds., *Oxford Handbook*, 383-396.

<sup>47</sup> BSELK 1008/1009, 21-1010/1011, 2, BC 417.

weights and measures, and counterfeit coins, and takes advantage of the other by deception and sharp practices and crafty dealings. Or again, one swindles another in a trade and deliberately fleeces, skins, and torments him. Who can even describe or imagine it all? In short, thievery is the most common craft and the largest guild on earth. If we look at the whole world in all its situations, it is nothing but a big, wide stable full of great thieves. This is why these people are also called armchair bandits<sup>102</sup> and highway robbers. Far from being picklocks and sneak thieves who pilfer the cashbox, they sit in their chairs and are known as great lords and honorable, upstanding citizens, while they rob and steal under the cloak of legality.<sup>48</sup>

But the Large Catechism does not only call for repentance from Luther's neighbors and friends. He recognized something of the larger problems involved in German economic life, even though he still viewed it in personal terms.

Yes, we might well keep quiet here about individual petty thieves since we ought to be attacking the great, powerful archthieves [with whom lords and princes consort and]<sup>103</sup> who daily plunder not just a city or two, but all of Germany. Indeed, what would become of the head and chief protector of all thieves, the Holy See at Rome, and all its retinue, which has plundered and stolen the treasures of the whole world and holds them to this day?

In short, this is the way of the world. Those who can steal and rob openly are safe and free, unpunished by anyone, even desiring to be honored. Meanwhile, the petty, sneak-thieves who have committed one offense must bear disgrace and punishment to make the others look respectable and honorable. But they should know that God considers them the greatest thieves, and that he will punish them as they deserve.<sup>49</sup>

As with his political perceptions, so also in the economic sphere, Luther's vision of society regarded it as the God-ordained interconnected network of situations in which people exercised responsibilities.

His comments on family life fit this pattern. His writings specifically on the family largely focused on the legal problems surrounding the relationship of children and parents in the betrothal and what rights children had over against their parents' role in arranging marriage. His depictions of the love, care, concern, and respect to be shown by spouses for

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<sup>48</sup> BSELK 1010/1011, 3-14, BC 417.

<sup>49</sup> BSELK 1010/1011, 15-26, BC 417.

each other and by parents for children and children for parents occur in sermons, lectures, other writings, and they reflect his own happy experiences both with Katharina von Bora and their six children in Wittenberg's Black Cloister and in his parental home – despite what some scholars make out of his typical memories of harsh treatment, other comments and his behavior as husband and father indicate that his parents had demonstrated a perceptible love for him.

The means or medium through which Luther related to society are also worth noting: few in history have so changed public communication of ideas as the Wittenberg professor. The respect and reputation his preaching had won him in Wittenberg in the first few years of his residence in the Augustinian cloister demonstrates his command of the chief means of intellectual communication in the Middle Ages, the oral. His skills both as preacher and as disputant at the university marked him as a leader before the posting of the Ninety-five theses served him well as his career turned to that of reformer. His sermons and lectures are filled with proof that he had studied and learned well the rhetorical principles he had absorbed from Demosthenes, Quintilian, and Cicero.<sup>50</sup> His disputations show a firm command of Aristotle's logic and its medieval developments. He combined them with his gift and feel for language, especially German but also Latin, and he not only delineated his teaching in clear terms but he also enriched the delivery of the biblical message with dialogues and monologues – featuring God the Father and Christ, or God and the sinner, or God and Satan – and with imaginative retellings of the biblical stories, making the text come alive for hearers and readers.

Then came the Ninety-five Theses on indulgences. A few printers took a risk and recognized sales potential in this rather dry Latin disputation text intended only to provoke discussion over what Luther perceived to be a serious pastoral problem and crisis for the church. Their gamble paid off. Their economic success also opened Luther's eyes to the potential of print for spreading his call for reform, and he put his *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* in German on the market within weeks. A revolution in public relations, a paradigm

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<sup>50</sup> Ulrich Nembach, *Predigt des Evangeliums. Luther als Prediger Pädagoge und Rhetor* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972).

change for public media, was taking place. The Gutenberg Galaxy was becoming clearer and brighter than it had previously been.<sup>51</sup>

Luther developed a symbiotic relationship with printers in a number of places, particularly Wittenberg, creating the town's first industry, and a pillar of its economic and social prospering, along with university and court. Luther could be critical of his printers – openly uncomfortable with the type face of the first local printer with whom he worked, Johann Rhau-Grunenberg, and contemptuous of his sloppiness in producing his wares. But he worked with them, with sensitivity for their economic plight, and with a willingness to hurry manuscript to them when they had begun to set a treatise in print while he was still writing the next few pages. He mobilized and transformed several medieval genre, the familiarity of which served as a bridge to the reading public, and he and his friend Lukas Cranach worked together to combine text with illustration. Andrew Pettegree has recently attached the label “Brand Luther” to what this combine of author, illustrator, and printer accomplished. With Cranach's innovative invention of a title page framing illustration, and the local printers' adding to the typical medieval title page the place of publication and the author's name, which had generally not graced title pages of incunabula, the Wittenberg team carried book publication into a new phase. “Published in Wittenberg” and “written by Martin Luther” sold copies. In his new Luther biography Scott Hendrix records the bitter notation of papal legate Girolamo Aleander that in Worms in 1521 the bookstands were filled with Luther's works, and they were selling like hotcakes.

And what can we learn from Luther regarding our own stance toward society? Probably less than we would hope; that must be made clear. His specific cultural and societal context has long since perished. He lived as a medieval person in the very earliest stages of what we label early modern Western Europe, and the gulf between his world and ours is great. Like us all, he could not think beyond the parameters set by his own world. That he was able to function as a paradigm-breaker in proposing another definition of what it means to be human and thus renew the biblical presentation of who God is does not mean that he thought “outside the box” in every area. Politics and economics serve as proofs that he was indeed a medieval man.

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther, 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2015), Mark U. Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Nonetheless, his career stands as an admonition to make effective use of the media, and his thought offers us some basis for thinking about how to fulfill our Christian callings in postmodern, secularizing societies.

From Luther's admonition to the peasants, who tried to argue their political-social agenda on the basis of Bible passages that Luther did not believe spoke to their situation, we can learn to rely on the wisdom and reasoning powers the Creator has given us with which we are to manage his creation according to his will. If we anchor our political and social views in certain Bible passages that do not apply, we imprison those passages and are tempted to have a false confidence in our vision of what society needs.

You have noticed my regret that he could not give us more clues on how to deal with institutions and systems. Among his strengths must be counted, at the same time, his intense focus on the importance of the personal and on the permeating nature of trust as the organizing principle of daily life and human existence itself. With democratic capitalism's emphasis on the individual as free-standing rather than independent, crises of relationship fill daily life and make people particularly vulnerable to media blitzes and other forms of the power of economic powerhouses, of national and multi-national corporations, consumer devourers. Together producers and media specialists breed a discontent that threatens the very fabric of the system that cultivates it by isolating individuals and convincing them they need much more than they need for the good life. Luther's understanding of human community can indeed speak to this world even if it cannot help as much with the address of systems and institutional tendencies to inflict evil on people.

Luther's sense of personhood in vocation depends on God's being the one who calls and gives the gift of responsibility for the welfare of others. Nonetheless, those who have no sense of a personal God who has created the structures of human and calls individuals into their places within those structures will first note that this sense of calling does make a difference in the performance of callings in family and economy and in society in general. From this sense of responsibility in callings we need to work more on the problems that individuals encounter when the systems and institutions in which they are only cogs fail to perform for the welfare of society.

Luther held a somewhat pessimistic view of human nature in regard to its core, fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things, but his belief that human beings can bring order to society apart from this trust in God – what he called “civil righteousness” –

provides encouragement for Christians to join those outside the faith in striving for improvements in society. Luther's insight that the sinful tendency to turn in ourselves reminds us that the struggle for justice and good order in society has not only victories and progress but also defeats and setbacks. Such setbacks need not discourage us but rather turn our attention ever again to the responsibilities laid upon us by our God in our respective callings. Resignation is never a proper attitude for those who trust the God who created history and has preserved the human race in spite of itself to this day. Satisfaction and gratitude for even the little victories in battling for a decent and peaceful life in this world is rather the natural thing for those who believe in Christ.