

Martin Luther

Providence was pleased, in the person of Martin Luther, to raise up a bold and daring genius.
—John Adams

INTRODUCTION

“The work I now place before you sets the earth in motion and places an immovable sun at the center of the universe. Therefore, I know that when men read it, Most Holy Father, they will boogie me off the stage.”

Copernicus wrote these words to Pope Paul III in the dedication to his groundbreaking work *On the Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres*. Despite the shocking nature of the claim, the hypothesis that the earth spun around the sun met with little fanfare, as the *magnum opus* of the aged astronomer sold less than 500 copies. Catalogued in the Vatican archives, it collected dust for the next seventy years.

The time for its resurrection came in 1616 when an Italian scientist by the name of Galileo wrote a little essay entitled, “On the Tides.” His main argument was that the ebbing and flowing of the seas can only be explained by assuming a Copernican model of the universe, one which sets the earth spinning on its axis, racing towards the sun at breathtaking speeds.

The claim landed Galileo in hot water, and had Copernicus turning in his grave. The case for “heliocentrism,” which failed to elicit even a yawn two generations prior, was now shocking the world. As a result, *Revolutions* was promptly

placed on the pope’s official “banned-book list.” To suggest that the earth revolved around the sun not only contradicted Ptolemy, it also seemed to go against Scripture, and this, the authorities would not tolerate.

Galileo was eventually summoned to Rome where he was forced to stand trial. Now an old man, the long days of questioning finally broke him. Recanting on his knees, he dutifully read the script which the authorities handed him: “I abandon the false opinion that the sun stands at the center of our system, immovable. I also recant of the heretical notion that the earth is in motion.” Legend has it that before rising to his feet, he tapped the ground and whispered into the air *Eppur si muove*, “And yet it moves.”

Admittedly, it is hard for us living in the West to imagine a world in which the authorities could burn your books and place you in prison for what you believed. Freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, and the free exercise of speech were ideas utterly foreign to medieval Europe—that is, until the coming of Martin Luther.

Arguably the most important figure of the last thousand years, Luther, in the words of one observer, “Shredded the political, social, and

theological fabric of Europe. In a very real sense, he created a new world,” and like any seminal person from the annals of history, it would be impossible to sum up his life in a few paragraphs. He was a professor of theology, a pastor, a preacher, an author, a Bible translator, and an advisor to kings. Accordingly, it is typical to sum up his many vocations under the simple epithet of *Reformer*.

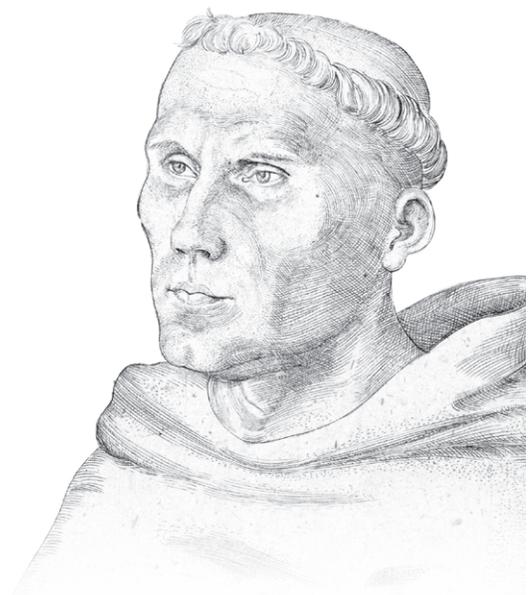
To “reform” something means that we are either making changes in order to improve it, or else we are seeking to bring it back to the state for which it was originally intended. In this world, things never remain static. Generally speaking, they tend to go from a state of order to a state of disorder, and so whether we are talking about relationships, schools, or sports teams—constant care must be taken in order prevent them from falling into disrepair. When Luther looked around medieval Europe, he saw a world that was in desperate need of reformation. During his life, the church, the schools, and the government were all spiraling into chaos, and while he addressed each of these areas in their turn, what is of interest to us now are his efforts to reform *government*.

There are countless ways in which a government can fall into disrepair. Perhaps the *form* of government is insufficient to meet the needs of the people, or one of the *branches* has become too powerful, or in some cases, the structure is sound and the powers are balanced, yet the magistrates who run the government have become corrupt. However, in the realm of political organizations, there is a far more common problem that has plagued human societies throughout history, and it is this: *the tendency for governments to overreach into lives of its citizens*.

This was the problem that Luther wants to address and he does it in the following manner. He begins by asking the question: *What is the basic nature of those governed?* The answer he gives is that human beings are comprised of *two* principal parts—a body and a soul. From there he argues that it is only over the “bodies” of its citizens, that is, over their outward existence, that government has lawful jurisdiction. For example, the state may

dictate to citizens what side of the street to drive on, how to conduct business transactions, and even the amount of money that must be forfeited in taxes. Over the soul, however, the government has absolutely no jurisdiction at all. In other words, it must not command the people regarding what to believe, how to worship, or in what object to place their faith. It is difficult to express what a radical notion this must have sounded like to medieval ears, Indeed, it was no less radical than the assertion that the earth spins around the sun.

The following essay entitled *On Secular Authority* was Luther’s attempt to check the arm of his own government. He writes with rage and you will undoubtedly pick up on that within the first few sentences. This is because he believes that the worst idea humanity ever came up with was the notion that a government can shackle the souls of their subjects by commanding them what to believe. This treaty is the first major blow to that will attempt to break the fetters and set Europe on the road to less despotic and more tolerant forms of governance. Unfortunately, it was but the first step in what was to be a long and arduous journey.





1512

Awarded the Doctorate of Theology degree, becomes chair of theology department at University of Wittenberg



1517

The Ninety-Five Theses is posted on All Saint's Church in Wittenberg



1525

The Peasant War begins

1483

Luther born in Eisleben



1507

Luther becomes a monk



1515

Novum Instrumentum omne—the first complete Greek New Testament is published



1521

Luther refuses to recant at the Diet of Worms



1546

Luther dies at the age of 62



On Secular Authority

Martin Luther

1523 AD

booklet

Luther is referring to his paper "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," which he wrote in 1520.

blaspheme

This word means "to speak irreverently about sacred things." The leaders in Germany were doing this by standing in the place of God.

henchmen

He is speaking of government officials who worked in concert with the Church to enforce its teachings. Luther's life was in danger from the moment he publicly denounced the pope and the Roman Catholic system.

temporal

Secular powers, such as government officials and civil magistrates are "temporal authorities." Luther believed that these offices were sanctioned by God, but they had very different roles from spiritual authorities such as bishops and priests.

^ARomans 13:1-2 extends

The question over how far governments may reach into the lives of its citizens was not only the thesis of this paper, but it was the seminal debate which would ultimately need the American Revolution to resolve.

knave

a base, dishonest, or worthless person

Formerly I addressed a **booklet** to the German nobility, setting forth how to properly exercise their office and duties as faithful Christians. How they have neglected to carry out my suggestions is very plain to see. Thus I must change my methods and write them, this time, about what they should stop doing. I fear this writing will have just as little effect on them as the former one had, and that they will by all means remain princes, but by no means become Christians.

It seems that God Almighty has allowed our rulers to go insane. They actually think they have the power to do whatever they please, and thus their subjects are led to believe that they are bound to obey them in everything. It has gone so far that in many cases, the rulers have ordered the people to throw away their books and to believe only what they prescribe. In this way they arrogantly set themselves in God's place, making themselves lord over men's conscience and faith.

Because of this madness, the Christian faith is suppressed as our leaders deny the divine Word, and **blaspheme** the divine Majesty. Therefore, I will no longer look away as my ungracious lords and angry nobles abuse their power—but I must now resist them—at least with words. They know that I have no fear of their idol the pope, who has long threatened to deprive me of my soul and of heaven. Now I must demonstrate that I am also not afraid of his **henchmen** who threaten to deprive me of body and of the earth. God grant that they may have to rage against me until their grey heads perish, and that I die not of their threatening's. Amen.

THE LIMITS OF SECULAR AUTHORITY

As I have previously written, nothing could be more obvious, that there must be **temporal** authority on earth. As St. Paul clearly states, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment."^A

However, we must now inquire how far the arm of secular authority **extends** and how far its hand reaches, lest it extend too far and encroach upon God's kingdom and rule. It is very important to know this, since where it is given too long a reach, terrible injury will always follow, but on the other hand, if its arm is inordinately shortened, a whole different set of evils will ensue. In the latter case, punishments are too light; in the former, too severe. Let us say at the outset, however, that it is always better to err in the latter and punish too little; since it always is better to let a **knave** live than to kill a good man; for the world will always have knaves, and must have them, but of good men—there are only a few.

Let us start by noticing that there are the two **classes** of Adam's children. One is in God's kingdom under Christ, the other in the **kingdom** of the world under the State. Each kingdom has two different sets of laws, as I have argued elsewhere. Moreover, every kingdom must have its own laws and regulations, and without law, no kingdom or government can exist, as daily experience proves.

Worldly government has laws which extend no farther than to life, property, and to what is external upon earth; for over the soul, God will allow no one to rule but Himself. Therefore, when temporal power presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads and destroys souls. We desire to make this so clear that everyone shall grasp it, and that our rulers—the princes and bishops—may see what fools they are when they seek to force the people, with their laws and commandments, into believing one thing or another.

THE 95 THESES
Luther nails his "Ninety-Five Theses" to the All Saint's Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1518. This was Luther's formal protest of the Roman Catholic Church and marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.



Pauwels, Ferdinand. Luther's 95 Theses. 1872, oil on canvas, Municipal Art Museum, Ypres.

When a man-made law is imposed upon the soul, in order to make it believe this or that, there is certainly no **word of God** for it, and if there is no word of God for it is uncertain whether God will have it so, for we cannot be certain that what He does not command pleases Him. In fact, we can be sure that it does *not* please Him, for He desires that our faith be grounded simply and entirely on His divine Word, as He says in Matthew "On this rock will I build my church."^B

Thus, the secular powers send souls to eternal death with such outrageous laws, for it compels them to believe something as "right" and "certainly pleasing to God"^C that is nevertheless uncertain or is certainly displeasing to Him, since there is no clear word of God for it. For whoever believes that to be "right" which is clearly wrong or uncertain—this person denies the truth, which is God Himself. He now believes in lies and errors and counts that right which is wrong. Therefore, it is the height of folly, when they **command** that one shall believe the Church, the fathers, and the councils, even though

classes

To Luther, all of the baptized who live a penitent life and who call on the name of the Lord would belong to that first class, that is, to the Kingdom of God.

kingdom

Luther's basic understanding of the world was that two kingdoms existed simultaneously—a spiritual kingdom which was ruled by Christ through His word, and an earthly kingdom ruled by governments. The rest of this essay will be devoted to explaining how these two kingdoms differ and what their proper jurisdictions are.

word of God

He is speaking of Holy Scripture. As it pertains to the spiritual kingdom and the spiritual lives of believers, if God has not commanded it in His Word, man has no right to require it. This would be adding to God's Word—a very serious sin.

^BMatthew 16:18

^CRomans 14:23

command

In Luther's mind, the Bible alone has the authority to bind the conscience.

councils

At this time, decisions made by church councils were binding, authoritative, and placed on par with Scripture.

^DMatthew 10:28

soul

The government has no jurisdiction over souls. In other words, it cannot regulate beliefs, only actions.

Leipzig

A city in Germany, south of Whittenberg.

Wittenberg

Luther's hometown in Germany and in many ways, the great theatre of the Reformation.

hellebore

a medicinal plant thought to cure insanity

^EHebrews 4:12

public

That is, outward matters. If the church cannot look into someone's heart, how much less the state.

there be no word of God for it. The devil's apostles command such things, not the Church; for the Church commands nothing unless it is found in God's Word. It will be a very long time, however, before they prove that the statements of popes and **councils** are God's Word. Still more foolish is it when they assert that the statements of kings, princes, and the mass of men are thus and so.

To sum all this up—we are not baptized unto kings, princes, or even unto the mass of men, but unto Christ and unto God himself. Neither are we called kings, princes or common folk, but Christians. Therefore no one shall command the soul, unless he can show it the way to heaven—but this no man can do—only God. Therefore, in matters which concern the salvation of souls, nothing but God's Word shall be taught and accepted.

Consummate fools that rulers are, even they must confess of having no power over souls—for no human being can kill a soul or make it alive—or conduct it to heaven or hell. If they will not believe this, then let them simply listen to Christ's own words, since He says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."^D I consider it now to be sufficiently proven that the **soul** is taken out of all human hands and is placed under the power of God alone.

FAITH CANNOT BE FORCED

Now tell me, how much brains are there in the head of him who imposes commandments where he has no power at all? Who would not regard one as insane if he tried to command the moon to shine when he desired it? How fitting would it be if those in **Leipzig** sought to impose laws on us in **Wittenberg**, or if we in Wittenberg tried to lay laws on those in Leipzig? They would certainly send doctors with a cart of **hellebore** to clear out our heads. Nevertheless, our emperors and wise princes continue to permit pope, bishops and sophists to lead them on, one blind man leading the other, commanding their subjects what to believe, apart from God's Word, and they still insist on being regarded as Christian princes. God help us!

Besides all this, we understand that authority may act only where it can see, know, judge, change, and convert. For what kind of judge would he be who blindly gives verdicts on matters which he neither heard nor saw? Tell me, how can a man see, know, judge, condemn, or change hearts? This is reserved for God alone! For the thoughts and intents of the heart can be known to no one but God.^E Therefore it is useless and impossible to command or force anyone to believe one thing or another. It must be taken hold of in a different way. Force cannot accomplish it, and I am surprised at these great fools, for don't they all say, *De occultis non judicat ecclesia*, that is, "The Church does not judge secret things."

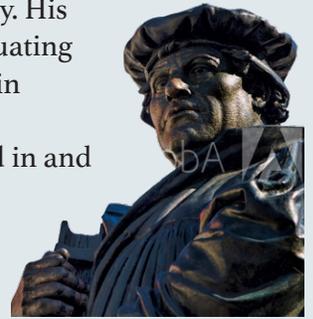
If the spiritual rule of the Church governs only **public** matters, how dare the senseless, secular power judge and control such a secret, spiritual, and hidden matter such as faith? Furthermore, everyman is responsible for his own faith, and he must see to it for himself that he believes rightly. As little

[HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS]

◆ A Life-Altering Decision

Luther was born in 1483 in the town Eisleben, Germany, to a working-class family. His father Hans wanted his young son to be a lawyer, and so in the year 1505, after graduating from the University of Erfurt with a master's degree, Luther subsequently enrolled in their law program. This is where the story gets really interesting.

One day, while traveling to the university on horseback, a violent storm swooped in and a bolt of lightning threw Luther from his horse. Terrified of death and judgment, Luther cried out to his patron saint, "Save me St. Anne and I will become a monk." True to his word (and to the eternal chagrin of his father) Luther immediately dropped out of law school and became a Roman Catholic monk.



◆ The Protest Begins

In the year 1517, Martin Luther was a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. During this period, he became convinced that his church—that is, the Roman Catholic Church—was in error about many things. However, the issue that vexed him the most was its practice of selling indulgences.

An indulgence was something the Church sold to living relatives of the deceased as a way to reduce the amount of punishment the deceased had to endure in purgatory before finally entering heaven. Luther despised this teaching, as he believed that people did not need an indulgence to be forgiven by God.

As a result, he nailed a document, which came to be known as the *Ninety-Five Theses*, to the door of the University's church. This action signaled that he was inviting other scholars to debate the "95 issues" he was bringing to their attention. He wanted to know, for example, that if the pope truly had power to release people from purgatory, why would he not just do it out of charity instead of making people pay for forgiveness?

The *Theses* struck a chord with the commoners and, fueled by the newly invented printing press, was soon spread all over Europe. Within a few short months, Martin Luther was a household name and the Protestant Reformation had officially begun.



◆ The Diet of Worms

In 1520 Pope Leo kicked Luther out of the Catholic Church. This move was intended to silence the Reformer, unfortunately for the pope, the German only grew louder.

As was the case throughout most of the medieval period, the Church had a stabilizing effect over most of Europe. This was the case even during Luther's time. For this reason, the turmoil which the Reformation was causing had alarmed Charles V. If Luther continued to divide the Church, political instability would be the inevitable result.

In order to prevent this, the Emperor called for an assembly—also called a "diet"—to be held in the city of Worms, Germany. Luther mistakenly thought that it was an invitation to debate doctrine. In reality, it was a conspiracy between the secular and sacred powers to get him to publicly renounce all his writings which contradicted the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Now remember, Luther did not believe that the church nor the state had the power to dictate what men are to believe. Therefore, after a grueling trial and a lengthy inquisition, Luther refused to recant of his writings, proclaiming to Charles some of the most famous words in the history of Western Civilization, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ...I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen"



conscience

The philosophy of Luther's famous saying "To go against conscience in neither right nor safe" is all over this work. For a government to force its citizens to violate their consciences by compelling them to believe one thing or another, was wicked, according to Luther.

Augustine

St. Augustine of Hippo (c. 354–430). Generally considered the greatest theologian in the history of the Church.

impossible

Since the dawn of time, those in authority have attempted to force their subjects to believe what has been deemed to be "orthodoxy," and although persecution does often succeed in bringing outward compliance, it can never change the heart.

Fcf. Romans 1:18–32

torturing

He is undoubtedly thinking of the Church's practice of selling "indulgences," that is, certificates issued by the pope which shortened people's stay in purgatory—a place of remedial punishment between heaven and hell, according to Roman Catholic teaching.



Romans

Many Romans blamed the fall of their empire on the Christians—saying that they angered their gods by preaching Jesus Christ.

as another can go to hell or heaven for me, so little can he believe or disbelieve for me; and as little as he can open or shut heaven or hell for me, so little can he drive me to faith or unbelief. Since, then, belief or unbelief is a matter of everyone's **conscience**, and since this by no means undermines the secular authorities, the latter should be content to mind its own affairs, and permit men to believe one thing or another, as they are able and willing, and constrain no one by force. Faith is a free work, to which no one can be forced. Nay, it is a *divine* work, done in the Spirit, and certainly not a matter which outward authority can compel or create. This is why we have the well-known saying, found also in **Augustine**, "No one can be forced what to believe."

These blind, wretched folks do not see how utterly hopeless and **impossible** a thing they are attempting, for no matter how much they fret and fume, they cannot do more than make the people obey them outwardly. They cannot change the heart, though they wear themselves out trying. Thus, the proverb is true, "Thoughts are free." Why then do they force people to believe, when they see that it is impossible? In this way they compel weak consciences to lie, to deny, and to say what they do not sincerely believe—loading themselves down with dreadful sins. For all the lies and false confessions which such weak consciences utter fall back upon him who compels them. It would be far better that if their subjects fell into error, simply to let them err. Better that then forcing them to lie and to say what is not in their hearts.

Would you like to know why God ordains that the temporal princes must offend so frightfully? I will tell you. God has given them over to a perverse mind and will make an end of them, as well as of the spiritual rulers of this land.^F For my ungracious lords, the pope and the bishops, should act like bishops and preach God's Word; this they leave undone and seek to become temporal princes, and govern with laws which concern only life and property. How thoroughly they have turned things upside down! Inwardly they ought to be ruling souls by God's Word. Instead, they outwardly rule castles, cities, land and people **torturing** souls with unspeakable outrages.

In the same manner, the temporal lords should rule land and people outwardly; this they do not do. All they can do is to flay and scrape, put tax on tax, tribute on tribute, let loose now a bear, then a wolf. Besides this, there is no justice, fidelity, or truth to be found among them. What they do would be beneath robbers and knaves, and their temporal rule has sunk quite as low as that of the spiritual tyrants. So God gives these princes over to perverted minds, that they rush on in senselessness and seek to establish a spiritual rule over souls, until they go under with the corrupt bishops, priests and monks—one knave with the other. Then they lay all the blame on the Gospel, and instead of doing penance, they blaspheme God and say that our preaching has brought about what their perverse wickedness has merited, and continues to merit, as the **Romans** did when they were destroyed.

THE PROPER JURISDICTION OF GOVERNMENT

You will reply, “But Paul says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,” and Peter says, “For the Lord’s sake, submit to all human authority.’”^G I answer, “That is just what I am arguing for!” These sayings agree with what I am saying.

^GRomans 13:1

St. Paul speaks of authority and power. Now, you have just heard that no one but God can have authority over souls. Thus, Paul cannot be speaking of any obedience except where there can be a corresponding authority. From this it follows that he is not talking about matters of faith, and he does not say that secular authority should have the right to command faith, but he is speaking of external possessions, and how these are to be set in order and controlled on earth.

His words clearly indicate this. Observe how he prescribes limits to both authority and obedience when he says, “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”^H You see, temporal obedience and power apply only to external things like taxes, revenue, respect, and honor. Likewise, when he says, “The authorities are God’s servants for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”^I He again limits their power, so that they have control not over faith or the Word of God, but only over **evil works**.

^HRomans 13:7

^IRomans 13:4

If, then, imperial power extended into God’s kingdom, and was not something entirely different, He would not have made it a separate thing, for the soul is not under Caesar’s power. He cannot teach it, nor guide it, nor kill it, nor make it alive, nor bind it, nor loose it, nor judge it, nor condemn it, nor hold it, nor release it.

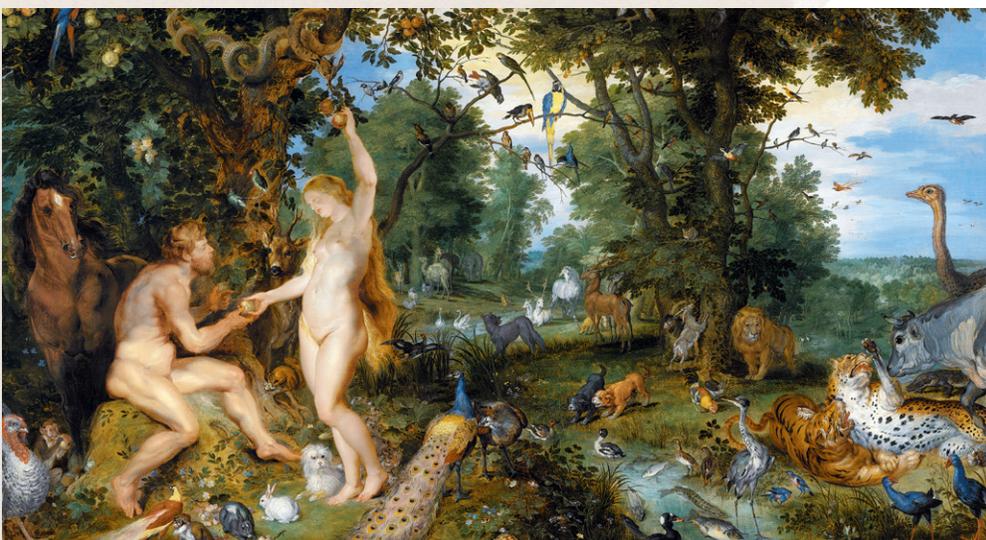
evil works

The purpose of government is simply to restrain wicked men so that society and culture can flourish. This idea would be most fully expounded in Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense.”

He has the power to do none of these things—thus he cannot command or impose laws on man’s soul, but only over his life, goods, and honor; for such things are properly under his authority.

DOMINION MANDATE

Luther acknowledges that God gave man dominion over the earth—but that mandate only extended to outward rule. Nowhere in Scripture does God give man authority to rule over the conscience of his fellow man.



Rubens, Peter. The Garden of Eden. 1615, oil on canvas, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

AT TIMES WE MUST DISOBEY GOVERNMENT

So whatever is on earth belongs to the temporal, earthly kingdom and man has authority from God to rule this, but that which belongs to the heavenly, eternal kingdom is entirely under the authority of the God of heaven. This is what Moses is talking about when he says, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”^J Therefore, only external rule is ascribed to men.

^JGenesis 1:28

^KActs 5:29

limit

Luther is referring to an incident when the civil authorities commanded St. Peter to stop preaching the gospel. Peter had to refuse this command since he was commissioned by God to preach the gospel.

Meissen, Bavaria

Cities in Germany.

ordered

He is saying that citizens should not hand over anything voluntarily to government officials against their consciences, however, if the magistrates force their way into their homes, they should not resist.

This is why St. Peter could say to the temporal authorities, “We must obey God rather than men.”^K Here he clearly sets a **limit** to worldly government, and so it is foolish to assert that we must do all that worldly government demands. In that case it would be to no purpose to say, “We must obey God rather than men.” If then your prince or temporal lord commands you to agree with the pope, to believe this or that, or if commands you to destroy certain books, you should say, “It is not proper for Satan to sit by the side of God. Dear Earthly Prince: I owe you obedience with my life and goods, therefore, command me within the limits of your power on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe, and to destroy my books, I will not obey; for in this case you are a tyrant and you overreach into God’s kingdom, commanding where you have neither right nor power.”

If the tyrant should take your property for such a response as this, and punish your disobedience—then blessed are you! Thank God that you were found worthy to suffer for the sake of the divine Word. Let him rave, fool that he is. He will meet his judge. But I tell you this—if you do not resist him, but give him his way, and let him take your faith or your books, then you have really denied God.

Let me illustrate. In **Meissen, Bavaria**, and in other places, the tyrants have issued an order that the New Testaments are to be confiscated and delivered to the courts. In this case, their subjects must not deliver a single page at risk of their salvation. For whoever does so, delivers Christ into Herod’s hands, since they act as murderers of Christ, just as Herod did. However, if their houses are **ordered** searched and books or goods taken by force, they should allow it to be done and they should not resist.

Persecution is not to be resisted, but endured, yet they should not cooperate with it, nor obey these wicked magistrates by moving foot or finger. For such tyrants act as worldly princes should act, for “worldly” princes they are; but the world is God’s enemy. Therefore,

FREDERICK III

The State can be a powerful defender of religious liberty or a staunch antagonist against it, and although Luther spent much of his life running from bloodthirsty rulers who wished him dead—there were several magistrates who defended him.

Frederick III, Elector of Saxony in Germany was one of those men. The founder of Wittenberg University where Luther taught, Fredrick believed that Luther should be able to preach his doctrines without fear of physical harm.



Cranach, Lucas. Frederick III, 1532, oil on canvas, Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna.

[HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS]

◆ The Peasants' War

For most of the medieval period, a large part of the Europe was comprised of “peasants.” These were laborers in the “feudal system” who paid rent to wealthy landowners in exchange for the right to grow crops. Eventually these peasants grew weary with the inequality of that system, and so the year of 1525 witnessed a massive popular uprising in Europe, second only to the French Revolution of 1789.

By this time, Luther was back in Wittenberg, attempting to reform the church and government of that city. When he heard of the commotion, he was horrified that civilians would take up arms against their government. As a result, he called on the German magistrates to crush the rebellion with all the force they could muster. In the end, nearly a quarter-million peasants were slain.



◆ A Prolific Writer

In addition to translating the New Testament from Greek into his native German, Luther was constantly engaged in writing letters, sermons, and theological treatises. In fact, between the years 1958 and 1986, his complete works were collected into fifty-five volumes totaling over 22,250 pages of written material.



◆ Looking to the Stars (Scientific Advancement)

In 1514, three years before Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses, a little-known astronomer named Copernicus was working on a theory which would completely overthrow the medieval model of the universe. He published his findings in a little volume called *Commentariolus*, which would become the forerunner to his magnum opus—*De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*—that is, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*.



Luther was critical of the work, saying “People gave ear to an upstart astrologer who strives to show that the earth revolves, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun and the moon. This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy...”

◆ The Business of Books (Contemporary Event)

Fearing the effect that the printing press could have on the masses, Pope Leo issued a decree that before any book was printed, it must first be approved by a bishop of Rome. Part of the edict read as following:

We have judged that our care must be exercised over the printing of books, precisely so that thorns do not grow up with the good seed or poisons become mixed with medicines. We therefore establish and ordain that henceforth, for all future time, no one may dare to print or have printed any book or other writing of whatever kind in Rome or in any other cities without the book or writings having first been closely examined, at Rome by our vicar and the master of the sacred palace. Should anyone attempt to print a book without our permission, in addition to it being seized and publicly burnt, payment of a hundred ducats to the fabric of the basilica of the prince of the apostles in Rome, without hope of relief, and suspension for a whole year from the possibility of engaging in printing, there is to be imposed upon anyone presuming to act otherwise the sentence of excommunication. Finally, if the offender's contumacy increases, he is to be punished with all the sanctions of the law, by his bishop or by our vicar, in such a way that others will have no incentive to try to follow his example.



they must also do what is opposed to God, and in accord with the world, and so remain worldly princes. So do not marvel when they rage and mock at the Gospel, for they must live up to their name and title.

You must know that from the beginning of the world, a wise prince is a rare bird indeed—even more so a pious prince. They are usually the greatest fools or the worst knaves on earth; therefore, one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good, especially in divine matters, which concern the salvation of souls. The rulers of this world are God’s jailers and hangmen, and His divine wrath needs them to punish the wicked and to preserve outward peace. Our God is a great Lord, and therefore He must have such noble, honorable and rich hangmen and **beadles**. He desires that they shall have riches, honor, and the fear of all people.

It pleases God that we call His hangmen “gracious lords,” fall at their feet, and be subject to them in all humility—so long as they do not stretch their arm too far and desire to become shepherds of souls instead of hangmen of bodies. If a prince becomes wise, pious, or a Christian, it is a miracle, and one of the most precious tokens of divine grace upon that land. For the usual course of things is according to the saying in **Isaiah** 3:4, “I will make boys their leaders, and toddlers their rulers.” The world is too wicked, and does not deserve to have many wise and pious princes. Frogs need storks.

HOW HERESY IS DEFEATED

Again you say, “Temporal power should not force men to believe, but it should keep men from being led astray by false doctrine, otherwise how could heretics be prevented from preaching?”

I answer—this is the bishop’s job, to whom such duty is entrusted. This work has never been entrusted to princes. Heresy can never be prevented by force. It must be taken hold of in a different way, and never with the sword. Here God’s Word must strive, and if it does not accomplish the destruction of heresies, it will remain unaccomplished through secular power, though it fills the world with blood.

Heresy is a spiritual matter, which no iron can strike, no fire burn, and no water drown. God’s Word alone avails here. Moreover, faith and heresy are never so strong as when men oppose them by sheer force, without God’s Word. For men count it certain that such force proves that a wrong cause is being directed against the right. Since it proceeds without God’s Word, they reason that it does not

beadles

a church officer; someone who assists the minister

Isaiah

One of the most famous prophets in the Bible. He argued that when God is displeased with a nation, He gives it over to incompetent rulers.

heresy

a belief contrary to what the religious authorities have deemed to be orthodox



Look Out

See TE p. ???.

CARDINAL LAW

When Luther stood against the Catholic Church he was quite literally standing against the world for at this period there was no separation between Church and State. People were often punished and executed—not because of anything they did, but rather for what they believed. Luther was one of the first men to scream from the rooftops that this was wrong. This picture by Raphael depicts a Roman Catholic Cardinal—then men responsible for enforcing the Church’s doctrines.



know how to further its cause except by force, just as the brute beasts do. For even in secular affairs force can be used only after the wrong has been legally condemned. How much less possible is it to act with force in these high, spiritual matters! See, therefore, what fine, shrewd nobles they are. They try to drive out heresy in such a way that they only strengthen the opposition, make themselves odious, and justify the heretics.

Friend, if you would drive out heresy, then you must tear it from the heart and turn men's wills away from it. Force will never accomplish this, but will only strengthen the heresy. God's Word, however, **enlightens** the hearts; and causes heresies and errors perish of themselves.

You see, if the wicked man is to be smitten and converted, it is to be accomplished by the mouth. In short, such princes and tyrants do not know that to fight against heresy is to fight against the devil, who fills men's hearts with error. As Paul says, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."^L Therefore, as long as the devil is not repelled and driven from the heart, it matters as little to him that I destroy his vessels with fire or sword, as if I fought lightning with straw. We have learned this from experience, for although many heretics were **burned**, yet not one has been or will ever be converted thereby.

enlightens

People come to hold true beliefs when God's Word—not brute force—drives out the latent errors which reside in their hearts.

^LEphesians 6:12

burned

In Medieval Europe, many people deemed "heretics" by the Church were burned at the stake. This, according to Luther, is a senseless practice since no amount of torture can change a person's heart.



Spangenberg, Gustav. Luther Making Music in the Circle of His Family. 1875, oil on canvas, Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig.

FAMILY WORSHIP

Luther is playing the instrument, his wife Katie is holding the child, while his good friend, Philip Melancthon, drinks a beer and watches on.

Alas, this world as this deserves such princes, none of whom do their duty. The bishops neglect the Word of God and do not rule souls by it, but rather command the worldly princes to rule them with the sword. In turn, the worldly princes allow usury, theft, adultery, murder, and many other evil works, and themselves do them. Then they allow the bishops to punish their subjects with excommunication. Everything is upside down! What else does the devil have to do on earth! No wonder the land is plunged into suffering and want.



Look Ahead

See TE p. ???.

tyranny

When government overreaches its proper jurisdiction, it becomes tyrannical. At what point these types of governments should be overthrown was one of the preeminent questions in Europe at this period.

no longer

The people of Europe were beginning to get their first taste of civil and religious liberty and were no longer content to do whatever these authorities demanded.

Dear princes and lords, be wise and guide yourselves accordingly. God will no longer tolerate it. Men ought not, men cannot, men will not allow your **tyranny** and presumption much longer. The world is **no longer** what it was when you hunted and drove the people like animals. Therefore, leave your outrage and force, and remember to deal justly and let God's Word have its course, as it will, and must, and shall, nor could you ever prevent it. If there is heresy abroad, let it be overcome, as is proper, with God's Word, but if you will keep on brandishing the sword, take heed lest there come one who shall bid you to sheath it, and that, not in God's name. ■■

AFTERWORD

You have now read Luther's famous treatise *On Secular Authority*, and it undoubtedly took you back to a world that you are not familiar with. This is because over the last several hundred years, the societies of western civilization have managed to check the powers of their governments. This has resulted in a degree of personal liberty which was generally unheard of throughout the annals of human history. To whatever extent this remains the case, Martin Luther deserves a large part of the thanks.

His argument, that human governments could not infringe on the consciences of their citizens by commanding them what to believe took wings. His refusal to bow to the secular powers at the Diet of Worms further added creditability to his position and made him an international celebrity. The death knell of despotic and tyrannical governments was beginning to sound and it was Martin Luther who was ringing the bell.

In the next chapter you will be hearing from an equally famous Reformer—a man by the name of John Calvin. Really, it is impossible to state who had a more profound impact on the modern world—he or Luther. Arguments could be made for both. What is beyond dispute, however, is that they disagreed on the amount of

power which should reside in human governments. As we have seen, Luther's great concern was to set up boundaries for magistrates, like a referee draws lines around a sporting event. He was essentially saying to his government, "If you step over these lines, you are out of bounds."

Calvin, on the other hand, was asking a different question altogether. He wanted to know—not how much freedom governments owed their citizens, but rather how much fidelity citizens owed their governments. In other words, while Luther focused on the nobility of man who has been made in God's image, Calvin focused on the majesty of God who has ordained human governments for our peace.

These two positions will be held in tension for the next few centuries. On the one hand, men will feel the duty they owe to their governments. On the other, they will feel the duty they owe to their consciences. Eventually, it will be impossible to remain faithful to both. Revolutions will transpire, blood will spill, and new generations will seek out political and religious liberty on the shores of a distant land called America.

[HISTORY HIGHLIGHTS]

◆ Precious Cargo (Architecture)

The Renaissance was a cultural movement in Europe which sought to resurrect the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome through an earnest study of their literature. The extent to which the Europeans cherished these classical texts can be observed in the construction of Biblioteca Marciana, the largest library of its kind, and home to the most formidable collection of classical texts in the world, priceless illuminated manuscripts, and the lone surviving copies of several famous scores of music including operas by Francesco Cavalli and sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti. Construction of this edifice began in 1536—the same year Calvin finished his famous book *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.



◆ Great Idea: Human Governments

Since the dawn of time, humanity has almost universally concluded that governments are necessary to maintain order so that society can at least have a chance to flourish. As you read Luther, continue to ask yourself, “What are the key marks of a healthy government, and what are the signs that a government has become bad, tyrannical, or evil”?



The interior of the Sansovino Hall, the Marciana Library, Venice, 1855, by Carl Friedrich Heinrich Werner (1808-1894)

