

WHETHER SOLDIERS, TOO, CAN BE SAVED

1526

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Revised by Robert C. Schultz

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether soldiers could be Christians and continue in their profession was the subject of a conversation between Luther and Assa von Kram in Wittenberg in July, 1525. The occasion of the conversation was related to the recent assumption of the throne of Electoral Saxony by Prince John.¹

Von Kram, a counselor of Duke Ernst of Braunschweig-Lüneberg and a professional soldier,² appears to have been troubled in conscience and unable to reconcile his confession of the Christian faith with his profession. He and others urged Luther to publish the views the Reformer apparently had shared with them.³ Luther consented,⁴ but by January, 1526, he had not yet done so and had to be reminded of his promise by von Kram.⁵ It is not clear when Luther began to write the treatise, but by October, 1526, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* was being printed. Its publication, however, was inexplicably delayed,⁶ and although copies were available before the last day of 1526,⁷ the title page bore the date January 5, 1527.

The question of whether Christians might bear arms and be professional soldiers was not simply a conversational or theoretical matter. The Reformation, both in its intellectual and socio-political expression, had called the whole structure of medieval society, beliefs, and practices into question. It raised questions for which answers had to be found not in the solitude of meditation and reflection, but in the crucible of events. One of these practices was the matter of warfare.

Following the defeat of King Francis I of France⁸ by Charles V in January, 1526, the emperor urged Catholic rulers to exterminate the Lutheran heresy.⁹ In July of the previous year Duke George of Ducal Saxony¹⁰ joined in an alliance with Albrecht of Mainz,¹¹ Joachim of Brandenburg, Eric of Braunschweig/Calenberg, and Henry of Braunschweig/Wolfenbüttel for this very purpose.¹² This alliance had its effect upon evangelical rulers, who joined the alliance formed between Electoral Saxony and Hesse at Torgau in 1526. In the meantime, however, these alliances were overshadowed by new threats from the Turks, who defeated King Louis II of Bohemia and Hungary at Mohacs on August 29, 1526.

The Anabaptists and others to the right of Luther took the position that a Christian could not bear arms under any circumstances.¹³ Luther did not agree with this view, nor did the evangelical princes.

In *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* Luther affirms the legitimacy of the military profession. He identifies it with the divine institution of the sword to punish evil, protect the good, and preserve peace. Luther candidly admits that the military calling can be abused, but misuse by no means invalidates its legitimacy and function. In developing this basic thesis Luther discusses how a soldier must execute his God-given office.

¹ Elector Frederick the Wise had died on May 5, 1525. From July 13 to 16 the new ruler was in Wittenberg to receive the homage of his subjects there. Cf. *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, XXV (1928), 74.

² His last service was in the emperor's army during the Italian campaign of 1528. Cf. *BG* 7, 384.

³ See p. 93.

⁴ See p. 93.

⁵ Perhaps at the baptism of Gabriel Zwilling's son, Luther's godchild, in Torgau. Cf. p. 137, and *WA* 19, 616.

⁶ Cf. *MA*³ 5, 426.

⁷ On January 1, 1527, Luther sent a copy of the book to Michael Stiefel. *WA*, Br 4, 152.

⁸ Emperor Charles forced Francis, who was his prisoner, to agree to aid the empire against Turks and heretics as a condition of his release. See Article XXVI of *The Treaty of Madrid, 14 January 1526* in B. J. Kidd (ed.), *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation*, No. 86, p. 180.

⁹ In March, 1526, Charles dispatched letters to Catholic princes of the empire in which he called for a prompt, thorough extermination of the "seductive, damnable, Lutheran doctrine which has caused so much murder, mayhem, blasphemy, and destruction." Cf. *BG* 7, 385. For the text of the letter to Duke Henry of Braunschweig/Wolfenbüttel, see C. Gotthold Neudecker (ed.), *Urkunden aus der Reformationszeit* (Cassel, 1836), I, 10–14.

¹⁰ George, the brother of Frederick the Wise, was an implacable foe of Luther and of the Reformation.

¹¹ The same archbishop of Mainz whose sale of indulgences prompted Luther to post his *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517.

¹² This alliance was concluded on July 19, 1525, within a week of Luther's original conversation with von Kram. Cf. Kidd, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

¹³ Typical of this position is the statement of Felix Mantz (*ca.* 1500–1527), the Zurich Anabaptist, "A Christian will not wield the sword, nor will he resist evil." *BG* 7, 384.

First, Luther deals with the question of fighting against overlords, i.e., the legitimate government. To do this is to rebel against the order instituted by God. The Reformer is quite aware that there are rulers who distort, abuse, and debase their office, nonetheless, their misconduct cannot harm men's souls.

Second, Luther treats the question of whether a soldier may fight in a war in which equals war against equals. Here he enunciates the principle of self-defense. A ruler is charged by God to defend and protect his people when they are attacked, and to do this he needs soldiers who serve him because God has appointed him to be their ruler. At the same time, however, Luther cautions that a soldier must not trust in the justness of the cause for which he fights. Confidence and trust must be in God, who alone gives victory.

Finally, the question of whether soldiers may participate in wars waged by rulers against their subjects is treated. Here Luther elaborates upon his position that such action is justified in the event of rebellion—and it is obvious that the memory of the Peasants' War is still fresh in his mind. But Luther reminds his readers that lords and rulers, even the emperor himself, are, ultimately, subjects of God. He does not give, as it were, a military *carte blanche* to those in authority. In summary, then, the soldier's duty is to exercise his legitimate and divinely appointed office in the service of God.

The German text, *Ob Kriegesleute auch in seligem Stande sein können*, is given in *WA* 19, (616) 623–662. The translation is a revision of that by Charles M. Jacobs in *PE* 5, 32–74.

R. C. S.

WHETHER SOLDIERS, TOO, CAN BE SAVED

To the worshipful and honorable Assa von Kram, knight, my gracious lord and friend, [from] Martin Luther.

Most honorable and dear sir and friend, grace and peace to you in Christ.

When you were in Wittenberg recently—at the time of the electors entry into the city¹—we talked about men in military service. In the course of the conversation we discussed many matters involving questions of conscience. As a consequence, you and several others asked me to put my opinion into writing and publish it because many soldiers are offended by their occupation itself. Some soldiers have doubts. Others have so completely given themselves up for lost that they no longer even ask questions about God and throw both their souls and their consciences to the winds. I myself have heard some of them say that if they thought too much about these problems, they would never be able to go to war again. One would think that war was such an absorbing matter that they were unable to think about God and their souls. Actually, however, we ought to think most about God and our souls when we are in danger of death.

I agreed to your request and promised to provide this book in order—to the best of my ability—to give the best advice to these weak, timid, and doubting consciences, and so that those who do not care may be better instructed. For whoever fights with a good and well-instructed conscience can also fight well. This is especially true since a good conscience fills a man's heart with courage and boldness. And if the heart is bold and courageous, the fist is more powerful, a man and even his horse are more energetic, everything turns out better, and every happening and deed contributes to the victory which God then gives. On the other hand, a timid and insecure conscience makes the heart fearful. It cannot possibly be otherwise: a bad conscience can only make men cowardly and fearful. This is what Moses says to his Jews, "If you are disobedient, God will make your heart fearful; You shall go out one way against your enemies and flee seven ways before them, and you will have no good fortune" [Deut. 28:20, 25]. Then both man and horse are lazy and clumsy; they lack vigor for the attack, and in the end they are defeated. There are indeed some rough and cynical people in service—they are called daredevils and roughnecks—for whom everything happens accidentally, whether they win or lose. The outcome of the battle is the same for them as for those who have good or bad consciences. They are simply part of the army. They are only the shells and not the true core of the army.

Accordingly, I now send you this opinion of mine, given according to the ability that God has granted me, so that you and others who would like to go to war in such a way that you will not lose God's favor and eternal life may know how to prepare and instruct yourselves. God's grace be with you. Amen.

In the first place, we must distinguish between an occupation and the man who holds it, between a work and the man who does it. An occupation or a work can be good and right in itself and yet be bad and wrong if the man who does the work is evil or wrong or does not do his work properly. The occupation of a judge is a valuable

WA D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, 1883–).
PE Works of Martin Luther. Philadelphia Edition (Philadelphia, 1915–1943).

¹ Cf. p. 89, n. 1.

divine office. This is true both of the office of the trial judge who declares the verdict and the executioner who carries out the sentence.² But when the office is assumed by one to whom it has not been committed or when one who holds it rightly uses it to gain riches or popularity, then it is no longer right or good. The married state is also precious and godly, but there are many rascals and scoundrels in it. It is the same way with the profession or work of the soldier; in itself it is right and godly, but we must see to it that the persons who are in this profession and who do the work are the right kind of persons, that is, godly and upright, as we shall hear.

In the second place, I want you to understand that here I am not speaking about the righteousness that makes men good in the sight of God. Only faith in Jesus Christ can do that; and it is granted and given us by the grace of God alone, without any works or merits of our own, as I have written and taught so often and so much in other places. Rather, I am speaking here about external righteousness which is to be sought in offices and works. In other words, to put it plainly, I am dealing here with such questions as these: whether the Christian faith, by which we are accounted righteous before God, is compatible with being a soldier, going to war, stabbing and killing, robbing and burning, as military law requires us to do to our enemies in wartime. Is this work sinful or unjust? Should it give us a bad conscience before God? Must a Christian only do good and love, and kill no one, nor do anyone any harm? I say that this office or work, even though it is godly and right, can nevertheless become evil and unjust if the person engaged in it is evil and unjust.

In the third place, it is not my intention to explain here at length how the occupation and work of a soldier is in itself right and godly because I have written quite enough about that in my book *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*.³ Indeed, I might boast here that not since the time of the apostles have the temporal sword and temporal government been so clearly described or so highly praised as by me. Even my enemies must admit this, but the reward, honor, and thanks that I have earned by it are to have my doctrine called seditious and condemned as resistance to rulers.⁴ God be praised for that! For the very fact that the sword has been instituted by God to punish the evil, protect the good, and preserve peace [Rom. 13:1–4; I Pet. 2:13–14] is powerful and sufficient proof that war and killing along with all the things that accompany wartime and martial law have been instituted by God. What else is war but the punishment of wrong and evil? Why does anyone go to war, except because he desires peace and obedience?

Now slaying and robbing do not seem to be works of love. A simple man therefore does not think it is a Christian thing to do. In truth, however, even this is a work of love. For example, a good doctor sometimes finds so serious and terrible a sickness that he must amputate or destroy a hand, foot, ear, eye, to save the body. Looking at it from the point of view of the organ that he amputates, he appears to be a cruel and merciless man; but looking at it from the point of view of the body, which the doctor wants to save, he is a fine and true man and does a good and Christian work, as far as the work itself is concerned. In the same way, when I think of a soldier fulfilling his office by punishing the wicked, killing the wicked, and creating so much misery, it seems an un-Christian work completely contrary to Christian love. But when I think of how it protects the good and keeps and preserves wife and child, house and farm, property, and honor and peace, then I see how precious and godly this work is; and I observe that it amputates a leg or a hand, so that the whole body may not perish. For if the sword were not on guard to preserve peace, everything in the world would be ruined because of lack of peace. Therefore, such a war is only a very brief lack of peace that prevents an everlasting and immeasurable lack of peace, a small misfortune that prevents a great misfortune.

What men write about war, saying that it is a great plague, is all true. But they should also consider how great the plague is that war prevents. If people were good and wanted to keep peace, war would be the greatest plague on earth. But what are you going to do about the fact that people will not keep the peace, but rob, steal, kill, outrage women and children, and take away property and honor? The small lack of peace called war or the sword must set a limit to this universal, worldwide lack of peace which would destroy everyone.

This is why God honors the sword so highly that he says that he himself has instituted it [Rom. 13:1] and does not want men to say or think that they have invented it or instituted it. For the hand that wields this sword and kills with it is not man's hand, but God's; and it is not man, but God, who hangs, tortures, beheads, kills, and fights. All these are God's works and judgments.

² Both officials were called judges (*Richter*). The trial judge was *Mundrichter* ("mouth judge"); the executioner was the *Faust-* or *Scharfrichter* ("fist" or "axe judge").

³ LW 45, 81–129.

⁴ Luther alludes to the frequent charge that the Peasants' War was largely incited by his teaching.

To sum it up, we must, in thinking about a soldier's office, not concentrate on the killing, burning, striking, hitting, seizing, etc. This is what children with their limited and restricted vision see when they regard a doctor as a sawbones who amputates, but do not see that he does this only to save the whole body. So, too, we must look at the office of the soldier, or the sword, with the eyes of an adult and see why this office slays and acts so cruelly. Then it will prove itself to be an office which, in itself, is godly and as needful and useful to the world as eating and drinking or any other work.

There are some who abuse this office, and strike and kill people needlessly simply because they want to. But that is the fault of the persons, not of the office, for where is there an office or a work or anything else so good that self-willed, wicked people do not abuse it? They are like mad physicians who would needlessly amputate a healthy hand just because they wanted to. Indeed, they themselves are a part of that universal lack of peace which must be prevented by just wars and the sword and be forced into peace. It always happens and always has happened that those who begin war unnecessarily are beaten. Ultimately, they cannot escape God's judgment and sword. In the end God's justice finds them and strikes, as happened to the peasants in the revolt.⁵

As proof, I quote John the Baptist, who, except for Christ, was the greatest teacher and preacher of all. When soldiers came to him and asked what they should do, he did not condemn their office or advise them to stop doing their work; rather, according to Luke 3 [:14], he approved it by saying, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." Thus he praised the military profession, but at the same time he forbade its abuse. Now the abuse does not affect the office. When Christ stood before Pilate he admitted that war was not wrong when he said, "If my kingship were of this world, then my servants would fight that I might not be handed over to the Jews" [John 18:36]. Here, too, belong all the stories of war in the Old Testament, the stories of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, Samuel, David, and all the kings of Israel. If the waging of war and the military profession were in themselves wrong and displeasing to God, we should have to condemn Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and all the rest of the holy fathers, kings, and princes, who served God as soldiers and are highly praised in Scripture because of this service, as all of us who have read even a little in Holy Scripture know well, and there is no need to offer further proof of it here.

Perhaps someone will now say that the holy fathers⁶ were in a different position because God had set them apart from the other nations by choosing them as his people, and had commanded them to fight, and that their example is therefore not relevant for a Christian under the New Testament because they had God's command and fought in obedience to God, while we have no command to fight, but rather to suffer, endure, and renounce everything. This objection is answered clearly enough by St. Peter and St. Paul, who both command obedience to worldly ordinances and to the commandments of worldly rulers even under the New Testament [Rom. 13:1–4; I Pet. 2:13–14]. And we have already pointed out that St. John the Baptist instructed soldiers as a Christian teacher and in a Christian manner and permitted them to remain soldiers, enjoining them only not to use their position to abuse people or to treat them unjustly, and to be satisfied with their wages. Therefore even under the New Testament the sword is established by God's word and commandment, and those who use it properly and fight obediently serve God and are obedient to his word.

Just think now! If we gave in on this point and admitted that war was wrong in itself, then we would have to give in on all other points and allow that the use of the sword was entirely wrong. For if it is wrong to use a sword in war, it is also wrong to use a sword to punish evildoers or to keep the peace. Briefly, every use of the sword would have to be wrong. For what is just war but the punishment of evildoers and the maintenance of peace? If one punishes a thief or a murderer or an adulterer, that is punishment inflicted on a single evildoer; but in a just war a whole crowd of evildoers, who are doing harm in proportion to the size of the crowd, are punished at once. If, therefore, one work of the sword is good and right, they are all good and right, for the sword is a sword and not a foxtail⁷ with which to tickle people. Romans 13 [:4] calls the sword "the wrath of God."

As for the objection that Christians have not been commanded to fight and that these examples are not enough, especially because Christ teaches us not to resist evil but rather suffer all things [Matt. 5:39–42], I have already said all that needs to be said on this matter in my book *Temporal Authority*.⁸ Indeed, Christians do not fight and have no worldly rulers among them. Their government is a spiritual government, and, according to the

⁵ Luther is referring to the defeat and punishment of the peasants in 1525.

⁶ I.e., the biblical patriarchs and rulers.

⁷ *Fuchsschwantz*; cf. p. 76, n. 36.

⁸ Cf. p. 31, n. 31.

Spirit, they are subjects of no one but Christ. Nevertheless, as far as body and property are concerned, they are subject to worldly rulers and owe them obedience. If worldly rulers call upon them to fight, then they ought to and must fight and be obedient, not as Christians, but as members of the state and obedient subjects. Christians therefore do not fight as individuals or for their own benefit, but as obedient servants of the authorities under whom they live. This is what St. Paul wrote to Titus when he said that Christians should obey the authorities [Titus 3:1]. You may read more about this in my book *Temporal Authority*.

That is the sum and substance of it. The office of the sword is in itself right and is a divine and useful ordinance, which God does not want us to despise, but to fear, honor, and obey, under penalty of punishment, as St. Paul says in Romans 13 [:1–5]. For God has established two kinds of government among men. The one is spiritual; it has no sword, but it has the word, by means of which men are to become good and righteous, so that with this righteousness they may attain eternal life. He administers this righteousness through the word, which he has committed to the preachers. The other kind is worldly government, which works through the sword so that those who do not want to be good and righteous to eternal life may be forced to become good and righteous in the eyes of the world. He administers this righteousness through the sword. And although God will not reward this kind of righteousness with eternal life, nonetheless, he still wishes peace to be maintained among men and rewards them with temporal blessings. He gives rulers much more property, honor, and power than he gives to others so that they may serve him by administering this temporal righteousness. Thus God himself is the founder, lord, master, protector, and rewarder of both kinds of righteousness. There is no human ordinance or authority in either, but each is a divine thing entirely.

Since, then, there is no doubt that the military profession is in itself a legitimate and godly calling and occupation, we will now discuss the persons who are in it and the use they make of their position, for it is most important to know who is to use this office and how he is to use it. And here we have to face the fact that it is impossible to establish hard and fast rules and laws in this matter. There are so many cases and so many exceptions to any rule that it is very difficult or even impossible to decide everything accurately and equitably. This is true of all laws; they can never be formulated so certainly and so justly that cases do not arise which deserve to be made exceptions. If we do not make exceptions and strictly follow the law we do the greatest injustice of all, as the heathen author Terence has said, “The strictest law is the greatest injustice.”⁹ And Solomon teaches in Ecclesiastes [7:16; 10:1] that we should not carry justice to an extreme and at times should not seek to be wise.¹⁰

Let me give an example. In the recent rebellion of the peasants there were some who were involved against their will.¹¹ These were especially people who were well-to-do, for the rebellion struck at the rich, as well as the rulers, and it may fairly be assumed that no rich man favored the rebellion. In any case, some were involved against their will. Some yielded under this pressure, thinking that they could restrain this mad mob and that their good advice would, to some extent, prevent the peasants from carrying out their evil purpose and doing so much evil. They thought that they would be doing both themselves and the authorities a service. Still others became involved with the prior consent and approval of their lords, whom they consulted in advance. There may have been other similar cases.¹² For no one can imagine all of them, or take them all into account in the law.

Here is what the law says, “All rebels deserve death, and these three kinds of men were apprehended among the rebellious crowd, in the very act of rebellion.” What shall we do to them? If we allow no exceptions and let the law take its strict course, they must die just like the others, who are guilty of deliberate and intentional rebellion, although some of the men of whom we speak were innocent in their hearts and honestly tried to serve the authorities. Some of our knightlets,¹³ however, refused to make such exceptions, especially if the man involved was rich. They thought they could take their property by saying, “You also were in the mob. You must die.” In this way they have committed a great injustice to many people and shed innocent blood, made widows and orphans, and taken their property besides.¹⁴ And yet they call themselves “nobles.” Nobles indeed! The

⁹ Cf. *Self-Tormentor (Heautontimorumenos)*, scene 4, 1. 48, and Cicero, *On Moral Obligation (de officiis)*, 1, 10.

¹⁰ During 1526 Luther was doing extensive work in the book of Ecclesiastes. Cf. *MA*³ 5, 407, note to p. 178.

¹¹ Cf. pp. 54, 76–77.

¹² See pp. 54, 76–77.

¹³ See p. 82, n. 46.

¹⁴ For Luther’s opinion on the way rulers dealt with defeated peasant rebels, see p. 84.

excrement of the eagle can boast that it comes from the eagle's body even though it stinks and is useless; and so these men can also be of the nobility.¹⁵ We Germans are and remain Germans, that is, swine and senseless beasts.

Now I say that in cases like the three kinds mentioned above, the law ought to yield and justice take its place. For the law matter of factly says, "Rebellion is punishable with death; it is the *crimen lese maiestatis*, a sin against the rulers."¹⁶ But justice says, "Yes, dear law, it is as you say; but it can happen that two men do similar acts with differing motives in their hearts. Judas, for example, kissed Christ in the garden. Outwardly this was a good work; but his heart was evil and he used a good work, which Christ and his disciples at other times did for one another with good hearts, to betray his Lord [Matt. 26:49]. Here is another example: Peter sat down by the fire with the servants of Annas and warmed himself with the godless, and that was not good [Luke 22:55]. Now if we were to apply the law strictly, Judas would have to be a good man and Peter a rascal; but Judas' heart was evil and Peter's was good; therefore justice in this case must correct the law.

Therefore justice not only acquits those who were among the rebels with good intentions, but considers them worthy of double grace. They are just like the godly man, Hushai the Archite, who, acting under David's orders, joined and served the rebellious Absalom with the intention of helping David and restraining Absalom, as it is all finely written in II Samuel 15 [:32–37] and 16 [:16–19]. Outwardly considered, Hushai, too, was a rebel with Absalom against David; but he earned great praise and everlasting honor before God and all the world. If David had allowed Hushai to be condemned as a rebel, it would have been just as praiseworthy a deed as those which our princes and knightlets are now doing to equally innocent people, yes, even to people who have deserved good.

In Greek this virtue, or wisdom, which can and must guide and moderate the severity of law according to cases, and which judges the same deed to be good or evil according to the difference of the motives and intentions of the heart, is called *epieikeia*; in Latin it is *aequitas*, and *Billichkeit*¹⁷ in German. Now because law must be framed simply and briefly, it cannot possibly embrace all the cases and problems. This is why the judges and lords must be wise and pious in this matter and mete out reasonable justice, and let the law take its course, or set it aside, accordingly. The head of a household makes a law for his servants, telling them what they are to do on this day or that; that is the law, and the servant who does not keep it must take his punishment. But now one of them may be sick, or be otherwise hindered from keeping the law through no fault of his own; then the law is suspended, and anyone who would punish his servant for that kind of neglect of duty would have to be a mad lord of the house. Similarly, all laws that regulate men's actions must be subject to justice, their mistress, because of the innumerable and varied circumstances which no one can anticipate or set down.

So then, we have this to say about people who live under military law or who are involved in fighting a war. First, war may be made by three kinds of people. An equal may make war against his equal, that is, neither of the two persons is the vassal or subject of the other even though one may be less great or glorious or mighty than the other. Or an overlord may fight against his subject. Or a subject may fight against his overlord. Let us take the third case. Here is what the law says, "No one shall fight or make war against his overlord; for a man owes his overlord obedience, honor, and fear" (Romans 13 [:1–7]). If you chop over your head, the chips fall in your eyes.¹⁸ And Solomon says, "If you throw a stone into the air, it will land on your own head."¹⁹ That is the law in a nutshell. God himself has instituted it and men have accepted it, for it is not possible both to obey and resist, to be subject and not put up with their lords.

But we have already said that justice ought to be the mistress of law, and where circumstances demand it, guide the law, or even command and permit men to act against it. Therefore the question here is whether a situation can ever develop in which it is just for people to act against this law, to be disobedient to rulers and fight against them, depose them, or put them in bonds.

There is a vice in us men which is called fraud, that is, deception or trickery. If this vice of ours discovers that justice is superior to law, as has been said, then it becomes a foe of the law and spends day and night looking for some way to sell itself in the marketplace under the name and appearance of justice. When it succeeds, law comes to nothing and fraud becomes the sweet darling that does everything it ought to do. This is how we get the

¹⁵ An untranslatable play on the words *Adel* ("nobility") and *Adeler* ("eagle").

¹⁶ Under the Roman and feudal law it was an offense against the person of the ruler.

¹⁷ *Billigkeit* in modern German.

¹⁸ cf. Thiele, *Luthers Sprichwörtersammlung*, No. 29.

¹⁹ Prov. 26: 27.

proverb which says, “*Inventa lege, inventa est fraus legis*,” “As soon as a law goes into effect, Mistress Fraud finds a loophole.”²⁰

Because they knew nothing of God, the heathen did not know that temporal government is God’s ordinance (they thought of it as the fortunate creation of men) and therefore they jumped right in and thought that it was not only right, but also praiseworthy, to depose, kill, and expel worthless and wicked rulers. This is why the Greeks, in public laws, promised jewels and gifts to tyrannicides, that is, to those who stab or otherwise murder a tyrant.²¹ In the days of their empire the Romans followed this example very closely and themselves killed almost the majority of their emperors. As a result, in that great empire almost no emperor was ever killed by his enemies, and yet few of them died a natural death in bed. The people of Israel and Judah also killed and destroyed some of their kings.²²

But these examples are not enough for us, for here we are not concerned with what the heathen or the Jews did, but what is the right and the just thing to do, not only before God in the Spirit, but also in the divine external ordinance of temporal government. Suppose that a people would rise up today or tomorrow and depose their lord or kill him. That certainly could happen if God decrees that it should, and the lords must expect it. But that does not mean that it is right and just for the people to do it. I have never known of a case in which this was a just action, and even now I cannot imagine any. The peasants who rebelled claimed that the lords would not allow the gospel to be preached and that they robbed the poor people²³ and, therefore, the lords had to be overthrown. I answered this by saying that although the lords did wrong in this, it would not therefore be just or right to do wrong in return, that is, to be disobedient and destroy God’s ordinance, which is not ours to do.²⁴ On the contrary, we ought to suffer wrong, and if a prince or lord will not tolerate the gospel, then we ought to go into another realm where the gospel is preached, as Christ says in Matthew 10 [:23], “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.”²⁵

It is only right that if a prince, king, or lord becomes insane, he should be deposed and put under restraint, for he is not to be considered a man since his reason is gone. “That is true,” you say, “and a raving tyrant is also insane; he is to be considered as even worse than an insane man, for he does much more harm.” It will be a little difficult for me to respond to that statement, for that argument seems very impressive and seems to be in agreement with justice and equity. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that madmen and tyrants are not the same. A madman can neither do nor tolerate anything reasonable, and there is no hope for him because the light of reason has gone out. A tyrant, however, may do things that are far worse than the insane man does, but he still knows that he is doing wrong. He still has a conscience and his faculties. There is also hope that he may improve and permit someone to talk to him and instruct him and follow this advice. We can never hope that an insane man will do this for he is like a clod or a stone. Furthermore, such conduct has bad results or sets a bad example. If it is considered right to murder or depose tyrants, the practice spreads and it becomes a commonplace thing arbitrarily to call men tyrants who are not tyrants, and even to kill them if the mob takes a notion to do so. The history of the Roman people shows us how this can happen. They killed many a fine emperor simply because they did not like him or he did not do what they wanted, that is, let them be lords and make him their fool. This happened to Galba, Pertinax, Gordian, Alexander, and others.²⁶

We dare not encourage the mob very much. It goes mad too quickly; and it is better to take ten ells²⁷ from it than to allow it a handsbreadth, or even a fingersbreadth in such a case. And it is better for the tyrants to wrong them a hundred times than for the mob to treat the tyrant unjustly but once. If injustice is to be suffered, then it is better for subjects to suffer it from their rulers than for the rulers to suffer it from their subjects. The mob neither has any moderation nor even knows what moderation is. And every person in it has more than five tyrants hiding in him. Now it is better to suffer wrong from one tyrant, that is, from the ruler, than from unnumbered tyrants, that is, from the mob.

²⁰ Cf. Wander (ed.), *Deutsches Sprichwörter Lexikon*, III, “List,” No. 287.

²¹ August Pauly and Georg Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (2nd ed.), VII (1890), 1810.

²² Cf. I Kings 15:25–29; 16:8–10; and II Kings 9:27–28.

²³ See the complaints presented by the peasants in *The Twelve Articles*, pp. 10–16.

²⁴ See p. 25.

²⁵ For Luther’s discussion on this point, see p. 37.

²⁶ These emperors were deposed in revolutions by the army; Galba in A.D. 69; Pertinax, 193; Gordian, 244; and Alexander, 235.

²⁷ The ell, used chiefly for measuring cloth, varied in length from thirty-seven to forty-eight inches.

It is said that years ago the Swiss slew their overlords and made themselves free,²⁸ and the Danes have recently driven out their king.²⁹ In both cases their subjects were driven to do this by the intolerable tyranny which they suffered at the hands of these rulers. However, as I said above, I am not discussing here what the heathen do or have done, or anything that resembles their examples and history, but what one ought to do and can do with a good conscience. That is the course of action that makes us certain that what we are doing is not wrong in God's sight. I know well enough and I have read in not a few history books of subjects deposing and exiling or killing their rulers. The Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans all did this and God permitted it and even let these nations grow and prosper in spite of it. However, the final outcome was always tragic. The Jews were finally conquered and their nation destroyed by the Assyrians.³⁰ The Greeks were defeated by King Philip.³¹ And the Roman nation was conquered by the Goths and the Lombards.³² As a matter of fact, the Swiss have paid and are still paying for their own rebellion with great bloodshed, and one can easily predict what the final outcome will be.³³ The Danes, too, have not yet survived their rebellion.³⁴ I feel that there can be no stable government unless a nation respects and honors its rulers. The Persians, the Tartars, and others like them are good examples of this. They were not only able to preserve their independence against the full power of the Romans, but they ultimately destroyed the Romans and many other nations.³⁵

My reason for saying this is that God says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" [Rom. 12:19]. He also says, "Judge not" [Matt. 7:1]. And the Old Testament strictly and frequently forbids cursing rulers or speaking evil about them. Exodus 23 [22:28] says, "You shall not curse the prince of your people." Paul, in I Timothy 2 [:1–2], teaches Christians to pray for their rulers, etc. Solomon in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes³⁶ repeatedly teaches us to obey the king and be subject to him. Now no one can deny that when subjects set themselves against their rulers, they avenge themselves and make themselves judges. This is not only against the ordinance and command of God, who reserves to himself the authority to pass judgment and administer punishment in these matters, but such actions are also contrary to all natural law and justice. This is the meaning of the proverbs, "No man ought to judge his own case,"³⁷ and, "The man who hits back is in the wrong."³⁸

²⁸ The struggles of the Swiss to gain their freedom began with their protest in 1291 against the lords' violation of the traditional laws. This protest became a war against the Hapsburgs of Austria, in which the Swiss—who lived in a small part of present-day Switzerland—won their freedom. In 1401 the people of Appenzell and the city of St. Gallen banded together to oppose what they considered as the attempt of the abbot of the St. Gallen monastery to impose new duties and taxes beyond those traditionally required. They were defeated in 1408. In 1489 the peasants of the city of Zurich revolted and the peasants of St. Gallen again joined the revolt. The peasant wars of the sixteenth century first broke out in Switzerland in 1513 and spread from there to southern Germany. In defending the legality of their struggle the peasants appealed to the original war of freedom at the close of the thirteenth century. See Franz, *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, pp. 3–9.

²⁹ King Christian II of Denmark, who ruled Scandinavia from 1513 to 1523, made efforts to introduce the Reformation there as early as 1520. Karlstadt spent some time there in 1521, and the king apparently even sought to have Luther come to Denmark at that time. In 1523, however, Christian was driven out and fled to Germany. He spent some time in Wittenberg with the elector, who was his uncle, before settling permanently in his imperial court; Charles V was his brother-in-law. During his stay in Wittenberg he showed great enthusiasm for the Reformation, apparently in the hope of gaining the support of the Protestant princes for his attempt to regain the throne. In any case, he renounced the Reformation when it seemed that this step would help him gain the emperor's support. Luther was apparently unaware of his duplicity. It is interesting that although the opposition to Christian II was led by clergy who were loyal to Rome, his successor, King Frederick I, was a supporter of the Reformation and established it in Denmark. See Julius Köstlin, *Martin Luther. Sein Leben und Schriften*, ed. and rev. by Gustav Kawerau (5th ed.; 2 vols.; Berlin: Alexander Duncker, 1903), I, 625–627.

³⁰ Luther apparently is referring to the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians in 722–721 B.C. (II Kings 17:6).

³¹ The Macedonians under Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, defeated the Greeks in the battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C.

³² The Lombard invasion of Italy began in the second half of the sixth century A.D.

³³ Protestant forces were defeated by the Catholics at the battle of Kappel, October 11, 1531. The result was a division among the Swiss.

³⁴ Christian II had written Luther as late as May 20, 1525, that he expected a popular movement to restore him to the throne. WA, Br 3, 503–504.

³⁵ Cf. p. 105.

³⁶ E.g., Prov. 24:21 and Eccles. 10:20.

³⁷ Cf. Wander (ed.), *Deutsches Sprichwörter Lexikon*, III, "Niemand," No. 55.

³⁸ Cf. p. 25, n. 20.

Now perhaps you will say, “How can anyone possibly endure all the injustice that these tyrants inflict on us? You allow them too much opportunity to be unjust, and thus your teaching only makes them worse and worse. Are we supposed to permit everyone’s wife and child, body and property to be so shamefully treated and always to be in danger? If we have to live under these conditions, how can we ever begin to live a decent life?” My reply is this: My teaching is not intended for people like you who want to do whatever you think is good and will please you. Go ahead! Do whatever you want! Kill all your lords! See what good it does you! My teaching is intended only for those who would like to do what is right. To these I say that rulers are not to be opposed with violence and rebellion, as the Romans, the Greeks, the Swiss, and the Danes have done; rather, there are other ways of dealing with them.

In the first place, if you see that the rulers think so little of their souls salvation that they rage and do wrong, what does it matter to you if they ruin your property, body, wife, and child? They cannot hurt your soul, and they do themselves more harm than they do you because they damn their own souls and that must result in the ruin of body and property. Do you think that you are not already sufficiently avenged?

In the second place, what would you do if your rulers were at war and not only your goods and wives and children, but you yourself were broken, imprisoned, burned, and killed for your lord’s sake? Would you slay your lord for that reason? Think of all the good people that Emperor Maximilian³⁹ lost in the wars that he waged in his lifetime. No one did anything to him because of it. And yet, if he had destroyed them by tyranny no more cruel deed would ever have been heard of. Nevertheless, he was the cause of their death, for they were killed for his sake. What is the difference, then, between such a raging tyrant and a dangerous war as far as the many good and innocent people who perish in it are concerned? Indeed, a wicked tyrant is more tolerable than a bad war, as you must admit from your own reason and experience.

I can easily believe that you would like to have peace and good times, but suppose God prevents this by war or tyrants! Now, make up your mind whether you would rather have war or tyrants, for you are guilty enough to have deserved both from God. However, we are the kind of people who want to be scoundrels and live in sin and yet we want to avoid the punishment of sin, and even resist punishment and defend our skin. We shall have about as much success at that as a dog has when he tries to bite through steel.⁴⁰

In the third place, if the rulers are wicked, what of it? God is still around, and he has fire, water, iron, stone, and countless ways of killing. How quickly he can kill a tyrant! He would do it, too, but our sins do not permit it, for he says in Job [34:30], “He permits a knave to rule because of the people’s sins.” We have no trouble seeing that a scoundrel is ruling. However, no one wants to see that he is ruling not because he is a scoundrel, but because of the people’s sin. The people do not look at their own sin; they think that the tyrant rules because he is such a scoundrel—that is how blind, perverse, and mad the world is! That is why things happened the way they did when the peasants revolted. They wanted to punish the sins of the rulers, as though they themselves were pure and guiltless; therefore God had to show them the log in their eye so they would forget about the speck in another man’s eye [Matt. 7:3–5].

In the fourth place, the tyrants run the risk that, by God’s decree, their subjects may rise up, as has been said, and kill them or expel them. For here we are giving instruction to those who want to do what is right, and they are very few. The great multitude remain heathen, godless, and un-Christian; and these, if God so decrees, wrongfully rise up against the rulers and create disaster, as the Jews and Greeks and Romans often did. Therefore you have no right to complain that our doctrine gives the tyrants and rulers security to do evil; on the contrary, they are certainly not secure. We teach, to be sure, that they ought to be secure, whether they do good or evil. However, we can neither give them this security nor guarantee it for them, for we cannot compel the multitude to follow our teaching if God does not give us grace. We teach what we will, and the world does what it wills. God must help, and we must teach those who are willing to do what is good and right so that they may help hold the multitude in check. The lords are just as secure because of our teaching as they would be without it. Unfortunately, your complaint is unnecessary, since most of the crowd does not listen to us. The preservation of the rulers whom God

³⁹ Maximilian I, Holy Roman emperor from 1493 to 1519, was extensively occupied with military undertakings during his reign.

⁴⁰ *Das wird uns gelingen wie dem hunde der ynn die stachel beysset.* Our translation is quite literal and interprets *stachel* as “steel.” Luther could be alluding to a dog’s attempting to bite someone in armor. *Stachel* could also mean a spiked dog-collar, and the passage would then be understood in the sense of “chewing nails.” *Stachel* may, however, also mean the quills of a porcupine. In that case, there is a related proverb, “The dog who bites the porcupine gets a bloody mouth.” Cf. Thiele, *Luthers Sprichwörtersammlung*, No. 426.

has appointed is a matter that rests with God and in his hands alone. We experienced this in the peasants' rebellion. Therefore do not be misled by the wickedness of the rulers; their punishment and disaster are nearer than you might wish. Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse,⁴¹ confessed that his life was like the life of a man over whose head a sword hung by a silken thread and under whom a glowing fire was burning.⁴²

In the fifth place, God has still another way to punish rulers, so that there is no need for you to avenge yourselves. He can raise up foreign rulers, as he raised up the Goths against the Romans, the Assyrians against the Jews, etc. Thus there is vengeance, punishment, and danger enough hanging over tyrants and rulers, and God does not allow them to be wicked and have peace and joy. He is right behind them; indeed, he surrounds them and has them between spurs and under bridle. This also agrees with the natural law that Christ teaches in Matthew 7 [12], "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them." Obviously, no father would want his own family to drive him out of the house, kill him, or ruin him because he had done things that were wrong, especially if his family did it maliciously and used force to avenge themselves without previously having brought charges against him before a higher authority. It ought to be just as wrong for any subject to treat his tyrant in such a way.

I must give an example or two of this. Note them well, for you will profit from them. We read of a widow who stood and prayed for her tyrant most devoutly, asking God to give him long life, etc. The tyrant heard it and was astonished because he knew very well that he had done her much harm, and that this was not the usual prayer for tyrants. People do not ordinarily pray such prayers for tyrants, so he asked her why she prayed thus for him. She answered, "I had ten cows when your grandfather lived and ruled. He took two of them and I prayed that he might die and that your father might become lord. This is what happened, and your father took three cows. I prayed again that you might become lord, and that your father might die. Now you have taken four cows, and so I am praying for you, for now I am afraid that your successor will take the last cow and everything that I have."⁴³ The scholars, too, have a parable about a beggar who was full of wounds. Flies got into them and sucked his blood and stung him. Then a merciful man came along and tried to help him by shooing all the flies away from him. But the beggar cried out and said, "What are you doing? Those flies were almost full and did not worry me so much; now the hungry flies will come in their place and will plague me far worse."⁴⁴

Do you understand these fables? There is as great a difference between changing a government and improving it as the distance from heaven to earth. It is easy to change a government, but it is difficult to get one that is better, and the danger is that you will not. Why? Because it is not in our will or power, but only in the will and the hand of God. The mad mob, however, is not so much interested in how things can be improved, but only that things be changed. Then if things are worse, they will want something still different. Thus they get bumblebees instead of flies, and in the end they get hornets instead of bumblebees. They are like the frogs of old who could not put up with a log for lord; instead they got a stork that pecked their heads and devoured them.⁴⁵ A mad mob is a desperate, accursed thing. No one can rule it as well as tyrants, who are like the leash tied to a dog's neck.⁴⁶ If there were a better way to rule over a mob, God would have established some other form of government for them than the sword and tyrants. The presence of the sword shows the nature of the children under it: people who, if they dared, would be desperate scoundrels.

Therefore I advise everyone who wants to act with a good conscience in this matter to be satisfied with the worldly rulers and not to attack them. For worldly rulers cannot harm the soul, as clergy and false teachers do. He should follow the example of the good David, who suffered as much violence from King Saul as you can ever suffer, and yet would not lay a hand upon his king, as he could often have done.⁴⁷ Rather, he commended the

⁴¹ Dionysius (*ca.* 432–367 B.C.) was renowned for conquests which made Syracuse the most powerful of the western Greek cities.

⁴² Cicero, *Tusculan Orations (Tusculanae)*, V, 21.

⁴³ WA 19, 666, reports that this story, without the reference to the cows, is found in John Agricola, *Proverbs* (later than this text), No. 128, and elsewhere.

⁴⁴ Although Luther's version does not correspond in every detail to Aesop's fable of *The Fox and the Hedgehog*, this story is undoubtedly the source of the illustration. Aristotle, with whose works Luther was well acquainted, quotes the story in *Rhetoric* 2, 20. Cf. also Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jewish People*, 18, 174–175 (VI, 5).

⁴⁵ The story is told by Aesop (*The Frogs and the Stork*) and in Phaedrus, *Fables*, I, 2. Luther was very fond of fables and translated some into German. The text of his translation of this fable, which was published after his death, is found in WA 50, 440–460.

⁴⁶ Cf. Thiele, *Luthers Sprichwörterammlung*, No. 236.

⁴⁷ Cf. I Sam. 24:1–7; 20:6–12.

matter to God, let things go as long as God would have them so, and endured to the end. If war or strife arise against your overlord, leave the fighting and struggling to those who want it. For as we have said, if God does not hold back the crowd, we cannot restrain them. But if you want to do what is right and have a secure conscience, let your weapons and armor lie and do not fight against your lord or tyrant. Rather suffer everything that can happen to you. The crowd that does the fighting, however, will be brought to justice.

“But,” you say, “suppose that a king or lord has given an oath to his subjects to rule according to articles that have been agreed upon and then does not keep the agreement.”⁴⁸ He thereby forfeits his right to rule. It is said that the king of France must rule according to the parlements, and that the king of Denmark must also swear to certain articles, etc.”⁴⁹ Here is my answer: It is right and proper for rulers to govern according to laws and administer them and not to rule arbitrarily. I add, however, that a king does not only promise to keep the law of his land or the articles of election, but God himself commands him to be righteous, and he promises to do so. Well, then, if this king keeps neither God’s law nor the law of the land, ought you to attack him, judge him, and take vengeance on him? Who commanded you to do that? Another ruler would have to come between you, hear both sides, and condemn the guilty party; otherwise you will not escape the judgment of God, who says, “Vengeance is mine” [Rom. 12:19], and again, “Judge not” (Matthew 7 [:1]).

The case of the king of Denmark is an example.⁵⁰ Lübeck and the cities of the sea towns⁵¹ joined with the Danes to depose him.⁵² I shall express my opinion in this matter for the benefit of those who might have a bad conscience about this matter and for those who might want to reconsider and better understand what they have done. Let us assume that the kings really were unjust before God and the world and that law and justice were entirely on the side of the Danes and the Lübeckers. That is one thing. But there is another thing, that is, that the Danes and Lübeckers have acted as judges and overlords of the king, and have punished and avenged the wrong, and thus assumed the right of judgment and vengeance. This raises questions for the conscience. When the case comes before God, he will not ask if the king was unjust and you just, for that has become clear. He will however ask, “You citizens of Denmark and Lübeck, who commanded you to do these acts of punishment and vengeance? Did I command you, or did the emperor, or overlord? If so, prove it by sealed documents.” If they can do so, then they have a good case. If not, God will judge thus, “You rebellious thieves have stolen what belongs to God. You have assumed my office and have maliciously assumed to yourselves the administration of divine vengeance. You are guilty of treason against God.”⁵³ You have invoked my judgment upon yourselves.”

For two completely different things are involved in being unjust and condemning injustice, in law and the execution of law, in justice and the administration of justice. Every man is involved in justice and injustice. However, God alone is lord over justice and injustice, and God alone passes judgment and administers justice. It is God who commits this responsibility to rulers to act in his stead in these matters. Therefore let no one presume to do this, unless he is sure that he has a command from God, or from God’s servants the rulers.

What would become of the world if everyone who was in the right punished everyone who did wrong? The servant would strike his master, the maid her mistress, the children the parents, the pupils the teacher. That would be a fine state of affairs! What need would there be, then, for judges and temporal rulers appointed by God? Let the Danes and Lübeckers consider whether they would think it right for their servants, citizens, and subjects to rebel against them whenever they treated them unjustly. Why, then, do they not do to others as they wish that others would do to them, and not treat others in a way they do not wish to be treated themselves? This is what Christ teaches in Matthew 7 [:12], and the natural law teaches it too.

To be sure, the Lübeckers and the other cities might excuse themselves by saying that they were not the king’s subjects but had dealt with him as enemies dealing with an enemy, as equals dealing with their equal. The poor Danes, however, were his subjects and they rebelled against their ruler without any command from God. And the Lübeckers advised and helped them. Thus they burdened themselves with other men’s sins and have become involved, entangled, and caught in this rebellious disobedience toward both God and man. I will not mention the fact that they also disregarded the emperor’s commands.

⁴⁸ Such an agreement was implicit in the giving and receiving of the feudal oath. Sometimes these conditions were placed in writing, and thus became the primal form of a written constitution.

⁴⁹ For example, Frederick I, who ruled Denmark from 1523 to 1533, had to promise to protect the rights of the nobility.

⁵⁰ Luther is discussing the deposition and exile of Christian II. See p. 106, n. 29.

⁵¹ Luther is referring to the alliance known as the Hanseatic League.

⁵² For details about this alliance, see *BG* 7, 408, n. 1.

⁵³ cf. p. 101, n. 16.

I mention this as an example because we are considering the doctrine that a subject ought not rebel against his ruler. The story of the deposition of the king of Denmark is very significant and serves here as a warning to all others to beware of this example. I hope that the consciences of those who did it may be touched and that some of them may reform and leave their iniquity before God comes and avenges himself on his enemies and those who have robbed him. Not that all of them will care about this! The great multitude, as has been said, does not care about God's word; it is an abandoned crowd and is being made ready for God's wrath and punishment. But I will be satisfied if some take it to heart and do not involve themselves in the deeds of the Danes and Lübeckers; and if they have been involved, I hope they will get out of it and not be a party to the sins of others. Each of us has more than enough of his own sins to answer for.

At this point I shall have to pause and listen to my critics, who cry, "See here, in my opinion you are flattering the princes. Are you now creeping to the cross and seeking pardon? Are you afraid? etc." I just let these bumblebees buzz and fly away. If anyone can do better, let him. I have not undertaken here to preach to the princes and lords. I think, too, that they will not be very happy to receive this flattery and that I will not have ingratiated myself with them, because it jeopardizes their whole class, as you have heard.⁵⁴ Besides, I have said often enough elsewhere, and it is all too true, that the majority of the princes and lords are godless tyrants and enemies of God, who persecute the gospel.⁵⁵ They are my ungracious lords and sirs, and I am not very concerned about that. But I do teach that everyone should know how to conduct himself in this matter of how he ought to act toward his overlord, and should do what God has commanded him. Let the lords look out for themselves and stand on their own feet. God will not forget the tyrants and men of high rank. God is able to deal with them, and he has done so since the beginning of the world.

Moreover, I do not want anyone to think that what I have written here applies only to peasants, as though they were the only ones of lower rank and the nobles were not also subjects. Not at all! What I say about "subjects" is intended for peasants, citizens of the cities, nobles, counts, and princes as well. For all of these have overlords and are the subjects of someone else. A rebellious noble, count, or prince should have his head cut off the same as a rebellious peasant. The one should be treated like the other, and no one will be treated unjustly.

I believe Emperor Maximilian could have sung a pretty little song about rebellious princes and nobles who put their heads together to start a rebellion. And the nobles! How often have they complained and conspired and sought to defy the princes and rebel? Think of the furor the Franconian nobles alone have made about how little they care for the emperor or for their bishops. However, we are not supposed to call these knightlets⁵⁶ rebels or troublemakers, although that is exactly what they were. The peasant, on the other hand, is supposed to stand for it and keep quiet. But unless my mind deceives me, God has punished the rebellious lords and nobles through the rebellious peasants, one scoundrel with another.⁵⁷ Maximilian had to put up with these nobles and could not punish them, though he had to restrain the peasants as long as he lived. The situation in Germany was so critical that I would be willing to wager that if the peasants had not revolted, a rebellion would have broken out among the nobles against the princes and perhaps against the emperor. But now the peasants are the ones who have revolted and they alone have become the villains.⁵⁸ As a result the nobles and the princes get off easy and can wipe their mouths as though they had done nothing wrong.⁵⁹ But God is not deceived [Gal. 6:7]; he has used these events to warn the nobles that they, too, should learn to obey their rulers. Let this be my flattery of princes and lords!

Here you say, "Are we, then, to put up with a ruler who would be such a scoundrel that he lets land and people go to ruin?" To say it as the nobles would, "Devil! St. Virus' Dance! Pestilence! St. Anthony! St. Quirinus!"⁶⁰ I am a nobleman and am I supposed to allow my wife and children and body and property to be so shamefully ruined?" I reply: Listen here! I am not trying to teach you anything. Go ahead and do what you please!

⁵⁴ Cf. pp. 105–107.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523). LW 45, 84, 109–110; cf. also in this volume, p. 19.

⁵⁶ Cf. p. 82, n. 46.

⁵⁷ Cf. p. 41, n. 53.

⁵⁸ Literally, "the only black ones."

⁵⁹ Cf. Thiele, *Luthers Sprichwörtersammlung*, No. 315. Cf. Prov. 21:20.

⁶⁰ These expletive invocations of the saints call upon them to afflict with the malady whose cure popular piety attributed to them: St. Vitus, epilepsy; St. Anthony, an inflamed condition of the skin; and St. Quirinus, the plague. Cf. Helen Roeder, *Saints and Their Attributes* (London, New York, Toronto, 1955), pp. 32, 62, 102, 115, 221.

You are smart enough. You do not need me! I do not have to worry about anything except watching while you sing this proud little song to the bitter end.⁶¹

To the others, who would like to keep their conscience clear, we have this to say: God has thrown us into the world, under the power of the devil. As a result, we have no paradise here. Rather, at any time we can expect all kinds of misfortune to body, wife, child, property, and honor. And if there is one hour in which there are less than ten disasters or an hour in which we can even survive, we ought to say, “How good God is to me! He has not sent every disaster to me in this one hour.” How is that possible? Indeed, as long as I live under the devil’s power, I should not have one happy hour. That is what we teach our people. Of course, you may do something else. You may build yourself a paradise where the devil cannot get in so that you need not expect the rage of any tyrant. We will watch you! Actually things go too well for us. We are too happy and content.⁶² We do not know how good God is to us and we believe neither that God takes care of us nor that the devil is so evil. We want to be nothing but wicked scoundrels and yet receive nothing but good from God.

That is enough on the first point, that is, that war and uprisings against our superiors cannot be right. However, people do and are in danger of doing this every day, just as they do everything else that is evil and unjust. But when it comes from God and he does not prevent it, the final outcome is not good and the people involved suffer, even though such rebels seem to have good fortune for a while.

Now we will move on to the second point and discuss the question whether equals may wage war against equals. I would have thin understood as follows: It is not right to start a war just because some silly lord has gotten the idea into his head. At the very outset I want to say that whoever starts a war is in the wrong. And it is only right and proper that he who first draws his sword is defeated, or even punished, in the end. This is what has usually happened in history. Those who have started wars have lost them, and those who fought in self-defense have only seldom been defeated. Worldly government has not been instituted by God to break the peace and start war, but to maintain peace and to avoid war. Paul says in Romans 13 [:4] that it is the duty of the sword to protect and punish, to protect the good in peace and to punish the wicked with war. God tolerates no injustice and he has so ordered things that warmongers must be defeated in war. As the proverb says, “No one has ever been so evil that he does not meet someone more evil than he is.”⁶³ And in Psalm 68 [:30] God has the psalmist sing of him, “*Dissipat gentes, quae bella volunt,*” that is, “He scatters the peoples who delight in war.”

Beware, therefore; God does not lie! Take my advice. Make the broadest possible distinction between what you want to do and what you ought to do, between desire and necessity, between lust for war and willingness to fight. Do not be tempted to think of yourself as though you were the Turkish sultan. Wait until the situation compels you to fight when you have no desire to do so. You will still have more than enough wars to fight and will be able to say with heartfelt sincerity, “How I would like to have peace. If only my neighbors wanted it too!” Then you can defend yourself with a good conscience, for God’s word says, “He scatters the peoples who delight in war.” Look at the real soldiers, those who have played the game of war. They are not quick to draw their sword, they are not contentious; they have no desire to fight. But when someone forces them to fight, watch out! They are not playing games. Their sword is tight in the sheath, but if they have to draw, it does not return bloodless to the scabbard. Those fools who are the first to fight in their thoughts and even make a good start by devouring the world with words and are the first to flash their blades, are also the first to run away and sheathe their swords. The mighty Roman Empire won most of its victories because the Romans were forced to fight; that is, everyone wanted a chance at the Romans to win his spurs at their expense. When the Romans were forced to defend themselves, they set about it vigorously enough! Hannibal, the prince from Africa, hurt them so badly that he almost destroyed them.⁶⁴ But how shall I say it? He started it; he also had to stop it. Courage (from God!) remained with the Romans even when they were losing, and where courage stays, deeds surely follow.⁶⁵ For it is God who does the deeds; he desires peace and is the enemy of those who start wars and break the peace.

I must mention here the example of Duke Frederick, elector of Saxony, for it would be a shame if that wise prince’s sayings were to die with his body.⁶⁶ He had to endure many wicked plots on the part of his neighbors and

⁶¹ Cf. Thiele, *Luthers Sprichwörtersammlung*, Nos. 158–159.

⁶² *Ibid.*, No. 323.

⁶³ Cf. Thiele, *Luthers Sprichwörtersammlung*, No. 51.

⁶⁴ He inflicted severe losses upon the Romans at Lake Trasimeno in the spring of 217 B.C.

⁶⁵ *Wo abet mut bleibt, da folget auch die that gewislich.* WA 19, 646.

⁶⁶ Frederick the Wise, Luther’s sovereign, had died the year before Luther wrote these words. Luther and many others held Frederick in esteem as a man of peace. Cf. *MA*³ 5, 429, note to p. 192.

many others. He had so many reasons to start a war that if some mad prince who loved war had been in his position, he would have started ten wars. But Frederick did not draw his sword. He always responded with reasonable words and almost gave the impression that he was afraid and was running away from a fight. He let the others boast and threaten and yet he held his ground against them. When he was asked why he let them threaten him so, he replied, “I shall not start anything; but if I have to fight, you will see that I shall be the one who decides when it is time to stop.” So although many dogs bared their fangs at him, he was never bitten. He saw that the others were foolish and that he could be indulgent with them. If the king of France had not started the war against Emperor Charles, he would not have been so shamefully defeated and captured.⁶⁷ And now that the Venetians and Italians are setting themselves against the Emperor and starting trouble,⁶⁸ God grant that they must also be the first to have to stop. (Although the emperor is my enemy, I still do not like this kind of injustice.) Let the saying remain true, “God scatters the peoples who delight in war” [Ps. 68:30].

God confirms all this with many excellent examples in the Scriptures. He had his people first offer peace to the kingdoms of the Amorites and Canaanites and would not permit his people to start a war with them. He thereby confirmed this as his principle. But when those kingdoms started the war and forced God’s people to defend themselves, they were completely destroyed [Num. 21:21–30; Deut. 2:26–37]. Self-defense is a proper ground for fighting and therefore all laws agree that self-defense shall go unpunished; and he who kills another in self-defense is innocent in the eyes of all men. But when the people of Israel wanted to start an unnecessary war with the Canaanites, the Israelites were defeated, Numbers 14 [:40–45]. And when Joseph and Azariah wanted to fight to gain honor for themselves, they were beaten [I Mac. 5:55–60]. And Amaziah, king of Judah, wanted to start a war against the king of Israel; but read II Kings 14 [:8–14] and see what happened to him. King Ahab started a war against the Syrians at Bamoth, but lost both the war and his own life, I Kings 22 [:2–40]. And the men of Ephraim intended to devour Jephthah and lost forty-two thousand men [Judg. 12:1–6], and so on. You find that the losers were almost always those who started the war. Even good King Josiah had to be slain because he started a war against the king of Egypt [II Kings 23:29] so that the saying would hold true, “He scatters the peoples who delight in war.” Therefore my countrymen in the Harz Motretains⁶⁹ have a saying, “It is truly said that whoever strikes anyone else will be struck in return.”⁷⁰ Why? Because God rules the world powerfully and leaves no wrong unpunished. He who does wrong will be punished by God, as sure as he lives, unless he repents and makes amends to his neighbor. I believe that even Münzer and his peasants would have to admit this.⁷¹

Let this be, then, the first thing to be said in this matter: No war is just, even if it is a war between equals, unless one has such a good reason for fighting and such a good conscience that he can say, “My neighbor compels and forces me to fight, though I would rather avoid it.” In that case, it can be called not only war, but lawful self-defense, for we must distinguish between wars that someone begins because that is what he wants to do and does before anyone else attacks him, and those wars that are provoked when an attack is made by someone else. The first kind can be called wars of desire; the second, wars of necessity. The first kind are of the devil; God does not give good fortune to the man who wages that kind of war. The second kind are human disasters; God help in them!

Take my advice, dear lords. Stay out of war unless you have to defend and protect yourselves and your office compels you to fight. Then let war come. Be men, and test your armor. Then you will not have to think about war to fight. The situation itself will be serious enough, and the teeth of the wrathful, boasting, proud men who chew nails⁷² will be so blunt that they will scarcely be able to bite into fresh butter.

The reason is that every lord and prince is bound to protect his people and to preserve the peace for them. That is his office; that is why he has the sword, Romans 13 [:4]. This should be a matter of conscience for him. And he should on this basis be certain that this work is right in the eyes of God and is commanded by him. I am not now teaching what Christians are to do, for your government ,does not concern us Christians; but we are rendering you a service and telling you what you are to do before God, in your office of ruler. A Christian is a person to himself; he believes for himself and for no one else. But a lord and prince is not a person to himself, but

⁶⁷ At the battle of Pavia, February 25, 1525, King Francis I was taken captive by the emperor’s forces. Cf. p. 90, n. 8.

⁶⁸ The trouble which Luther speaks of resulted in the sack of Rome by the imperial army in May, 1527, less than a year after the publication of this treatise.

⁶⁹ Mansfeld, which Luther regarded as his hometown, is situated in the Harz Mountains.

⁷⁰ Cf. Wander (ed.), *Deutsches Sprichwörter Lexikon*, IV, “Schlagen,” No. 60.

⁷¹ Münzer and many peasants were executed at the end of the Peasants’ War; see pp. 59–60.

⁷² *Eisensfresser*, literally, “iron-eater.”

on behalf of others. It is his duty to serve them, that is, to protect and defend them. It would indeed be good if he were also a Christian and believed in God, for then he would be saved. However, being a Christian is not princely, and therefore few princes can be Christians; as they say, “A prince is a rare bird in heaven.”⁷³ But even if princes are not Christians, they nevertheless ought to do what is right and good according to God’s outward ordinance. God wants them to do this.

But if a lord or prince does not recognize this duty and God’s commandment and allows himself to think that he is prince, not for his subjects’ sake, but because of his handsome, blond hair as though God had made him a prince to rejoice in his power and wealth and honor, take pleasure in these things, and rely on them. If he is that kind of prince, he belongs among the heathen; indeed, he is a fool. That kind of prince would start a war over an empty nut⁷⁴ and think of nothing but satisfying his own will. God restrains such princes by giving fists to other people, too. There are also people on the other side of the mountain.⁷⁵ Thus one sword keeps the other in the scabbard. However, a sensible prince does not seek his own advantage. He is satisfied if his subjects are obedient. Though his enemies and neighbors boast and threaten and spew out many bad words, he thinks, “Fools always chatter more than wise men;⁷⁶ an empty sack holds many words;⁷⁷ silence is often the best answer.”⁷⁸ Therefore he does not concern himself much about them until he sees that his subjects are attacked or finds the sword actually drawn. Then he defends himself as well as he can, ought, and must. For anyone who is such a coward that he tries to catch every word and evaluate it is like a man who tries to trap the wind in his coat.⁷⁹ And if you want to know what peace or profit he gets out of that, ask him and you will soon find out.

This is the first thing to be said in this matter. The second should be just as carefully observed. Even though you are absolutely certain that you are not starting a war but are being forced into one, you should still fear God and remember him. You should not march out to war saying, “Ah, now I have been forced to fight and have good cause for going to war.” You ought not to think that that justifies anything you do and plunge headlong into battle. It is indeed true that you have a really good reason to go to war and to defend yourself, but that does not give you God’s guarantee that you will win. Indeed, such confidence may result in your defeat—even though you have a just cause for fighting the war—for God cannot endure such pride and confidence except in a man who humbles himself before him and fears him. He is pleased with the man who fears neither man nor devil and is bold and confident, brave and firm against both, if they began the war and are in the wrong. But there is nothing to the idea that this will produce a victory, as though it were our deeds or power that did it. Rather, God wants to be feared and he wants to hear us sing from our hearts a song like this, “Dear Lord, you see that I have to go to war, though I would rather not. I do not trust, however, in the justice of my cause, but in your grace and mercy, for I know that if I were to rely on the justness of my cause and were confident because of it, you would rightly let me fall as one whose fall was just, because I relied upon my being right and not upon your sheer grace and kindness.”

Just listen now to what the heathen say about this, the Greeks and Romans, who knew nothing of God and the fear of God. They thought that it was they who made war and won victories all by themselves. But by experience over a long period of time in which a great and well-armed people was often beaten by a small number of poorly armed people, they had to learn and freely admitted that nothing is more dangerous in war than to be secure and confident. So they concluded that one should never underestimate the enemy, no matter how small he may be; that one should surrender no advantage, no matter how small it may be; that one should neglect no precaution, vigilance, or concern, no matter how small it may be. One should be as careful with everything as one would be if one were weighing gold. Foolish, confident, heedless people accomplish nothing in war, except to do harm. They regarded the words “*non putassem*”—“I did not think of it”—as the most shameful words a soldier could speak. These words indicate that he was one of those secure, confident, careless men, who in one moment, by one step, with one word, can do more damage than ten like him can repair, and then he will say, “Indeed, I did not think of it.”⁸⁰ Prince Hannibal badly defeated the Romans as long as they were confident and secure against him. And history is full of innumerable examples of this kind, just as we see them happening with our own eyes every day.

⁷³ Cf. *ibid.*, I, “*Fürst*,” No. 61; cf. also LW 45, 113.

⁷⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, III, “*Nuss*,” No. 137.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, I, “*Berg*,” No. 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, III, “*Narr*,” No. 879.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, V, “*Wort*,” Nos. 223–224.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, “*Schweigen*,” Nos. 38, 42.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, V, “*Wind*,” Nos. 347–348.

⁸⁰ Cicero, *On Moral Obligation (de officiis)*, I, 23.

The heathen learned this by experience and taught it, but they did not know how to account for it other than to blame it on Fortune. They felt that they had to be afraid of Fortune. However, as I have said, the actual cause of this is that God wants to demonstrate through such histories that he wants men to fear him, and that he will not tolerate confidence, contempt, temerity, or security in such things until we learn to receive from his hands all that we can and want to have, as a gift of pure grace and mercy. It is therefore remarkable for a soldier who has a good cause to be confident and discouraged at the same time. How can he fight if he is discouraged? But if he goes into battle with complete confidence, the danger is even greater. This, then, is what he should do: Before God he should be discouraged, fearful, and humble, and commit his cause to him that he may dispose things, not according to our understanding of what is right and just, but according to his kindness and grace. In this way he wins God to his side with a humble, fearful heart. Toward men he should be bold, free, and confident because they are in the wrong, and smite them with a confident and untroubled spirit. Why should we not do for our God what the Romans, the greatest fighters on earth, did for their false god, Fortune, whom they feared? Whenever they did not do this, they fought in great danger and even were badly beaten.

Our conclusion on this point, then, is that war against equals should be waged only when it is forced upon us and then it should be fought in the fear of God. Such a war is forced upon us when an enemy or neighbor attacks and starts the war, and refuses to cooperate in settling the matter according to law or through arbitration and common agreement, or when one overlooks and puts up with the enemy's evil words and tricks, but he still insists on having his own way. I am assuming throughout that I am preaching to those who want to do what is right in God's sight. Those who will neither offer nor consent to do what is right do not concern me. Fearing God means that we do not rely on the justness of our cause, but that we are careful, diligent, and cautious, even in the very smallest details, in so small a thing as a whistle.⁸¹ With all this, however, God's hands are not bound so that he cannot bid us make war against those who have not given us just cause, as he did when he commanded the children of Israel to go to war against the Canaanites. In such a case God's command is necessity enough. However, even such a war should not be fought without fear and care, as God shows in Joshua 3 [7:1–5] when the children of Israel marched confidently against the men of Ai, and were beaten. The same kind of necessity arises if subjects fight at the command of their rulers; for God commands us to obey our rulers [Rom. 13:1], and his command requires that we fight, though this too must be done with fear and humility. We shall discuss this further below.

The third question is whether overlords have the right to go to war with their subjects. We have, indeed, heard above that subjects are to be obedient and are even to suffer wrong from their tyrants. Thus, if things go well, the rulers have nothing to do with their subjects except to cultivate fairness, righteousness, and judgment. However, if the subjects rise up and rebel, as the peasants did recently, then it is right and proper to fight against them. That, too, is what a prince should do to his nobles and an emperor to his princes if they are rebellious and start a war. Only it must be done in the fear of God, and too much reliance must not be placed on being in the right, lest God determine that the lords are to be punished by their subjects, even though the subjects are in the wrong. This has often happened, as we have heard above. For to be right and to do right do not always go together. Indeed, they never go together unless God joins them. Therefore, although it is right that subjects patiently suffer everything and do not revolt, nevertheless, it is not for men to decide whether they shall do so. For God has appointed subjects to care for themselves as individuals, has taken the sword from them, and has put it into the hands of another. If they rebel against this, get others to join them and break loose, and take the sword, then before God they are worthy of condemnation and death.

Overlords, on the other hand, are appointed to be persons who exist for the sake of the community,⁸² and not for themselves alone. They are to have the support of their subjects and are to bear the sword. Compared to his overlord the emperor, a prince is not a prince, but an individual who owes obedience to the emperor, as do all others, each for himself. But when he is seen in relationship to his own subjects he is as many persons as he has people under him and attached to him. So the emperor, too, when compared with God, is not an emperor, but an individual person like all others; compared with his subjects, however, he is as many times emperor as he has people under him. The same thing can be said of all other rulers. When compared to their overlord, they are not rulers at all and are stripped of all authority. When compared with their subjects, they are adorned with all authority.

⁸¹ Cf. Wander (ed.), *Deutsches Sprichwörter Lexikon*, III, "Pfeife," No. 1260.

⁸² *Eine gemeine person*; i.e., one whose person symbolizes the community as a whole.

Thus, in the end, all authority comes from God, whose alone it is; for he is emperor, prince, count, noble, judge, and all else, and he assigns these offices to his subjects as he wills, and takes them back again for himself. Now no individual ought to set himself against the community or attract the support of the community to himself, for in so doing he is chopping over his head, and the chips will surely fall in his eyes.⁸³ From this you see that those who resist their rulers resist the ordinance of God, as St. Paul teaches in Romans 13 [:2]. In I Corinthians 15 [:24] Paul also says that God will abolish all authority when he himself shall reign and return all things to himself.

So much on these three points; now come the questions. Now since no king can go to war alone (any more than he can administer the law courts alone—he must have people who serve him in war just as he must have counselors, judges, lawyers, jailers, executioners, and whatever else is necessary for the administration of justice), the question arises whether a man ought to hire himself out for wages, *dienstgelt* or *mangelt* as they call it, and commit himself to serve the prince as the occasion may demand, as is customary.⁸⁴ To answer this question we must distinguish various types of soldiers.

In the first place, there are some subjects who, even without such an arrangement, are under obligation to aid their overlords with their body and property and to obey their lord's summons. This is especially true of the nobles and of those who hold property granted by charter from the authorities. For the properties held by counts, lords, and nobles were parceled out in ancient times by the Romans and the Roman emperors and were given in fief on the condition that those who possess them should always be armed and ready—the one with this many horses and men, the other with that many, according to the size of their holdings. These fiefs were the wages with which they were hired. This is why they are called fiefs and why these incumbrances still rest upon them. The emperor permits these holdings to be inherited; and this is right and fine in the Roman Empire.⁸⁵ The Turk, it is said, does not allow such inheritances and tolerates no hereditary principality, county, or knights' fee or fief, but assigns and distributes them as, when, and to whom he will. This is why he has such immeasurable wealth and is absolute lord in the land, or rather a tyrant.

The nobles, therefore, should not think that they have their property for nothing, as though they had found it or won it by gambling. The encumbrance on it and the feudal rents show whence and why they have it, namely, as a loan from the emperor or the prince. Therefore they ought not use it to finance their own ostentatious display and riotous conduct, but be armed and prepared for war to defend the land and to maintain the peace. Now if they complain that they must keep horses and serve the princes and lords while others have peace and quiet, I reply: Dear sirs, let me tell you something. You have your pay and your fief, and you are appointed to this office and are well paid for it. But do not others also have to work hard enough to maintain their little properties? Or are you the only ones who have work to do? And your office⁸⁶ is seldom called for, but others must do their duty every day. If you are not willing to do this or think it burdensome or unjust, then give up your fief. It will be easy to find others who will be glad to accept it and do in return what it requires of them.

Therefore, wise men have divided the work of all men into two categories, *Agriculturam* and *Militiam*, that is, agricultural and military occupations. And this is the natural division. The farmers feed us and the soldiers defend us. Those who have the responsibility of defending are to receive their income and their food from those who have the responsibility of feeding, so that they will be able to defend. Those who have the responsibility of feeding are to be defended by those who have the responsibility of defending, so that they will be able to provide food. The emperor or prince in the land is to supervise both groups and see to it that those who have the responsibility of defending are armed and have mounts, and that those who have the responsibility of feeding honestly try to increase the supply of food. However, he should not tolerate useless people, who neither feed nor defend, but only consume, are lazy, and live in idleness, and drive them out of the land, as do the bees, which sting the drones to death because they do not work and only eat up the honey of the other bees. This is why Solomon, in Ecclesiastes [5:8–9], calls the kings builders who build the land, for that should be their responsibility. But God preserve us Germans! We are not getting any wiser or doing this the right way, but are

⁸³ See p. 103, n. 18.

⁸⁴ The employment of mercenaries was a common practice. Many such soldiers were Germans. *BG* 7, 427, n. 2.

⁸⁵ Luther's understanding of the origins of feudal structures appears to be based on such writings as Peter Andlau's *Libellus de Caesarea Monarchia*, Title 13, first published in 1460 and republished by Joseph Hürbin in *Zeitschrift der Savignystiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Germanische Abteilung*, Vol. XII (1890).

⁸⁶ I.e., the responsibility of military service.

continuing for a while to be consumers, and we let those be feeders and defenders who have the desire for it or cannot evade it.⁸⁷

In Luke 2 [3:14] St. John the Baptist confirms the right of this first class to their pay and to hold fiefs, and says that they rightly do their duty when they help their lord make war and serve him. When the soldiers asked him what they were to do, he answered, “Be content with your wages.” Now if it were wrong for them to take wages, or if their occupation were against God, he could not have let it continue, permitted it, and confirmed it, but, as a godly, Christian teacher, he would have had to condemn it and deter them from it. This is the answer to those who, because of tenderness of conscience—though this is now rare among these people—profess that it is dangerous to take up this occupation for the sake of temporal goods, since it is nothing but bloodshed, murder, and the inflicting of all kinds of suffering upon one’s neighbor, as happens in wartime. These men should inform their consciences that they do not do this from choice, desire, or ill-will, but that this is God’s work and that it is their duty to their prince and their God. Therefore, since it is a legitimate office, ordained by God, they should be paid and compensated for doing it, as Christ says in Matthew 10[:10], “A laborer deserves his wage.”⁸⁸

Of course, it is true that if a man serves as a soldier with a heart that neither seeks nor thinks of anything but acquiring wealth, and if temporal wealth is his only reason for doing it, he is not happy when there is peace and not war. Such a man strays from the path and belongs to the devil, even though he fights out of obedience to his lord and at his call. He takes a work that is good in itself and makes it bad for himself by not being very concerned about serving out of obedience and duty, but only about seeking his own profit. For this reason he does not have a good conscience which can say, “Well, for my part, I would like to stay at home, but because my lord calls me and needs me, I come in God’s name and know that I am serving God by doing so, and that I will earn or accept the pay that is given me for it.” A soldier ought to have the knowledge and confidence that he is doing and must do his duty to be certain that he is serving God and can say, “It is not I that smite, stab, and slay, but God and my prince, for my hand and my body are now their servants.” That is the meaning of the watchwords and battle cries, “Emperor!” “France!” “Luineburg!” “Braunschweig!” This is how the Jews cried against the Midianites, “The sword of God and Gideon!” Judges 7[:20].

Such a greedy man spoils all other good works, too. For example, a man who preaches for the sake of temporal wealth is lost, though Christ says that a preacher shall live from the gospel.⁸⁹ It is not wrong to do things for temporal wealth, for income, wages, and pay are also temporal wealth. If it were wrong, no one should work or do anything to support himself on the ground that it is done for temporal wealth. But to be greedy for temporal wealth and to make a Mammon⁹⁰ of it is always wrong in every office, position, and occupation. Leave out greed and other evil thoughts, and it is not sin to fight in a war. Take your wages for it, and whatever is given you. This is why I said above that the work, in itself, is just and godly, but that it becomes wrong if the person is unjust or uses it unjustly.

A second question: “Suppose my lord were wrong in going to war.” I reply: If you know for sure that he is wrong, then you should fear God rather than men, Acts 4 [5:29], and you should neither fight nor serve, for you cannot have a good conscience before God. “Oh, no,” you say, “my lord would force me to do it; he would take away my fief and would not give me my money, pay, and wages. Besides, I would be despised and put to shame as a coward, even worse, as a man who did not keep his word and deserted his lord in need.” I answer: You must take that risk and, with God’s help, let whatever happens, happen. He can restore it to you a hundredfold, as he promises in the gospel, “Whoever leaves house, farm, wife, and property, will receive a hundredfold,” etc. [Matt. 19:29].

In every other occupation we are also exposed to the danger that the rulers will compel us to act wrongly; but since God will have us leave even father and mother for his sake, we must certainly leave lords for his sake. But if you do not know, or cannot find out, whether your lord is wrong, you ought not to weaken certain obedience for the sake of an uncertain justice; rather you should think the best of your lord, as is the way of love, for “love believes all things” and “does not think evil,” I Corinthians 13 [:4–7]. So, then, you are secure and walk well

⁸⁷ The literature of the period raised frequent complaints about the number of persons who were supported without working. Sebastian Frank expressed the opinion that scarcely a third of the German populace actually worked for a living. Cf. *BG* 7, 424, n. 1, and *MA*³ 5, 430, note to p. 199.

⁸⁸ Cf. Luke 10:7.

⁸⁹ Matt. 10:10; cf. I Cor. 9:14.

⁹⁰ Cf. Mitt, 6:24.

before God. If they put you to shame or call you disloyal, it is better for God to call you loyal and honorable than for the world to call you loyal and honorable. What good would it do you if the world thought of you as a Solomon or a Moses, and in God's judgment you were considered as bad as Saul or Ahab?

The third question: "Can a soldier obligate himself to serve more than one lord and take wages or salary from each?" Answer: I said above that greed is wrong, whether in a good or an evil occupation. Agriculture is certainly one of the best occupations;⁹¹ nonetheless, a greedy farmer is wrong and is condemned before God. So in this case to take wages is just and right, and to serve for wages is also right. But greed is not right, even though the wages for the whole year were less than a gulden.⁹² Again, to take wages and serve for them is right in itself; it does not matter whether the wages come from one, or two, or three, or however many lords, so long as your hereditary lord or prince is not deprived of what is due him and your service to others is rendered with his will and consent. A craftsman may sell his skill to anyone who will have it, and thus serve the one to whom he sells it, so long as this is not against his ruler and his community. In the same way a soldier has his skill in fighting from God and can use it in the service of whoever desires to have it, exactly as though his skill were an art or trade, and he can take pay for it as he would for his work. For the soldier's vocation also springs from the law of love. If anyone needs me and calls for me, I am at his service, and for this I take my wage or whatever is given me. This is what St. Paul says in I Corinthians 9 [:7], "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?" Thereby Paul approves the soldier's right to his salary. If a prince needs and requires another's subject for fighting, the subject, with his own prince's consent and knowledge, may serve and take pay for it.

"But suppose that one of the princes or lords were to make war against the other, and I were obligated to both, but preferred to serve the one who was in the wrong because he has showed me more grace or kindness than the one who was in the right and from whom I get less—what then?" Here is the quick, short answer: What is right, that is, what pleases God, should be more important than wealth, body, honor and friends, grace, and enjoyment; and in this case there is no respecting of persons, but only of God. In this case, too, a man must put up with it for God's sake if it is thought that he acts ungratefully and is despised for doing it. He has an honorable excuse because God and right will not tolerate our serving the people we like and forsaking those whom we do not like. Although the old Adam⁹³ does not listen willingly to this, nevertheless, this is what we must do if right is to be maintained. For there is no resisting God, and whoever resists what is right resists God, who gives, orders, and maintains all that is right.

The fourth question: "What is to be said about the man who goes to war not only for the sake of wealth, but also for the sake of temporal honor, to become a big man and be looked up to?" Answer: Greed for money and greed for honor are both greed; the one is as wrong as the other. Whoever goes to war because of this vice earns hell for himself. We should leave and give all honor to God alone and be satisfied with our wages and rations.

It is, therefore, a heathen and not a Christian custom to exhort soldiers before the battle with words like this, "Dear comrades, dear soldiers, be brave and confident; God willing, we shall this day win honor and become rich." On the contrary, they should be exhorted like this, "Dear comrades, we are gathered here to serve, obey, and do our duty to our prince, for according to God's will and ordinance we are bound to support our prince with our body and our possessions, even though in God's sight we are as poor sinners as our enemies are. Nevertheless, since we know that our prince is in the right in this case, or at least do not know otherwise, we are therefore sure and certain that in serving and obeying him we are serving God. Let everyone, then, be brave and courageous and let no one think otherwise than that his fist is God's fist, his spear God's spear, and cry with heart and voice, 'For God and the emperor!' If God gives us victory, the honor and praise shall be his, not ours, for he wins it through us poor sinners. But we will take the booty and the wages as presents and gifts of God's goodness and grace to us, though we are unworthy, and sincerely thank him for them. Now God grant the victory! Forward with joy!"

There can be no doubt but that if one seeks the honor of God and lets him have it—as is just and right, and as it ought to be—then more honor will come than anyone could want, for in I Samuel 2 [:30] God promises, "Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed." Since God cannot fail to keep his promise, he must honor those who honor him. Seeking one's own honor is one of the greatest sins. It is

⁹¹ Luther regarded agriculture highly. Cf., e.g., Luther's *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520). LW 44, 214.

⁹² On the gulden, see Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, p. 258.

⁹³ I.e., man's sinful nature.

nothing less than *crimen lese maiestatis divine*, that is, robbery of the divine majesty.⁹⁴ Let others, therefore, boast and seek honor; you be obedient and quiet, and your honor will find you. Many a battle has been lost that might have been won if honor alone could have done it. These honor-greedy warriors do not believe that God is in the war and gives the victory; therefore they do not fear God and are not joyful, but are foolhardy and mad, and in the end they are defeated.

But I think the “best comrades”⁹⁵ are those who encourage themselves and are encouraged before the battle by thinking about the women they love, and have this said to them, “Hey, now, let everyone think about the woman he loves best.” I admit that if two credible men who are experienced in these matters had not told me this, I would never have believed that in a business of this kind, where the danger of death stares men in the face, the human heart could so forget itself and be so light. Of course, no one does this when he fights alone with death. But when the company is assembled one stirs up the other, and no one gives a thought to what affects him, because it affects many. But to a Christian heart it is terrible to think and hear that at a time when he is confronted by God’s judgment and the peril of death, a man arouses and encourages himself with fleshly love; for those who are killed or die thus certainly send their souls straight to hell without delay.

“Indeed,” they say, “if I were to think of hell, I could never again go to war.” It is still worse to put God and his judgment wilfully out of mind and neither know nor think nor hear anything about them. For this reason a great many soldiers belong to the devil. And some of them are so full of the devil that they know no better way to prove their joy than by speaking contemptuously of God and his judgment, as if their boasting made them really tough;⁹⁶ they also dare to swear shamefully by Christ’s Passion, and curse and defy God in heaven. It is a lost crowd; it is chaff, and, as in other classes, there is much chaff and little wheat.

It follows that those mercenaries who wander about the country seeking war, although they might work and ply a trade till they were called for and thus from laziness or roughness and wildness of spirit waste their time, cannot be on good terms with God. They can neither give God any good explanation for this nor have a good conscience about their wandering. All they have is a foolhardy desire or eagerness for war or to lead the free, wild life which is typical of such people. Ultimately some of them will become scoundrels and robbers. However, if they would labor or take up a trade and earn their bread, as God has commanded all men to do, until their prince summoned them for himself or permitted and asked them to serve someone else, then they could go to war with the good conscience of men who knew that they were serving at the pleasure of their overlord. Otherwise they could not have such a good conscience. Almighty God shows us a great grace when he appoints rulers for us as an outward sign of his will, so that we are sure we are pleasing his divine will and are doing right, whenever we do the will and pleasure of the ruler. For God has attached and bound his will to them when he says, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” [Matt. 22:21], and in Romans 13 [:1], “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” The whole world ought to think of this as a great joy and comfort and even as a compelling reason to love and honor those who rule over us.

Finally, soldiers have many superstitions in battle. One commends himself to St. George,⁹⁷ another to St. Christopher;⁹⁸ one to this saint, another to that. Some cast magical spells on iron and bullets; some bless horse and rider; some carry St. John’s Gospel,⁹⁹ or some other object on which they rely. All these soldiers are in a dangerous condition, for they do not believe in God. On the contrary, they sin through unbelief and false trust in God; and if they were to die, they could not avoid being lost.

This is what they ought to do. When the battle begins and the exhortation of which I spoke above¹⁰⁰ has been given, they should simply commend themselves to God’s grace and adopt a Christian attitude. For the above exhortation is only a form for doing the external work of war with a good conscience; but since good works save no man, everyone should also say this exhortation in his heart or with his lips, “Heavenly Father, here I am, according to your divine will, in the external work and service of my lord, which I owe first to you and then to my lord for your sake. I thank your grace and mercy that you have put me into a work which I am sure is not sin, but

⁹⁴ Cf. p. 101, n. 16.

⁹⁵ Luther is speaking ironically.

⁹⁶ *Die rechten eisenfresser*, literally, “real iron-eaters.” Cf. p. 121, n. 72.

⁹⁷ The fourth-century patron saint of England was venerated as the patron of calvarymen and soldiers.

⁹⁸ Christopher, whose legend tells how he bore the Christ child across a river, was the patron saint of navigators, sailors, and travelers. His aid was invoked for safe journeys and against storms.

⁹⁹ Some wore amulets containing the verses John 1:1–14, the last Gospel of the mass. WA 19, 660, n. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. pp. 132–133.

right and pleasing obedience to your will. But because I know and have learned from your gracious word that none of our good works can help us and that no one is saved as a soldier but only as a Christian, therefore, I will not in any way rely on my obedience and work, but place myself freely at the service of your will. I believe with all my heart that only the innocent blood of your dear Son, my Lord Jesus Christ, redeems and saves me, which he shed for me in obedience to your holy will. This is the basis on which I stand before you. In this faith I will live and die, fight, and do everything else. Dear Lord God the Father, preserve and strengthen this faith in me by your Spirit. Amen.” If you then want to say the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, you may do so and let that be enough. In so doing commit body and soul into God’s hands, draw your sword, and fight in God’s name.

If there were many such soldiers in an army, do you think anyone could do anything to them? They would devour the world without lifting a sword. Indeed, if there were nine or ten such men in a company, or even three or four, who could say these things with a true heart, I would prefer them to all the muskets, spears, horses, and armor. Then I would be willing to let the Turk come on, with all his power; for the Christian faith is not a joke, nor is it a little thing, but as Christ says in the gospel, “It can do all things” [Mark 9:23]. But, my dear friend, where are those who believe thus and who can do such things? Nevertheless, although the great majority does not do this, we must teach it and know it for the sake of those who will do it, however few they may be. As Isaiah 55 [11] says, God’s word does not return empty, but accomplishes his purpose. The others who despise this wholesome teaching which is given for their salvation have their judge to whom they must answer. We are excused; we have done our part.

Here I shall let this rest for this time. I wanted to say something about war against the Turk because it has come so close to us,¹⁰¹ and some accused me of advising against war with the Turk.¹⁰² I have long known that at last I would have to become a Turk, and it does not help me that I have written so plainly about this and have said, especially in my book *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, that equal may well go to war with equal.¹⁰³ But since the Turk is back home again and our Germans are no longer asking about this, it is not yet time to write about it.¹⁰⁴

I should have completed this instruction, dear Assa, long ago; but it has been delayed so long that meanwhile, by God’s grace, you and I have become godfathers.¹⁰⁵ And yet I hope that the delay has not been fruitless and that the cause has been furthered by it. I commend you to God.

¹⁰¹ In the spring of 1526 the Turks conquered Hungary and threatened to invade Austria and Germany. The situation was so critical that the emperor did not take military action against the Lutheran princes because he needed their support. Cf. p. 90.

¹⁰² The papal bull excommunicating Luther made this point. For Luther’s reply to the accusation, see LW 32, 89–90.

¹⁰³ LW 45, 125.

¹⁰⁴ Luther did write about war with the Turks: in 1529 he published *On War Against the Turk* (see pp. 155–205) and wrote his *Army Sermon Against the Turk* (*Heerpredigt wider den Türken*; WA 30^{II}, 160–197); in 1541 he wrote *Admonition to Pray Against the Turk* (*Vermöhnung zum Gebet wider den Türken*; WA 51, 585–625).

¹⁰⁵ See p. 89, n. 5.

¹Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 46 : The Christian in Society III*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999, c1967 (Luther's Works 46), S. 46:87