VERBUM CHRISTI

JOURNAL OF REFORMED EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY
Vol. 10, No. 1 April 2023
https://doi.org/10.51688/VC9.1.2023.art5
p-ISSN: 2407-0556; e-ISSN: 2599-3267

The Political Theology Of Martin Luther

ARTICLE HISTORY

SUBMITTED
28 February 2023

REVISED
14 June 2023

ACCEPTED
16 June 2023

PAGES
75 - 92

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ABSTRACT
This article examines Martin Luther's political theology via his theological contributions to political discourses, reviewing select biblical commentaries, sermons, and catechism to identify important themes. In light of neg-ative assessments of Luther's political views, it is important to consult his theological and biblical texts when analyzing his ideas. To understand his presentation of a biblical political theology, it is important to comprehend how his biblical exegeses informed his political views. Luther differed from others in that his political ideas were principally theological; similar to Augustine, his political views were closely tied to aspects of theological anthropology and stressed the role of government as serving the common good and the welfare of the people. His understanding of political theology emphasized the gospel and freedom.
Keywords: political theology, anthropology, politics, domestic government, tyranny, political ethics.

Introduction[1]

In *Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (2007), Columbia University humanities professor Mark Lilla noted how a select group of Western European intellectuals has moved away from interest in political theology, resulting in what he called the collective forgetting of "the long tradition of Christian political theology."[2] However, research and discussion of the topic have been increasingly vital, and the number of relevant publications is still growing.[3] Political theology is associated with the German political theorist Carl Schmitt, whose work positively influenced the development of political theology but whose ideas are seen as having weaker connections with contemporary discussions of the topic. Other notable German intellectuals contributing to political theology discussions include Johannes Baptist Metz, Erik Peterson, Dorothee Sölle, and Jürgen Moltmann.[4] As interest in certain aspects of theology and religion found in political ideas continues to grow, the term "political theology" is increasingly being used to describe a broad range of religious, social, and political topics,[5] with similarities noted between political theology and "critical theory" and "theology in the public sphere." Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward thus depict political theology as public theology based on their assertion that "according to its proponents, theology is itself political and plays a role in the public sphere."[6] While Moltmann defines political theology as "a designation for theological reflection on the concrete political practice of Christianity,"[7] the political scientist Philip Gray describes it as an attempt to understand "politics through theology."[8]

While interest in connections between theology, religion, and political ideas is increasing, scholars are reconsidering the engagement of political theology with these subjects from an explicitly theological perspective. John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, and other members of the radical orthodoxy movement are pursuing to recover the political and public task with a theological outlook consisting of a "Christianized ontology and practical philosophy consonant with authentic Christian doctrine."[9] They are reconsidering

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1 Parts of this article were presented at the meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Denver, November 2022. Abbreviations: *LW* = Luther Works; *WA* = Weimar Edition.

2 Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 5.

3 For a selection, Miguel Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); William Bain, *Political Theology of International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, ed., *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019); Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019); Joseph Rivera, *Political Theology and Pluralism: Renewing Public Dialogue* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018); Robert Sirvent and Silas Michael Morgan, eds., *Kierkegaard and Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018); Michael Zank and Allen Speight, eds., *Politics, Religion and Political Theology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017); Mika Luoma-aho, *The Future of Political Theology: Religious and Theological Perspectives* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016); Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Michael Jon Kessler, ed., *Political Theology for a Plural Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4 According to Emily Dumler-Winckler, this "German stream of thought" focuses on how religious concepts such as sovereignty and natural and divine law "were secularized in modern political discourse." Emily J. Dumler-Winckler, "Protestant Political Theology and Pluralism: From a Politics of Refusal to Tending and Organizing for Common Goods," *Religions* 10, no. 9 (September 2019): 3, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090522.

5 Paul S. Chung, *Critical Theory and Political Theology: The Aftermath of the Enlightenment* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2019).

6 Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward, eds., *Religion and Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 190.

7 Jürgen Moltmann, "European Political Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 14.

8 *Phillip* W. Gray, "*Political Theology* and the Theology of Politics: Medieval Christian Political Thought and Carl Schmitt," *Humanitas* 20, nos. 1 & 2 (2007): 176.

9 John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., "Introduction," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

patristic and medieval sources and are emphasizing the significance of "a transcendent, eternal referent to provide stability in efforts to reconstruct worldly politics."[10] In the past decade, scholars have taken a renewed interest in political theology in analyses of ideas that emerged during the Reformation.[11] This interest includes reassessments of Martin Luther's contributions—the focus of this essay, which explores the current scholarly engagement with Luther's political theology regarding his views on discourses involving politics and government.

Earlier examinations of Luther's ideas describe his views as determined by religious concerns only, with a basic approach that was apolitical.[12] He has been portrayed as primarily "a theologian and a preacher" who never acquired a consistent political philosophy, and who "knew little about the theories underlying the formation of national states in western Europe."[13] According to the social theorist Ernst Troeltsch, the political ideas of Luther and Lutheranism "fostered slavish obedience to authority … [which] set the stage for absolutism."[14] Jennifer Herdt is one of several scholars who has suggested that Luther never seriously considered the possibility of positive interaction between Christianity and politics.[15] Those scholars who have considered his ideas about government have tended to use negative language when describing his influence. Yet in doing so, they have overlooked important details of political theology, and have diminished certain features of his political views associated with his core Reformation ideas.

Current scholarship in political theology encourages us to revisit and reinterpret Luther's political ideas, to better understand the effects of his religious views on political thinking,[16] especially the ways his ideas were misrepresented in the mid-twentieth century. Michael Laffin, for example, has defended Luther against charges of individualism, indifference, and quietism.[17] In *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology*, Laffin addresses questions regarding secularization theory and the meaning of political theology while challenging the views of Milbank and Herdt. In addition to addressing criticisms of Luther's political perceptions, he emphasizes the power of Luther's ideas for engaging with "leading contemporary theological conceptions of politics" and presents evidence indicating that Luther was not opposed to politics.[18] Laffin's book opens new avenues for considering Luther's political and theological views. Therefore, this article engages with

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10 Annika Thiem, "Schmittian Shadows and Contemporary Theological-Political Constellations," *Social Research* 80, no. 1 (2013): 23, http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sor.2013.0022.

11 Matthew J. Tuininga, *Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

12 Sheldon S. Wolin, "Politics and Religion: Luther's Simplistic Imperative," *American Political Science Review* 50, no. 1 (1956): 25, https://doi.org/10.2307/1951599.

13 Harold John Grimm, "Luther's Conception of Territorial and National Loyalty," *Church History* 17 no. 2 (1948): 82, https://doi.org/10.2307/3160469.

14 Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt: Vortrag, gehalten auf der IX. Versammlung deutscher Historiker zu Stuttgart am 21. April 1906, 35* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1906), 35.

15 Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 344.

16 Michael Richard Laffin, *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther from the Modern Political Narrative* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Jarrett A. Carty, *God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Elke Wolgast, "Luther's Treatment of Political and Societal Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 397–413.

17 Candace L. Kohli, Review of *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther from the Modern Political Narrative*, by Michael Richard Laffin, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 2 (2018): 202.

18 Laffin, *The Promise*, 22.

contemporary political theology when analyzing Luther's texts.

While Luther was not strictly a political theorist, his theological views are useful in discussing political theology, his understanding of government, in particular, providing insights that build on earlier frameworks such as Augustine's views on religion and political relations. Luther's political texts are best understood and appreciated when read in the context of his views on theology,[19] especially anthropology, justification, and freedom. His opinions regarding anthropology and justification can serve as foundations for a distinct form of political theology, with an especially close link between his anthropological views and his notion of government, as well as between justification and freedom. It is important to acknowledge that Luther combined his religious outlook with his views on freedom and the gospel and to understand that his ideas on the role of government were part of his political theology.[20] Luther understood the purpose of government as serving the common good, with the benefits of politics associated with acknowledging "places where humans can concretely [experience] God's promises and provision."[21] In Laffin's words, Luther approached "politics [as] a good within creaturely limits."[22]

Unlike many critical interpretations of Luther's political views, this article asserts that a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective requires a fresh examination of the political content of his sermons, commentaries, and catechism *alongside* his political writings. In this article, consideration of his biblical and theological texts enhances our understanding of his political views, thereby supporting new approaches to studying sixteenth-century Protestant views of political institutions. It is important to remember that Luther was a biblical scholar who promoted what Mark Lilla calls a "biblical political theology."[23] In contrast to secular political theorists, Luther viewed the Bible as a central authority.[24] It is therefore essential to clarify how his biblical exegesis and theological worldview undergirded and informed his political views.

Rather than concentrate on the socio-political distinctions of the Reformation,[25] this article offers specific examples of how Luther constructed his political views based on his biblical theology and exegesis. The focus will be on his texts considered exegetical or sermonic. While the German Lutheran scholar Bernhard Lohse notes the importance of Luther's *Lectures on Romans* for its discussion of "the relationship between spiritual and temporal authority,"[26] I argue that Luther's commentaries, sermons, and Old and New Testament lectures deserve far greater attention as regards understanding his political theology in a way that complements his two kingdoms doctrine.[27] In light of the diversity

19 J. M. Porter, *Introduction to Luther: Selected Political Writings* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1974), 4.

20 Ferdinand Edward Cranz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society*, Harvard Theological Studies XIX (Cambridge, MA: *Harvard* University Press, 1959).

21 Laffin, *The Promise*, 27.

22 Laffin, *The Promise*, 4.

23 Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, 30.

24 Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2: *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 19.

25 Luther created his political theology alongside the new concepts of "political power and authority [that were] emerging to meet the realities of adequate power." Jarrett A. Carty, "Two Kingdoms / Political Theology," in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 301.

26 Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 84.

27 For a discussion on Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, see Heckel Johannes, *Lex Charitatis: A Juristic Disquisition on Law in the Theology of Martin*

of older interpretations, it is crucial to examine Luther's theological writings to understand his political views.

Anthropology, Creation, and Government

This clarifying endeavor begins by articulating Luther's views on sin and politics. Although secular-minded critics often ignore the topic, Comparative Literature Professor Victoria Kahn emphasizes the notion of sin as an important aspect of political theology study.[28] The topic of sin and the necessity of government are important characteristics of Luther's political theology. In his biblical exegesis and commentary on Genesis 2:16, Luther argues that civil government was unnecessary before the fall and the first sin, leading to his perception that civil government is a "necessary remedy for corrupt nature" and essential for establishing a "kingdom over sin."[29] He promoted the idea of patristic theology for *post lapsum* government, a central early church belief.

In his discussion of sin and government, Luther, like others, was inspired by a tradition (going back to Augustine) of believing that some form of governance was required to deal with sin and "the fallen nature" of humankind,[30] and this supports reconsideration of Luther's ideas on political theology. Such reconsideration is especially important because political theology represents an effort to associate "the question found in [sin-rooted] political struggle with the gospel."[31] According to Luther's political theology, individuals had to be delivered from the power of sin in order to participate in political praxis.

As part of his interest in the origins of government, Luther addressed those aspects associated with the original creation. In his Genesis commentary and other writings, Luther held a general belief that government was part of God's original creation. In his 1530 homily, *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School*, he affirmed, "It is certain, then, that temporal authority is a creation and ordinance of God" (*LW* 46:238). In other words, he assumed that all humans had a requirement to be governed (*WA* 6, 252, 1). In his Genesis commentary, he wrote:

> After God had given to man a polity, or national government; and also an economy or the principles of domestic government, and had constituted him king over all creatures, and had moreover appointed for him as a protective remedy the tree of life, for the conservation of his corporeal or natural life;—God now erects for him a temple as it were, that he might worship his Creator, and give thanks unto that God who had bestowed upon him all these rich and bountiful blessings.[32]

Luther, trans. Gottfried G. Krodel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2010), 25–33; W. D. J. Cargill Thompson, "*The 'Two Kingdoms' and the 'Two Regiments': Some Problems of Luther's Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 20, no. 1 (1969): 164–85, https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/XX.1.164.

28 Victoria Kahn, "What Original Sin? Political Theology, the Jewish Question and the Work of Metaphor," *Telos* 178 (2017): 100, http://dx.doi.org/10.3817/0317178100.

29 Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*, trans. Henry Cole (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1858), 142.

30 For Augustine, the fall caused human beings to be so corrupt that they required government's lawful control. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. and trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), XXII, 518.

31 Willard Trout Pierce, "The Value of Freedom in the Political Theology of Luther and Its Promise for Contemporary Political Theology" (PhD diss., Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1986), 128.

32 Luther, *The Creation*, 130.

Luther believed it was important to understand "domestic government" or "the government of the family" as part of the original creation, designed during creation rather than a response to the fall. Luther discussed his ideas of government in reference to the garden of Eden. In particular, he used the idea of "the politics of the garden" when describing a positive role for government "within the created order."[33] In his Genesis exegesis, he clearly distinguished between domestic government (*oeconomia*) and civil government (*politia*).[34] He did not express this distinction in a historical vacuum but as an idea shaped by philosophical and theological traditions. Even though he did not directly mention them in this commentary, he was certainly familiar with the differences between civil and domestic government as described by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas.

In his interpretation of Psalm 128, Luther described a common connection between civil and domestic government—noting a clear priority for the latter, which he described as "the beginning of all political government."[35] Luther considered family as "more essential to human life than the state," whose agency, he said, stems from "that of parents."[36] When promoting the idea of domestic government, he argued that "there can be no city, no commonwealth, no kingdom" if family-centered household governments were not sustained.[37] According to Oswald Bayer, because Luther recognized "the dependence of politics on economy and social life," his notion of government, therefore "share[d] the creaturely status of the household and its administration."[38]

Luther's discussion of anthropology and government is closely linked with questions regarding government purpose and justification. His approach to the doctrine of sin implies a human tendency towards violence and disorder that justifies the existence of government for restraint and protection against evil[39]—central ideas in his political discourse. Luther wrote, for "if external government did not exist, people would devour each another, and no one would keep his life, goods, wife, and child." This is the reason why God established the sword, "so that evil would be partly restrained, and the government would be able to maintain peace" (*WA* 12, 675, 22; cf. *LW* 45:91). In short, Luther perceived government as being good for society—a significant idea in his political theology. Similar to Augustine, he also understood that the main responsibilities for anyone working in government were to protect citizens against violence and to maintain peace in all relations (*WA* 31.I, 201, 26). Central to Augustine's political model was the notion that preserving peace in this world was important so that people might "live and work together."[40]

Further insights on the establishment of government can be gained by evaluating Luther's writings that regard God as the architect of politics. In revisiting Luther's political

33 Jeong Kii Min, *Sin and Politics: Issues in Reformed Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 13.

34 Luther, *The Creation*, 142.

35 Martin Luther, *A Commentary on the Psalms Called Psalms of Degrees* (London: W. Simpkin & R. Marshall, 1819), 292.

36 Gene Edward Veith, "Theology of Marriage and Family," in *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation*, ed. Mark A. Lamport (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 503.

37 Luther, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 292.

38 Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 93.

39 Kahn, "What Original Sin?," 101.

40 Herbert Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 221.

theology, it is not surprising to find that he did not perceive government as something invented by humankind; if that were true, he could not describe it as serving a protective function.[41] As Lilla explains, "biblical political theology … [starts] with God, his word, and above all with his authority," and this approach comes close to Luther's view.[42] For Luther believed that government is created by God and belongs to God (*WA* 24, 586). Analyzing government from this viewpoint implies a higher authority in the form of a God who alone has the power to appoint and remove emperors, kings, and other rulers (*LW* 46:126). Luther saw God as "the creator of politics."[43] As Luther uses governmental categories for God, he writes in his commentary on Genesis that God "has ceased from his creation-work, but he has not ceased from his government-work" (*WA* 24, 586). Since government is an example of God's "power and ordinance [Gottes Gewalt und Ordnung]," Luther argued that government is best understood as an example of God's agency (*WA* 24, 586).

To comprehend Luther's ideas on political theology demands close attention to his views on civil government. Statements in his discussions of government-related topics indicate that Luther was familiar with the political writings of Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero, among other philosophers, whom he criticized for not addressing the efficient and final cause of civil government.[44] In his exposition of Psalm 127, Luther described what he believed was the efficient cause of civil and domestic government when describing human beings as the instrument through which God works. When addressing what he called the failure of philosophers to understand that people "cannot be governed by their own policy and wisdom," he asserted that everything is "ruled and guided by the wisdom of God."[45] To support this argument that it is only through God's agency that rulers govern, he cited from biblical Wisdom literature the notion that rulers also serve as God's instruments.[46] Confirming that "all things are the mere gift of God," he concluded that the *telos* for civil government was "the glory and the service of God, and not of our own glory and our own pleasure."[47]

Although Luther never wrote a political theory as such, there is evidence indicating that his view of government was positive.[48] Luther called individuals in government "gods" (*LW* 13:54), describing them as participating in "godly majesty" when helping God to perform "supernatural work" (*WA* 31.I, 201, 20). In his exposition of Psalm 82:2, he described individuals in government as "divine" and "godlike," and the qualities of their positions as examples of "divine virtue" (*LW* 13:52). When discussing government authority in terms of political ethics, he praised individuals whose responsibilities were

41 "*Denn die Obrigkeit sei wie sie wolle, ist sie nicht von menschen, sonst were sie nicht eine Stunde sicher*" (*WA* 24, 586, 24).

42 Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, 66.

43 Min, *Sin and Politics*, 21.

44 Luther, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 240.

45 Luther, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 245.

46 Luther, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 246.

47 Luther, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 247.

48 Luther's positive opinions regarding government are linked to his personal political experiences—mostly his realization that assistance from a secular entity was necessary in order to enact reforms following the 1517 indulgence dispute and consequent papal resistance. This led him to accept a political theology that included a temporal authority capable of attracting princely support for his reformation efforts. Carty, "Two Kingdoms / Political Theology," 299.

to construct and maintain righteous laws (*LW* 13:54), stressing that after the position of a preacher, "temporal government … [was] the highest service of God and the most useful office on earth" (*LW* 13:51).

Such a perception of government led Luther to discuss the righteous virtues and political ethics of individuals in civil government in their service to different groups in society, the first being the ability of government authorities to act in ways that maintain justice for both church leaders and members (*LW* 13:52). For example, a prince who protects the church was viewed as having great value; note that Luther received protection and support from Prince Fredrick the Wise (1486–1525), Elector of Saxony. Another virtue of government was its ability to protect the weakest and most disadvantaged groups in a society (the poor, orphans, and widows in vulnerable situations), a view shaped by Luther's reading of the Old Testament. He believed that government rulers, who had the power to enact and enforce moral and upright laws, were in the best position to protect vulnerable and marginal populations from exploitation (*LW* 13:53).

Government and Welfare for the People

Luther used his identification of God as the starting point and foundation of government to argue that the main purpose of government is to promote peace and justice. In his exegesis of the Psalms, Luther described a loyal and just government as a precious commodity; accordingly, he had no interest in supporting repressive governments and advised civil servants not to seek praise or pleasure for ensuring that those in government refrain from pursuing personal interests while abusing or harming the citizens they are supposed to serve (*WA* 18, 299). Luther emphasized this point when noting that God created government "for useful service" and that the purpose of government agents was to serve the people's wellbeing (*LW* 22:94–95). In his interpretation of Deuteronomy 32, Luther repeated his belief that such agents do not perform their personal business but God's, and that they are therefore supposed to act as God's servants (*LW* 9:20). Luther was stymied by governments or members of governments who misused their authority, especially as his political theology was built on the idea that governments should function as institutions of God's caring. Therefore, he repeatedly argued that God installs those in authority to care for their citizens (*WA* 52, 222).

Luther clearly based his advocacy of government on how he perceived its role as the protector of the physical safety and welfare of the people (*WA* 5, 569). Luther repeatedly described government as a valuable institution for all citizens, regardless of rank, and maintained that it should never limit its protections to certain economic or political classes.[49] He frequently emphasized the idea that "every lord and prince is bound to protect his people and to preserve the peace for them" (*LW* 46:120).

Incorporating Luther's views into modern political theology (as Laffin encourages us to do) requires careful examination and interpretation of his understanding of government

49 Luther Hess Waring, *The Political Theories of Martin Luther* (New York: Knickerbocker, 1910), 277.

as a good or potentially good institution. In his 1529 *Larger Catechism* he used the traditional idea of *paterfamilias* in describing the Fourth Commandment[50]—a significant standard of early societal orders and a useful concept for describing secular government.[51] In a text on Psalm 82 published the following year, Luther portrayed monarchs as fathers, and "good" princes as "fathers and saviors of their country" (*LW* 13:53). He used the same paternal image in discourses on biblical encouragement to honor one's parents (*LW* 2:175; *LW* 22:94; *LW* 23:27–28).[52] This application of parental language to describe secular authority can be traced back to late medieval humanists who used *pater* when describing secular authorities, as well as to Augustine's description of a link between civic and family peace when discussing the role of government. Augustine compared government hierarchies to "the natural order" of families when considering the *paterfamilias* principle in *De Civitate Dei*.[53]

> The paternal metaphor is also evident in Luther's vision of a political-government model. According to Kristin Zapalac, Luther responded to threats of imperial control by challenging the assumption of "an absolute natural hierarchy in secular affairs," and instead proposed a system built on paternal obligation.[54] What follows, then, is that for Luther the idea that "out of the authority of parents all other authority" has its origin and formation, and hence that those who bear the name "masters" adopt the stance and power of parents to exercise authority. Luther concluded that individuals in government had to show parental-like authority and display "fatherly hearts"[55] when dealing with citizens in exercising power and serving as "masters."[56] For his examples, Luther referred to Cicero and others who were perceived as *patres patriae* of their dominions. For Luther, the mandate to honor parents should also be extended to government.[57]

Tyranny, Insurrection, and War

Although he portrayed governments as the "fathers of nations," Luther acknowledged the existence of corrupt rulers and, thus, the potential for tyranny. He continued to view the institution of government in positive terms while admitting that evil individuals were bound to be found in government positions (*LW* 46:248). To address the question of how government can be created by God when there are corrupt and evil rulers, he replied that a "tyrant can abuse the ordinance of God," just as Nero and Julian did (*LW* 40.II:283–84). Luther believed that tyranny was not outside of God's control but argued that insane princes or kings should be "put under restraint" (*LW* 46:105). He recognized clear limits to government power; for example, he assumed that subjects or citizens should disobey

50 Kristin Eldyss Sorensen Zapalac, *"In His Image and Likeness": Political Iconography and Religious Change in Regensburg, 1500–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 151.

51 Toomas Kotkas, *Royal Police Ordinances in Early Modern Sweden: The Emergence of Voluntaristic Understanding of Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 77.

52 Luther paid particular attention to the exposition of the Fourth Commandment (Exod 20:12) in his guidelines for visiting pastors in Electoral Saxony. When addressing the idea of honoring parents, he offered three reasons for why Christians should respect secular government (*LW* 40.II:281–82).

53 St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 2:XIX, 325–26.

54 Zapalac, *"In His Image,"* 153.

55 Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore Gerhardt Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 384.

56 Luther, "The Large Catechism," 384.

57 Luther, "The Large Catechism," 385. Also, in a sermon on Matthew 18–24 he offered an analogy contrasting parenthood with government (*WA* 47, 242, 13).

political rulers who commanded them to disrespect God's decrees. He never promoted "a general theory of resistance" but he did reject the idea of submitting to a government "simply because authority is divinely established."[58]

Luther had more to say about the boundaries of temporal authority and about government opposition in his discussion of Acts 5:29. Given his belief that political obligations should be evaluated in light of Scripture, he referred to this verse in different writings when considering the topic of government authority. Luther argued that when a government asked citizens to do "something contrary to the command of God or [to] hinder [them] from what God commands, obedience ends, and the obligation ceases" (*LW* 44:100). He gave the example of a ruler starting an unjust war, and stated that there was no need to "follow nor help such a prince." He also believed Christians should refuse to obey any temporal authority that compelled them to "steal, lie or deceive" (*LW* 44:100). These are examples of his consistent biblical argument for acknowledging and abiding by limitations to government edicts.

While Luther supported the idea of popular elections, he described as dangerous the image of citizens taking full control of a government or state, "For if government were to be laid low in this way, we would have no peace" (*WA* 17.I, 211). He expressed his concerns about mob rule in a 1525 sermon on Romans 13, declaring that "the common rabble ought not to rule" (*WA* 17.I, 211). Luther also opposed riots and rebellion instigated by the common people (*LW* 13:251).

In a 1521 tract arguing against political insurgency in the cities of Wittenberg and Erfurt,[59] Luther wrote that the minds of citizens needed to be pacified to ensure that they did not give in "to the passions and words which lead to insurrection, and to do nothing at all unless commanded to do so by [their] superiors or assured of the co-operation of the authorities."[60] He wrote that "God has forbidden insurrection" and used Scripture to support his argument that insurrection is a useless procedure that "never results in the desired reformation."[61] In his response to Thomas Müntzer and the insurgents, Luther argued that "the reason why God wanted to have government [was] that life in the world might go on in an orderly manner" (*WA* 18, 88). In his 1522 exegesis of 1 Peter 2:13–17, Luther declared that "one must do what the prince commands" (*LW* 30:73). Specifically referring to 1 Peter 2:13, he stressed that since Christians are "free in all external matters" and not obligated to secular government, they need to obey laws "to please God and to serve the[ir] neighbor[s]" (*LW* 30:78), thereby promoting peace (*LW* 30:74). He also argued that Christians should not expect any special privileges in return for their obedience beyond avoiding accusations and being recognized for providing good testimony (*LW* 30:74–75).

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58 James Brown Scott, *Law, the State, and the International Community*, 2nd ed. (Clark, NJ: Lawbook Exchange, 2002), 1:480, 482; David Mark Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001), 105.

59 Martin Luther, "An Earnest Exhortation for all Christians, Warning Them against Insurrection," in *Works of Martin Luther*, trans. W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1930), 3:206–22.

60 Luther, "An Earnest Exhortation," 210.

61 Luther, "An Earnest Exhortation," 211–12.

Respect for secular authority as a non-abusive and caring institution was an essential point in Luther's political theology, one that he addressed in several texts and sermons. In his exegesis on 1 Peter 2:16, Luther noted that Christ "paid the tax, even though he did not have to do so but was free and Lord over all things" (*LW* 30:78). Luther added that Christ obeyed Pilate as having God-given authority, saying that Pilate "would have no power over me unless it had been given [him] from above [John 19:11]" (*LW* 30:78).

Since the Reformation questioned the structure of medieval social order and customs, and since Luther disagreed with the Anabaptist position that Christians should never engage in war, he felt a need to address the concept of war. In 1526, a counselor and professional soldier named Assa von Kram (ca. 1480–1528) joined others in encouraging Luther to express publicly his views on the acceptability of military occupation and war, and the following year Luther wrote a treatise entitled "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved."[62] In it, he cited Romans 13:1–4 and 1 Peter 2:13–14 in his discussion on what he called the "divine institution of the sword" for punishing evil, protecting the good, and preserving peace. Luther argued that God established soldiers and armed conflict as instruments for obtaining peace (*LW* 46:95),[63] but also agreed that the sword should not be used in wars considered unnecessary or unjust. He primarily relied on Old Testament accounts to support his argument (*LW* 46:97), but in "Whether Soldiers" he also referred to a comment ascribed to Jesus in the presence of Pilate "that war [in itself] was not wrong" (*LW* 46:97). Luther concluded that soldiers should not be viewed only as practitioners of a destructive profession, but as performing potentially useful work in the same manner as do those with other vocations (*LW* 46:97). However, he was clearly aware of the capacity of states to misuse armed conflict (*LW* 46:97).

Political Theology: Freedom and the Two Kingdoms

If Luther's political ideas are to be beneficial for understanding political theology, then his beliefs regarding freedom deserve special attention. His *Freedom of a Christian* does address political issues in the context of religious anthropology and a dialectical Weltanschauung.[64] Regarding the text's anthropological content, it depicted a "radical human freedom and a radical human obligation" expressed as his famous dialectic,[65] "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (*LW* 31:344). While Luther presented his views on freedom; he embraced both a spiritual and political view when affirming "the freedom of individual conscience."[66] In *Freedom* he proposed a model for political theology that emphasized both the gospel and individual freedom. In the same writing, the gospel's idea of the Christian's freedom from the law has implications for political theology.

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62 Robert C. Schultz, Introduction to "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved," in *LW* 46:89–90.

63 Augustine advocated that wars are fought in an effort to bring about peace. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 2:XIX, 12, 315.

64 *Freedom* contains aspects of his "two kingdoms doctrine," Luther describing the inner man as belonging to a spiritual kingdom and the outer man as belonging to a secular kingdom. Jeffrey Shearier, "The Ethics of Obedience: A Lutheran Development," *Concordia Journal* 12, no. 2 (1986): 61.

65 Caryn D. Riswold, *Two Reformers: Martin Luther and Mary Daly as Political Theologians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007), 58.

66 Waring, *The Political Theories of Martin Luther*, 268.

Luther's emphasis on freedom from the law in Christian life did not advocate disregard for civil authority. Indeed, he argued that Christians do not need the law for salvation, and that through faith in Christ they no longer needed the law at all,[67] implying that their justification by faith resulted in their willingness to perform service for others cheerfully.[68] While acknowledging the legitimacy of government, Luther described Christians though free individuals ruled by the gospel as nonetheless obligated to pay taxes.[69] In his analysis of Romans 13:1–7, he explained what he considered to be the connection between justification by faith and freedom to government: although believers are justified by faith, they must nevertheless obey government in the spirit of freedom.[70]

A careful examination of Luther's interpretation of justification and his thoughts on anthropology uncovers further clues to his political theology. Regarding how his understanding of justification by faith can be applied to his political ideas, it can be argued that in his view only believers justified by faith engage in "correct [political] practice," and that, in this way they help individuals to serve as "a Christ to others."[71] In other words, the gospel and freedom of faith both serve as foundations for political praxis. For Luther, "the freedom of Christ" encourages believers to engage in social affairs. This is a nuanced notion of social responsibility and political ethics based on the framework of Christian freedom.[72] As Luther saw it, through faith believers have received all good things, and they ought to use all these good things to serve their neighbors.[73] Accordingly, his ideas on political engagement and commitment to others are essential; and, as essential, they warrant renewed attention.[74]

Luther also expressed the idea of political engagement and respecting both community and authority in his 1532 exposition on the Sermon on the Mount,[75] in which he described two kingdoms or realms of Christian lives: a spiritual kingdom for the Christian person, and an earthly kingdom for the secular person (*LW* 21:111). In dealing with this concept of dual participation, he emphasized how important it was for each kingdom to keep to "its own sphere" and not mix (*LW* 21:113). He added detail to the idea of a Christian's relationship to the secular kingdom in his analysis of Matthew 5:38–42, including his observation that Christians are capable of performing all kinds of "secular business"—an idea associated with his Christian anthropology (*LW* 21:109, 113). He acknowledged that while only the inner-person of a Christian is subject to Christ, in their outer-person dealings with property and family they cannot avoid interacting with civil authorities (*LW* 21:109).[76] Luther admitted that under secular law Christians have responsibilities towards other people and concerning societal matters when he wrote, "Just learn the difference

67 Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty*, ed. Harold Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), 24.
68 Luther, *Christian Liberty*, 31.
69 Luther, *Christian Liberty*, 32.
70 Luther, *Christian Liberty*, 32.
71 Pierce, "The Value of Freedom," 137.
72 Pierce, "The Value of Freedom," 139, 147.
73 Luther, *Christian Liberty*, 34.
74 Pierce, "The Value of Freedom," 140.
75 Luther, *Christian Liberty*, 33.
76 This Christian belief in two persons—one Christian, one secular—is tied to the idea of the inner and the outer man as described in *Freedom*.

between the two persons that a Christian must carry simultaneously on earth, because he lives in human society and has to make use of secular and imperial things, the same way the heathen do" (*LW* 21:110–11). He described a Christian soldier or judge as acting as a secular person (*Weltperson*) while maintaining "a Christian heart" (*LW* 21:113). Luther's sixteenth-century theology is therefore in agreement with the observation offered by George Forell, Herman Preus, and Jaroslav Pelikan: that every Christian has a dual status as a citizen of the church and of the state, yet "remains one person made alive in the only living God by the one Gospel."[77]

Conclusion

Luther never penned a comprehensive political theory, and therefore his biblical and religious texts must be examined alongside his more overtly political treatises to find additional clues regarding his political theology. Luther specifically referred to Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2:13 as *loci classici* in his political theology. However, it is important to consider his other biblical commentaries and religious instruction for a detailed understanding of his views. According to his commentaries, sermons, and catechism, he primarily viewed government as a God-given institution that serves a restraining function for fallen humanity. Yet he also saw great value in government for protecting the welfare of citizens and maintaining peaceful relations between them. Accordingly, his political theology is best interpreted within an Augustinian framework that affirms a *post lapsum* basis for government: limiting the disorder of sin while maintaining a positive intention for humanity,[78] with a paternal metaphor holding a central position in his catechismal discussion of the role of government. In *Freedom of a Christian*, he gave an example of a political theology that supported both the gospel and individual freedom, the practice of loving both God and one's neighbor forming the basis of what he understood to be ethical behavior.[79] Luther's theological and exegetical texts provide a nuanced understanding of his political theology, one that continues to inform twenty-first-century discussions of connections between his political and theological views.

With the exception of Michael Laffin's and Jarrett Carty's analyses, few recent efforts in the English-speaking world have clarified how Luther's theological views shaped his political theology or expanded that conversation by considering modern views of political theology. The above assessment of Luther's sermons, commentaries, and catechism is a beginning contribution to that conversation and affirms his belief in the interconnection of politics and theological ideas.[80] Unlike modern views exemplified in the work of Mark Lilla,[81] Luther did not believe in a separation of theology and politics.[82]Although

77 George Forell, Herman Preus, and Jaroslav Pelikan, "Notes and Studies: Toward a Lutheran View of Church and State," *Lutheran Quarterly* 5 (1953): 290.

78 Laffin, *The Promise*, 13.

79 Shearier, "The Ethics of Obedience," 63.

80 John Stroup, "Political Theology and Secularization Theory in Germany, 1918–1939: Emanuel Hirsch as a Phenomenon of His Time," *Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 3 (1987): 339, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000023695.

81 Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, 55–103.

82 William Cavanaugh, "Political Theology as Threat," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 251.

political theory was not his primary interest during the Reformation, his understanding of government provided a foundation for insights that can be compared to Augustine's political-religious views. Luther's biblical political theology touches on important topics that have implications for the civic sphere, and that must therefore be considered in any discussion of modern political and public theology.

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