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AGAINST THE INFINITE STIMULUS OF GREED: MARTIN BUCER'S REFORMATION OF WELFARE | BRADFORD LITTLEJOHN

INTRODUCTION

In the clarion call of the Reformation, Luther wrote, “man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body, in order to work on its account, but also for all men on earth; nay, he lives only for others and not for himself.”¹ Because one of the primary dimensions of earthly existence is economic—buying, selling, owning, giving, and taxpaying—Protestants keen to understand and apply this legacy of the Reformation must understand the Reformers’ economic thought.

Unfortunately, seen through the *laissez-faire* eyes of modern conservatism, this thought is often seriously misrepresented. True, against the backdrop of the medieval spiritualization of begging and mendicancy, the Reformers did stress the importance of hard work and the need to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor. But they did not call for the privatization of charity—in fact, since

mendicant beggars exploited private charity most effectively, they often sought quite the opposite. Many Reformers called for bold institutional action involving both church and state to care for the poor, lift them out of poverty, and even, in some cases, to regulate the economic activities that were driving increasing numbers into poverty.



SHEPHERD TENDING HIS FLOCK, BY JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET, EARLY 1860S

One of the boldest voices belonged to Martin Bucer, who called for the English crown to enact robust policies regulating economic activity and providing strong, institutional poor relief mechanisms; the crown should, he argued, aim to ensure the survival, welfare, and flourishing of every member of society without giving quarter to voluntary idleness.

Bucer’s economic proposals in *De Regno Christi* thus offer a fascinating perspective on Christian ethics and political economy that fit uneasily, if at all, on our modern political spectrum, challenging assumptions of both left and right. Of course, Bucer’s theological acumen hardly ensured that he was an adept economist; as we shall see in this study, he was as prone as modern Christian ethicists to misjudge real needs and the best ways to address them. But the principles guiding his prescriptions, I shall argue, should continue to challenge and inform us today.

1. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of the Christian*, in *Reformation Theology: A Reader of Primary Sources with Introductions* (Davenant, 2017), 221.

THREE LEVELS OF CONTEXT

In order to understand what Bucer is up to, we need to get quite a bit of context.

First then, for those unfamiliar with this largely neglected but immensely important Reformer, Bucer was born in 1491 and entered the Dominican Order before encountering Luther's theology in 1518. Intrigued by what he read and heard, and influenced also by many leading reform-minded humanists, Bucer left the Dominicans in 1521 and by 1523 was a reformer in the strategic south German city of Strasbourg. Bucer turned Strasbourg into a key Reformation hub and played a pivotal, though unsuccessful, role as mediator between Luther and the Swiss in their eucharistic disputes. Seeing the appeal of the Anabaptists, Bucer recognized the Reformation would never succeed long-term without a comprehensive reform of morals and a robust Christian community life.² Involving both clergy, ordinary laity, and civil magistrates, and stressing both positive mutual edification and appropriate penalties for sinful conduct, Bucer aimed to make Strasbourg into a godly society with a strong institutional church, heavily influencing Calvin's subsequent work at Geneva.

Unfortunately, Bucer's work at Strasbourg was cut short in 1547–48 by Charles V's crushing victory over the Protestant princes at the Battle of Mühlberg. Providentially, just before Mühlberg, Edward VI, aged 9, had been crowned in London, ushering in a period of rapid Protestant reform in England. Archbishop Cranmer and his allies invited beleaguered continental Protestant leaders to take refuge in England, and Bucer was among those who took him up on the offer. There he played an important role, as Professor of Divinity at Cambridge and a theological advisor to Cranmer, until his death in 1551, just after completing the *De Regno Christi*.³

The *DRC* (as we'll call it from now on) reflected Bucer's lifelong vision for a collaborative, comprehensive reform of church and society. Many of Bucer's proposals proved impractical in this larger island-wide context, but he seems to have quickly gotten himself up to speed on the basic political, economic, and cultural situation of his new home. Learning sometime in mid-1550 of the custom of presenting a book to the king at the beginning of each year, he went to work quickly on the *DRC* and sent the manuscript to his friend

at court, Sir John Cheke, on October 21.⁴ The wide-ranging work epitomized Bucer's lifelong labors toward and reflections on church reform. There is evidence that young Edward did in fact read and appreciate the work, and proposed implementing some of its policies; unfortunately, his untimely death in summer 1553 diminished the impact of Bucer's work.⁵

From our perspective, it may be difficult to understand why Bucer wrote detailed proposals for church reform to the *king*. For the magisterial reformers, though, civil magistrates, as the chief laymen in a church in which all believers had a priesthood to exercise, had a responsibility to oversee not merely the earthly welfare of their subjects, but to help reform the church and protect it from false teaching and disorderly conduct. As Bucer memorably put it,

“The kings of this world also ought to establish and promote the means of making their citizens devout and righteous who rightly acknowledge and worship their God and who are truly helpful toward their neighbors in all their actions. For this purpose, the kings of this world ought also to be ready to undergo any dangers, exile, and even death itself.”⁶

The magisterial Reformers, it must also be stressed, did not share modern conservatism's concern for limited government—due to different philosophical and theological assumptions, but also in part perhaps because technological realities meant that that even a government hell-bent on micromanaging society labored under significant practical limitations in doing so. Thus, Bucer's vision in *DRC* is startlingly comprehensive, ranging from the education of godly ministers to the reform of marriage law to how to usefully employ criminals. Martin Greschat summarizes:

“He aspired to nothing less than the radical, comprehensive renewal of England that was to begin with religious reform and would be followed by a reshaping of social and moral conditions, as well as a recasting of the economic and administrative structures of the country. This is what Bucer meant when he spoke or wrote about spreading and consolidating the rule of Christ in England. In other words, he wished to establish the Reformation in the broadest sense and have all areas of life subjected to the lordship of Christ—and not merely organize a church.”⁷



MARTIN BUCER BY GERMAN SCHOOL, CIRCA 1650–1689

4. Martin Greschat, *Martin Bucer: A Reformer and His Times* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2004), 239.

5. Hopf, *Bucer in the English Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), 100.

6. *On the Kingdom of Christ* in Wilhelm Pauck, ed. and trans., *Melancthon and Bucer* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2006), 180.

7. Greschat, *Martin Bucer*, 239.

2. See Jake Meador, “That No One Should Live for Himself,” in W. Bradford Littlejohn and Jonathan Tomes, eds., *Beyond Calvin: Essays on the Diversity of the Reformed Tradition* (Davenant, 2017): 1–20.

3. See Constantin Hopf, *Martin Bucer and the English Reformation*.

There is no question that England was in the midst of a social and economic crisis when Bucer took up his pen. In fact, the previous year, a series of massive rebellions broke out in a few major counties. The rebels were defeated by late summer 1549, but victory was not a foregone conclusion, and Protector Somerset was subsequently ousted for his perceived mismanagement of the crisis.⁸ The Western Rebellion was incited by Catholic traditionalists, partly in response to new Protestant liturgical reforms; but economic and social concerns were also driving factors, as Peter Martyr Vermigli recognized, reprimanding both landlords and peasantry for their covetousness.⁹ In the year leading up to the rebellions, a significant party at court had drawn urgent attention to the worsening plight of the poor and agitated for significant reform to provide for their needs and restrain their oppressors.¹⁰

For most historians of the twentieth century, the chief culprit for the economic distress and political discontent was the so-called enclosures. Subsequent scholarship has shown that, in fact, much bigger and more complicated economic forces were the real problem, with enclosures simply making a convenient scapegoat. However, since Bucer himself was among those who honed in on the enclosure problem, let us examine it before naming larger forces.

In medieval England, after the abolition of serfdom, land ownership and access was governed by a complex set of property- and use-rights. A local nobleman would preside over a manor consisting of lands he owned outright, lands farmed by lifelong tenant-holders who paid rent to the lord, lands that might be let for shorter-term tenancies, and commons—land to which the community had shared access for grazing and farming, thus providing means of sustenance to even the poorest members of the community.¹¹ Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, these common lands were gradually enclosed into smaller tracts of private property; this generated more efficient and profitable land use, fostering steady economic development and long-term prosperity—but sometimes at the expense of the poorest classes. The great economic historian R.H. Tawney argued that the enclosed lands were largely used for very profitable and less labor-intensive sheep raising, resulting in massive unemployment. The unemployed, lacking access to the commons, were left to become wandering vagrants or beggars, and concentrated in urban areas.¹²

Recent research has largely discredited this narrative. In reality, enclosures in the 1530s and 1540s were limited compared to other periods in English history, and most enclosures proceeded legally by agreement of all parties concerned (though naturally the most powerful parties tended to benefit disproportionately).¹³ So where did the un-

8. For the fullest recent study, see Andy Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).
 9. See full text and discussion in W.J. Torrance Kirby, *The Zurich Connection and Tudor Political Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), ch. 3.
 10. Wood, *1549 Rebellions*, 31-38.
 11. See Eric Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems in the Sixteenth Century and After* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), chs. 1-3 for a thorough overview.
 12. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1912).
 13. Wood, *Riot, Rebellion, and Popular Politics* 83

employment and migration problem, lamented by contemporaries of the period, come from? A population boom. England's population nearly doubled in the sixteenth century, as the reigns of the Tudors brought relative peace and stability following the chaos of the Hundred Years' War and Wars of the Roses.¹⁴ The growing population caused a spike in food prices (exacerbated by inflation) and a simultaneous decline in real wages.¹⁵ And increased agricultural productivity, due in part to the enclosures, amounted to even fewer rural jobs for a rapidly growing workforce. All of this meant a spiking poverty rate and an increase in wandering beggars and urban poor; it is no surprise that many at the time, lacking a grasp of the larger macroeconomic forces, blamed the enclosures.

BUCER'S PROPOSAL FOR AGRARIAN REFORM

Bucer's discussion of enclosures is situated in chapter 49 of the *DRC*, "On the Restoration of Various Crafts." It is striking that Bucer was unafraid to continue to write against the enclosures even in 1550, after the 1549 rebellions had led to a strong conservative backlash. He exhorts the king to oversee thoroughgoing economic development that will put all the people of England to work in labor profitable both for themselves and the whole kingdom. Bucer's chief concern with enclosures, then, is not the matter of private vs. common ownership but the fact that so many enclosures were for the sake of sheep grazing.

Bucer begins his discussion by remarking, "It is apparent that this island has been adorned by the Lord with such good soil and climate that it should be able to produce far richer farm products than it now does." That God has given England natural resources and that it has a God-given responsibility to develop them as fully as possible sounds like the familiar Weberian "Protestant Work Ethic." However, Bucer continues, the goal of this cultivation should be maximal human flourishing, not private profit. The land, he says, "should be cultivated on its own merits and for the good of the commonwealth, at the expense (at least partial if not entire) of the profit in wool. Insofar as this profit provides only harmful pomp and luxury, it should be turned over to the purpose of giving sustenance to human beings who are the sons of God."¹⁶

This is a fascinating argument, even if we might critique it for being economically short-sighted. In fact, English agricultural productivity was generally increasing in Bucer's time (just not nearly fast enough to keep up with the population boom), and the profitability of the wool industry aided long-term economic development which, over the course of centuries, gave unprecedented sustenance to all.¹⁷ Still, in the near-term, wool profits were largely privatized while the resul-

14. Barrett L. Beer, *Rebellion and Riot: Popular Disorder in England in the Reign of Edward VI* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2013) 19.
 15. Beer, *Rebellion and Riot* 19-21.
 16. *DRC* 338.
 17. Kerridge, *Agrarian Problems*, 127-28.

tant poverty was socialized, so Bucer had a point. “They say,” Bucer went on in a hyperbolic echo of More, “that this trade in wool has now so increased that in most places one man uses as much land for the pasture of his sheep as was used a short time ago to support the life of more than a thousand men.” Bucer’s concern is probably with the sheep industry’s impact both on the ever-tight food supply and on employment—even if enough food were still being produced, thousands no longer had any way to buy it since they had lost their means of honest labor.

For Bucer, this situation was an urgent moral and theological concern because he held the flourishing of human life, not the pursuit of private profit, to be the ultimate purpose of an economy. “But what person not completely destitute of the mind of Christ,” he fumes,

“can fail to acknowledge that Christian princes must make it a major project that there should be as [many] good men¹⁸ as possible everywhere who live for the glory of God; therefore such princes must in every way be on guard lest a few evil and harmful men, such as they all are who try to advance their own interests more than those of the commonwealth, excited by the infinite stimulus of greed, should displace men from the lands, and rob the state of its greatest riches and ornaments, namely, good citizens, and deprive the Church and heaven of worshipers praising God.”¹⁹



THE BEGGARS, BY SÉBASTIEN BOURDON, BETWEEN 1635 AND 1640

This striking line of argument, stripped of its specifically theological elements, was to later find one of its most eloquent exponents in Victorian English social theorist John Ruskin, who, in his 1860 masterpiece, *Unto This Last*, argued that “there is no wealth but life”—that, logically, the only meaningful purpose of material wealth must be to achieve the maximum flourishing of human life. For Bucer, though, the theological dimension is essential. The more Christian men and women there are, the more worshipers will fill the Church on earth and the halls of heaven. Godly rulers thus must ensure *both* that as many of their people as possible become Christian *and* that they have as many people as possible—“be fruitful and multiply” is, as it were, a political imperative as well. And this means that they must manage their economies to ensure the broadest possible distribution of the means of sustenance, rather than allowing wealth to multiply a few hands, stymieing the multiplication of men and women. Bucer concludes, “The saying of Prov. 14:28 must be pondered: It is to the greater glory of the king if his people increase and multiply; it is a measure of diminishing majesty if his people diminish and decrease in number.”²⁰

Of course, it may be that Bucer’s particular concern was misplaced; indeed, as we now recognize, it was precisely the rapid increase of England’s people at this time that was largely responsible for the intense economic pressures being experienced. However, his principle was sound, and it was only through vigilant government attention to the dangers of private aggregation at the expense of the commons that early modern England succeeded in continuing to steadily increase both its population and its standard of living.

BUCER’S PROPOSALS FOR POOR RELIEF

But even if Bucer’s proposals for agrarian reform had been entirely on-target and had been implemented, what about the meantime? What to do with the growing masses of beggars and landless, out-of-work poor? There is no doubt that poverty was on the rapid increase during the Tudor era, an unsurprising result of a population rise that outstripped productivity gains. Existing medieval institutions and practices for caring for the needy (nearly all of whom had physical or mental disabilities) were profoundly over-stretched by the 1540s—not, as often claimed by Catholic historians, because of the dissolution of the monasteries and their poor relief initiatives, but because of these larger economic pressures.²¹ Indeed, if anything, monasticism was seen as part of the problem, with mendicants resented as lazy and unproductive drains on society. With thousands in desperate

poverty crowding England’s cities and wandering through its villages, various initiatives were proposed for addressing the problem. Bucer’s proposals were in line with the general tenor of those being put forward at this time, but they were more comprehensive and forward-thinking than any laws yet established. There is even some evidence that they influenced later Elizabethan poor relief legislation.²²

Bucer frames all his proposals around the need to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor. This was not a new feature of English poor relief policy, but a frequent point of emphasis in late-medieval legislation, which, in the words of Marjorie McIntosh, “made a clear distinction between people who were unable to work for their own support and able-bodied vagrants who chose to move around the region or country living off alms.”²³ The latter were subject to arrest and (depending on the ebb and flow of the laws and the mood of the local constable) potentially severe punishment. The former could apply for begging licenses, which they could display when seeking alms to demonstrate that they were genuinely needy. In practice, lo-

18. *Plurimi* (very many) appears in the Latin text but is omitted by oversight in the English translation.

19. *DRC* 338.

20. *DRC* 338.

21. Marjorie McIntosh, *Poor Relief in England, 1350-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 115-16.

22. Hopf, *Bucer*, 100, 120-21.

23. McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, 41.

cal residents were apt to ignore whether or not someone had a begging license, particularly given the meritorious nature of almsgiving in the late medieval church.²⁴ The poor or disabled could also enroll at one of several hundred small hospitals or almshouses, semi-monastic institutions where residents generally worked or offered prayers for their benefactors in return for daily sustenance.²⁵ Before the sixteenth century, though, widespread chronic poverty was rarely a problem.²⁶

As poverty increased and became highly visible during Henry VIII's reign, and as both Catholic and Protestant humanists expressed increasing concern about justice toward the poor, church and government looked for new ways to address the problem. The older medieval approach was fatally flawed because, since many automatic spiritual benefits were earned by helping the poor, there was little incentive to distinguish between the truly needy and fraudulent beggars. Attempts to address the problem generally focused on empowering the parish church as the center for charitable giving and distribution.²⁷ And this was precisely what Bucer sought to expand upon with his proposals.

Bucer wanted each church equipped with as many wise and godly deacons as possible, who would be responsible, first, to "investigate how many really indigent persons live in each church for whom it is equitable for the church to provide the necessities of life." They should exclude from this number any who could "sustain themselves by their own powers" but preferred idleness. Moreover, whenever possible, the needy should be cared for by close friends and relatives who have the means, thus "spar[ing] the churches in order that they may have more to nourish and assist those who have no home or family who would want to or could help them."²⁸ This diaconal task will not be an easy one, requiring constant attention, detailed investigations, good record-keeping, and frequent checkups on those receiving aid to see how they are making use of it. This may sound a bit harsh, stingy, or paternalistic, but it should be noted that the background issue was the overwhelming of churches by more poor than they could effectively care for. Judicious use of resources was therefore crucial.

The deacons must also, says Bucer, keep careful account of all expenditures and of all the funds that come in, that they can be above reproach.²⁹ He exhorts the King and the government to see to it that any resources once given for the relief of the poor and later abused for the excesses of the Roman clergy be restored to their proper use, and that in parishes with excessive clerical salaries, these be reduced to a more reasonable level to free up funds for the poor. Finally, since charity will now be handled in this more institutional fashion, begging is to be outlawed altogether, and there will be no more need for individual almsgivers to try and figure out whether a particular beggar is able-bodied or not.

24. McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, 42, 45-52.

25. McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, ch. 3.

26. McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, 48.

27. McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, 127.

28. *DRC* 307.

29. *DRC* 309-10.

In fact, Bucer is keen to emphasize that individuals *must not* do so, so much so that "if anyone is caught giving anything privately to the needy," he will be liable to church discipline.³⁰ This is perhaps one of the most striking and, to our minds, disturbing features of his treatment. Bucer recognizes that many "will object that it is inhuman that the hands of the faithful are closed so that they cannot do good according to their own judgment to those whom they have found to be really in need; for there are to be found excellent men among the poor, who are ashamed to seek the Church's alms."³¹ Bucer, however, is concerned about the problem caused by those who can earn a living but will not, or who squander what they receive, hoodwinking well-intentioned Christians into giving resources that should be reserved for the many who are truly needy. He notes that "a private person cannot...investigate the poor as certainly as those who, as they are given this duty by the churches, daily meet it with utmost effort."³²

Poor relief should be in the hands of wise and experienced men who handle this complex business day-in and day-out. Bucer's antipathy to private charity also seems motivated by the late medieval context, in which individuals sought to gain private spiritual merit for their almsgiving, and by the pervasive human problem of pride. Rebuking the "arrogance" of private almsgivers, Bucer appears to be aware of how often the motive for private giving, rather than anonymously through the church's common fund, is gaining recognition from others and making the recipients feel indebted to their benefactors.³³

This does not mean that Bucer ignores the concern about the poor feeling too ashamed to seek aid. As a wise and experienced pastor, he is keenly aware of this challenge, and notes that, in such cases, those well-acquainted with the needy person can bring their need to the attention of the deacons. The deacons must also "take into consideration not only the need of various persons but also their faintness of heart," offering assistance in such a way that "in no case they add the affliction of shame to the affliction of poverty."³⁴ Moreover, churches should foster an atmosphere in which poverty is never accounted a reason for shame.

One final feature of Bucer's advice for poor relief deserves attention. As before with agrarian reform, Bucer recognizes that mundane and spiritual concerns cannot be separated. Bucer does not want the poor to merely be enabled to "live" but to "live to the Lord."³⁵ He expounds on this at the end of his treatment: "Nor is it sufficient for the kindness of Christians to give food, shelter, and clothing to those in extreme need"; rather "they should give so liberally of the gifts of God which they have receive'd" that poor girls unable to marry for lack of dowry may do so, that promising boys may be able to study for the ministry, and that "faithful men who are unemployed...can make a living by their trade and feed their children and educate them in the Lord and show themselves more profitable citizens of the commonwealth." "For," he goes on, "it hardly suffices for the churches of Christ

30. *DRC* 311.

31. *DRC* 312.

32. *DRC* 312.

33. *DRC* 311.

34. *DRC* 313.

35. *DRC* 308.

that their people should merely be alive but it must also be provided for them that they live to the Lord for a certain and mutual usefulness among each other and within the State and the Church.” To this end, the church’s charity should include providing the education, skills, and training to enable every member of the community to eventually “contribute something to the common good and prove himself as a true and useful member of Christ.”³⁶

Unfortunately, Bucer’s proposals for the reform of the diaconal office were never put into effect; the Church of England continued to treat the office of deacon as more of a preaching and liturgical office than one specifically concerned with care for the poor. However, parish-based poor relief became the norm in Protestant England, with significant positive results even as the general problem of poverty worsened with continuing population rise.³⁷

CONCLUSION

Fast-forwarding to our own day, the secular character of our civil government renders the close partnership that Bucer envisioned between church and state anachronistic and perhaps unworkable, though George W. Bush’s Faith-based Initiative was a worthwhile attempt in this direction. The results of this separation can be seen in the breakdown both of the kinds of careful discrimination between the genuinely and fraudulently needy that Bucer called for, and of the holistic attention to material and spiritual needs that any successful approach to charity must involve. It is also worth noting that, assuming as he

36. DRC 315.

37. McIntosh, *Poor Relief*, 138.

does an almost complete overlap of church membership and citizenry, Bucer does not provide us much insight on the thorny matter of how to prioritize the needs of the saints and the needs of those outside the church. However, three enduring lessons should at least be distilled from Bucer’s recommendations.

AN ECONOMY CAN NEVER
BE VIEWED AS AMORAL,
AND IT MUST BE ASSESSED
ON ITS ABILITY, NOT TO
GENERATE PRIVATE PROFIT,
BUT TO INCREASE THE
NUMBER AND FLOURISHING
OF THE “SONS OF GOD.”


First, an economy can never be viewed as amoral, and it must be assessed on its ability, not to generate private profit, but to increase the number and flourishing of the “sons of God.”

Second, although Americans often prefer the flexibility and control of direct personal charitable giving, Bucer makes a strong case for the value of centralized (though still local) institutions that collect and distribute to meet the most urgent needs.

Third, the purpose of charity is not merely to prevent those who bear the image of God from starving. Rather, it is to recognize our solidarity with every member of society, especially those within the church, and thus to equip every man and woman to be a productive and educated member of the social body, capable of mutually blessing one another and building up the kingdom of God.

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INHABITING THE PLACES OF PROMISE: MARTIN LUTHER'S TEACHING ON THE THREE INSTITUTIONS

MICHAEL LAFFIN

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of Martin Luther's writings on society, ethics, and politics in the English-speaking world tend to focus on his teaching concerning the two kingdoms, which divides authority into temporal and spiritual realms. Often overlooked is the larger theological framework within which the two kingdoms teaching is situated. In particular, his teaching concerning the three institutions (or "estates," as they are more commonly called) has been, with a few important exceptions, largely neglected. According to Luther, Scripture references institutions or "con-creatures" (*concreatae sint*), created together with human beings, that bear God's promise to provide for human creaturely life, especially in its social aspects.¹ The three institutions are, Luther says, the church (or *ecclesia*), the household economy (or *oeconomia*), and politics (or *politia*). When Luther's treatment of the three institutions is neglected, the teaching concerning the two kingdoms tends to take on a life of its own, leading to quietist interpretations of the Christian's relation to governmental authority, or a division of human life into autonomous "worldly" and "spiritual" spheres, the latter understood in an individualistic and inward sense, none of which was intended by Luther.

In part, wariness of Luther's political theology stems from appropriate concerns about how it was misused in early twentieth-century Germany to justify subservience to Hitler's Nazi regime. A proper understanding of the institutions and how they function in Luther's thought, however, will show that they help us to subject earthly authority (churchly, political, economic) to the criticism of divine revelation and force into the open the idolatry behind any claims of absolute authority by any of the three institutions. Such claims were made primarily by the church hierarchy in Luther's time, the state in

Nazi Germany, and, some might claim, by the economy in our own time. Further, without attending to the teaching on the institutions, Luther's social and political ethics become separated from his larger theological commitments, dissolving their organic unity. The three institutions can give us much needed critical purchase as we seek to faithfully inhabit our vocations, and the institutions that support our vocations, in the world today. Therefore, my purpose is to set forth Luther's teaching on the three institutions, indicating its inseparable connection to his larger theology of the Word of God, and then to spell out its implications for the way we might think about social life, ethics, and politics.

THREE INSTITUTIONS AND THE WORD OF GOD

Despite their recent neglect, the three institutions play a much greater role in Luther's self-description of his theological undertaking than do the two kingdoms.² Oswald Bayer notes that, in his Catechisms and in writings like

"On Councils and the Church," the "Confession Concerning Christ Supper," and in numerous Table Talks, Luther refers to the three institutions as embodying the Reformation. As Bayer writes, "...in Luther's self-presentation the three estates [institutions] have far greater weight than the two kingdoms, which never appear in these summary



LUTHER'S THESES ARE ENGRAVED INTO THE DOOR OF ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, WITTENBERG.

2. Although there is not space for the argument here, it is worth noting that two "kingdoms" can be misleading when speaking of Luther's theology. More accurate would be to see his early language of "kingdoms" in the light of his later language of "regiments," which points to the fact that God rules with God's "left and right hand." The emphasis in the language of "regiments" is aimed at the unity of God's rule over all of human life and history, whereas the "kingdoms" suggests separate realms, perhaps on the order of Augustine's two cities (*civitates*). In his later writings, when Luther wants to make this latter distinction, he speaks of two "*ecclesiae*," or two churches marked by that which they worship, either the true God or idols. Thus, Luther is able to speak in critical fashion of the "earthly" city or church, as does Augustine, while his acknowledgment of the two "regiments" leaves space for the positive sense in which God rules through temporal authorities. Talk of two "kingdoms" threatens to collapse this difference and leads to the problems previously mentioned, namely quietism or false removal of the church from the "public" sphere.

1. See Bernd Wannewetsch, "Luther's Moral Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 130.

and testamentary contexts.³ Their importance for Luther is linked to their role in interpreting Scripture. In a Table Talk, he argues that we should read the Bible in the light of a three-fold division of God's work into "the household [*Oeconomiam*], the government [*politiam*], the church [*ecclesiam*]. If a verse does not fit the church," he says, "we should let it stay in the government or the household, whichever it is best suited to."⁴ Likewise, he writes in his "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" that "these three religious institutions or orders are found in God's Word and commandment."⁵ Hans Ulrich picks up on this language and refers to these three as "institutions," and describes them as "marked place(s) of living within God's governance and government insofar as this expresses God's promise."⁶ They are established by the Torah, the law of God. The institutions, then, describe the shape and form of the divine commands—commands which promise—as found in Scripture concerning the establishment of and provision for creaturely human life. They are, as Ulrich writes, "an invitation to explore God's will and to receive God's cooperation."⁷ Understood in this manner, the institutions are best described *not* as natural structures of life given apart from God's Word of salvation but as means of attuning us to the way creaturely reality is shaped and sustained in its encounter with God's living Word.

What is suggested by the term "institution," as Bayer notes, is the coming together of the divine Word and the material element. The material element, or nature, does not have innate capacities, but instead is continually animated by the ever-present Word. The focus on the all-present Word, and the Lutheran

3. Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Estates," in *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 94. Note Bayer's language of "estates" to describe what I am calling "institutions." Luther's terminology varies and he interchangeably uses the terms "orders" (*ordinationes*, *ordo*, *Ordnung*), "hierarchies" (*Hierarchies*), and "offices" (*Amt*), in addition to "estates" (*Stand*) and "institutions" (*Stiften*). However, despite the fluidity of the terminology, the underlying concept remains constant in Luther's writings.

4. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works 54: Table Talk*, 446 (hereafter, the English translation of *Luther's Works* referred to as LW); D. Martin Luthers Werke *Weimarer Ausgabe*, WATR 5.218, 12-18 (hereafter the *Weimarer Ausgabe* is referred to as WA).

5. LW 37:365.

6. Hans Ulrich, "God's Commandments and their Political Presence: Notes of a Tradition on the 'Ground' of Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 23.1 (2010), 45-6. My decision to refer to the estates as "institutions" follows Ulrich and brings to the fore the importance of their being "established" or "instituted" by the divine speech.

7. Ulrich, "On the Grammar of Lutheran Ethics," in Karen L. Bloomquist, ed. *Lutheran Ethics at the Intersection of God's One World* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2005), 35.

Christology associated with it, means the incarnate Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father is simultaneously the eternally ubiquitous Son of God who creates and preserves the world according to His one person. Therefore, the institutions preserve the oneness of the command of God while upholding the appropriate distinction between creation and redemption.



THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS, BY HIERONYMUS BOSCH, BETWEEN 1480 AND 1505

EXPOSITION OF THE THREE INSTITUTIONS

But what exactly are these institutions? Luther's most concentrated spelling out of all three occurs in his *Lectures on Genesis*. In interpreting Genesis 2:16-17, God's first address and command to Adam regarding eating from the trees in the garden, Luther writes, "Here we have the establishment (*institutio*) of the church (*Ecclesia*) before there was any government of the home (*Oeconomia*) and of the state (*Politia*), for Eve was not yet created."⁸ In other words, "The temple is earlier than the home," and therefore the church is the primal institution.⁹ The stress on the Word of God is central to Luther's interpretation of the passage: "Here the Lord is preaching to Adam and setting the Word before him."¹⁰ What we get in these verses is God's sermon to Adam—the Word is preached to him, the same Word which created and continually governs the world. If Adam had remained in paradise, Luther argues, this sermon from the Lord would have served as his Bible, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil "would have been the church at which Adam, together with his descendants would have gathered on the Sabbath day."¹¹ However, the church's priority is not merely temporal; it is also the institution definitively indicating the nature of human social life as established by divine speech. As Ulrich puts this point, "The grammar of cooperation and living with God is to be found paradigmatically within the church, the Christian congregation and community. Here is the place where people learn to be aware of God's presence."¹² Crucial to

Luther's account of the church is God's grace in providing humanity with a place where the Word of God can be heard in certainty and humanity can respond, confident that its worship is pleasing to God. As Luther writes, "Adam had need of this command concerning the tree

8. LW 1: 103; WA 42, 70, 3-5.

9. LW 1:104.

10. LW 1:105.

11. LW 1:105.

12. Ulrich, "On the Grammar of Lutheran Ethics," 41.

of the knowledge of good and evil, namely, that there should be an outward form of worship and an outward work of obedience toward God.”¹³ Thus, the establishment of the church is both God’s promise to speak to and address God’s human creature and the enablement of the creature for faithful response to the divine address.

The second institution that Luther exposit in the *Lectures on Genesis* is the household economy (*oeconomia*), which includes marriage and the family, business, work, and education.¹⁴ He finds this institution established in God’s Word—“It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18)—and in God’s call for a man to leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife, such that “they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).¹⁵ Interestingly, Luther brings larger social implications to the fore in connection with the family. He says that Adam enjoyed innocence in paradise and lacked nothing as he was enveloped in God’s gracious presence. So, then, what could it mean that it was not good for Adam to be alone? Luther answers that “God is speaking of the common good or that of the species, not of personal good. The personal good is the fact that Adam had innocence. But he was not yet in possession of the common good which the rest of the living beings who propagated their kind through procreation had.”¹⁶ And again here, Luther stresses the centrality of the Word of God and the way it enables human beings to inhabit the places of human social life with the assurance of God’s promise to provide. Just as the promise and command concerning the church gave humanity a definite form, time, and place for worship, so the institution of the *oeconomia* gives humanity a definite form, time, and place for human procreation, labor, and sustenance.¹⁷

Finally, Luther explicates Genesis’ account of the institution of the “state” (again, *politia* in Latin), which indicates God’s promise to care for and rule human political life. Luther is not always consistent regarding the status of the institution of the political, sometimes suggesting that it is a postlapsarian measure necessitated by human sinfulness, but at other times suggesting it came into being with the creation of human beings, since human life has always been subject to God’s rule. The overall evidence, however, lends to reading the political institution as part of the original divine establishment alongside the church and household-economy.¹⁸ Luther interprets the political order as God’s ordinance by means of which God exercises His unitary rule over the world. The world is thus God-infused, with the continual existence of all human societies and political arrangements dependent upon the divine Word which alone establishes the enduring forms of human social life. In his “Exposition of Psalm 127 (1524),” with

13. LW 1: 109.

14. In his “Exposition of Psalm 127 (1524),” Luther notes that he borrows the concept of *oeconomia* from Aristotle, LW 45:322.

15. LW 1:115, 138-39.

16. LW 1:115-16.

17. Luther gives further indications of what the delightful labor of paradise would have entailed when he exegetes Gen. 2:15, “And so the Lord God took man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it,” LW 1:101-102.

18. For a full discussion of the inconsistency in Luther’s account of *politia*, including the various passages throughout his writings where it is discussed, see my *The Promise of Martin Luther’s Political Theology: Freeing Luther from the Modern Political Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 183-87.

reference to the psalm’s famous first verse, “Unless the Lord guards the city, its watchmen keep awake in vain,” Luther shows how all communities are “masks” that express God’s dominion. He does not deny that, in the fallen world, sin has infected all communities, and that they can become so corrupted that they are rightly called “anti-institutions,” but to the extent that they provide peace and allow for human cooperation, this is a sign of God’s active presence and work. And for as long as the world endures, the divine promise to establish and govern political life gives us hope in finding and inhabiting such communities of peace.

Luther took what he saw to be the papacy’s attempt to unify the authority of all three institutions in the singular hands of the church to be the great social and political threat of his time. In particular, he saw the danger posed by a church hierarchy that promised the salvation that belonged to Christ alone, subjecting all of human political and economic life to the papacy. He perceived this to be happening in the papacy’s claim to decide unilaterally on doctrine, in its use of indulgences and the banking system to further its own causes, and in its attempts to subject temporal authority to its rule. Whether Luther’s judgment on this matter was correct, we can nonetheless see why Luther took his teaching on the institutions to be so central to his understanding of the Reformation. In realizing the importance of each of the three, and of the rightful limits they place on one another, the institutions free creatures to respond faithfully to the divine promises without grasping after idols that falsely offer salvation or justification outside of these promises.

LUTHER TOOK...THE PAPACY'S
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The idols we worship are embodied in social formations and tend toward absolutization. As Luther argues in his Large Catechism, an idol or a god is that to which we look for all good things, and when we look to something other than the divine promise, we slavishly absolutize the idol and, in extreme cases, seek to subject all of human life to it.¹⁹ Again, Luther worried that the papacy and church hierarchy had come to be the social expression, or institutional form, of the idolatry that sought salvation in human righteousness. So while there were undoubtedly political motivations behind the Reformation, Luther saw the re-establishment of local princely authority as giving space for receiving the promise of divine rule, pulling it out from under an imperial papacy that sought to assume the mantle and promise of all three institutions under its singular rule. The attempt to grasp the authority that belongs to Christ alone is, for Luther, the very definition of an “anti-institution,” and the one claiming such authority is the very definition of the “anti-Christ.” This goes a long way in explaining Luther’s harsh rhetoric against the papacy and in defence of princely rulers. The theological convictions motivating this stance become easily obscured if explained simply in terms of a doctrine of the “two kingdoms,” with a simplistic “spiritual/worldly” distinction, rather than in terms of Luther’s richer account of the three institutions within which the “two kingdoms” conceptually operates.

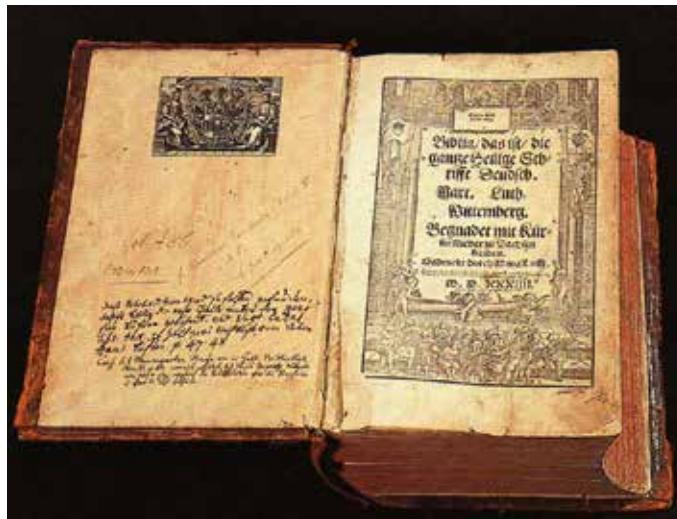
19. Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert eds. and Charles Arrand et al. trans. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE THREE INSTITUTIONS FOR REFORMATIONAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Given the theological context for Luther's understanding of the three institutions, and given a sense for what constitutes their material context, what is their importance for contemporary Protestant ethics or politics? Most importantly, attention to the three institutions ensures that reflection on questions of ethics and politics remains rooted in the patterns of the divine promises as found in Scripture; it furthermore allows for discerning the concrete contours in which a commitment to *sola scriptura* bears materially on such questions. It means that we read and interpret creation in the light of Scripture and not as an independent source of revelation alongside Scripture. It also prevents appeals to natural law or "unassisted" human reason from becoming untethered from the words and promises of Scripture; in other words, the framework of the three institutions prevents Scripture from being abandoned for the imaginings of the human heart. In short, Luther's three institutions discipline our political and ethical reflection in conformity with the "deep grammar of Scripture."²⁰ The focus on revelation as found in Scripture, rather than read out of the created order independently of Scripture, also means the institutions are circumscribed and developed in response to Scripture, not by reference to sociological formations.

The concept of institutions tunes our attention to the places in Scripture where God has set forth His good intentions for human life, helping us discern the faith or idolatry embodied in all actual social-political formations. For Luther, the final cause of any healthy social or political community is the promising Word of God, but in their distorted "anti-communal" form, such communities are warped by the unbelief that refuses to trust and accept this Word. Reflection on the institutions, which is to say, on the shape of the divine promises to care for human life as revealed in Scripture, brings to light that to which our hearts cling in social and political life. The institutions illuminate faith and idolatry. They ask us, do particular economic configurations reveal trust in the divine promise that the earth will provide for all of God's creatures when inhabited with trust in our Heavenly Father or betray an idolatrous reliance on human domination to leach sustenance from a groaning earth? Does a given political configuration reveal our denial that God ultimately rules human affairs, leading us to trust human force and power alone to realize peace, or does it reveal trust that peace is finally the work of the slain lamb? Does our view

20. This phrase is taken from Brian Brock, "On Generating Categories in Theological Ethics: Barth, Genesis and the *Ständelehre*," *Tyndale Bulletin* 61.1 (2010), 66.



LUTHER BIBLE, 1534

of the church suggest that it must grasp after power and influence to secure its position in society, or do we trust Christ's promise that He is with us to the end of the age, such that we perceive humility and weakness as true marks of the church and as the sign of God's power at work in reconciling the world?

Our temptation, which results from unbelief, is to absolutize the institutions in a human attempt to possess that which can only be received as a gift of God. So, rather than embracing creaturely limits, the state attempts to provide the peace, security, and cooperation required for human flourishing by any means necessary; the "market" becomes a god to which communities, livelihoods, and the common good are sacrificed; the church strives above all else to recapture a position of political influence. But in turning human hope to the state, the economy, or the church itself, we risk getting pulled into the grasping vortex of one or the other in a desperate attempt to secure by our own means that which God has promised in His Word to provide. Bayer describes such attempts as, "lust for future things (*concupiscentia futurorum*)...an unhealthy domination by the future and the flight from the present that accompanies such preoccupation."²¹ On the other hand, trust in the divine promises as revealed in the divine Word, promises which the teaching on the institutions alerts us to, allows us to inhabit these places of promise in the present

in the certainty of divine provision and favour. We can turn our full and patient attention to the neighbor, free from the distorting pressure that comes from the false belief that the future is entirely ours to secure, or even from the false belief that the justification for our life depends upon getting our service to our neighbor right. Rather, Luther's teaching on the institutions provides the grammar for living in places where we are set between God and neighbor, enabling us to freely serve as conduits of God's love to God's creatures. We become, as Luther would put it, "Christ's one to another."²²

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21. Oswald Bayer, "I am the Lord your God...": The Significance of the First Commandment as a Basis for Ethics," in *Freedom in Response*, 58. Luther speaks of *concupiscentia futurorum* in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, LW 15:50.

22. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31:368.

WHEN ROMAN CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS READ EACH OTHER

BEYOND DORDT AND DE AUXILIIS: THE DYNAMICS OF PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC SOTERIOLOGY IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

EDITED BY JORDAN J. BALLOR, MATTHEW T. GAETANO, AND DAVID S.

SYTSMA. LEIDEN: BRILL, 2019

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL LYNCH

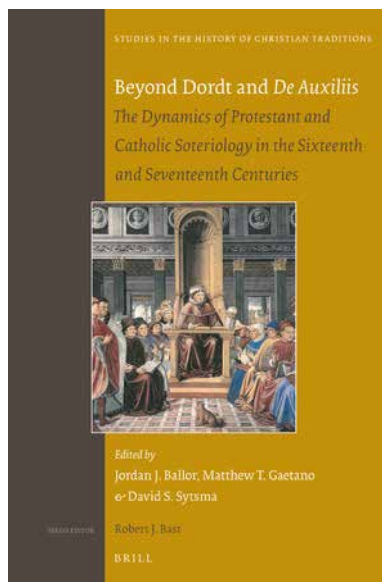
Popular Protestant narratives about the Reformed tradition often teach that Reformed theologians rejected Pelagian Roman Catholic doctrines of grace and free choice, even radically departing from the general consensus of the medieval church. Roman Catholics had their own telling of the story: Protestants, and especially the nefarious John Calvin, taught that God was the author of sin, denied free choice, and even believed that God created some human beings for damnation. Furthermore, Calvin, according to this portrayal, accurately and sufficiently represents the Reformed tradition. Doubtless, such narratives have latched onto important realities in early modern theological wrangling. Some Reformed theologians of the early modern period gave the impression that the Roman Catholic church did not understand the first thing about God's grace, and Roman Catholic theologians rightly feared some of the language found amongst the Reformed relating to God's relationship to sin, predestination, and reprobation. But a new book thankfully complicates overly-simplistic interpretations of these early modern theological disputes. *Beyond Dordt and De Auxiliis*, a collection of essays by both Roman Catholic and Protestant historians, examines the interdependence of these two traditions in the early modern period as they discussed and debated doctrines such as predestination and divine grace.

The title of the book mentions two of the most important events among Protestants and Roman Catholics in the early modern period dealing with the nature of divine grace: The Synod of Dordt and the *Congregatio de Auxiliis*. Yet the preposition governing those two events—beyond—hints at the way the book encourages us to view them: not as mere intra-tradition talking-shops, but as snapshots of the history of dogma which represent a larger conversation in these Western traditions. When one moves beyond or, perhaps, dives deeply into the Remonstrant and Contra-Remonstrant debates leading to and subsequent to Dordt and the *Congregatio*, one finds a rich inter-theological discourse of interpreting and polemicizing within and

between all of these groups. The Dominicans and Reformed emphasized the unmerited nature of efficacious grace while the Jesuits and Arminians wished to protect human freedom or contingency. Predictably, Dominicans likened Remonstrants to the Jesuits, and the Jesuits enjoyed casting their Dominican brethren as Calvinists. The Reformed unsurprisingly followed suit, comparing the Remonstrants to the Jesuits—even occasionally claiming that the latter were more orthodox in their writings on divine grace than the former!

Many of the essays in this volume focus on a particular, key person and his role in these debates; others examine a particular doctrine or how one slice of a tradition interpreted and reacted to the theological conflicts regarding God's grace. Three essays, broadly speaking, look at how the Reformed and Remonstrants interacted with each others' views relative to the Dominican vs. Jesuit divide. For example, Richard Muller's essay examines when and how Jacob Arminius appropriated the Jesuit Luis de Molina's doctrine of middle-knowledge (*scientia media*), which claims that, apart from God's decree or will, God knows what any rational creature would do in any given situation and so wills a particular world in which those creatures freely do what He knew they would do.

Two of the English delegates at the Synod of Dordt, Samuel Ward and John Davenant, also garner their own essays. Stephen Hampton's essay on Ward pushes back against the typical narrative that Ward's position on the efficacy of infant baptism was novel, showing instead that even earlier Reformed theologians such as William Whitaker and William Perkins argued for a similarly strong sacramental efficacy in baptism, not to mention that Augustine himself taught that the guilt of original sin was remitted in all the baptized. For those familiar with Jay T. Collier's *Debating Perseverance*, Hampton's piece adds another historical layer to the debates on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints among Church of England ministers and theologians. John Davenant's Thomistic account of predestination is



the focus of David Sytsma's essay. Sytsma details the way in which Davenant employed the Dominicans and Jesuits for his own polemical ends against the Remonstrants and the (as Davenant believed) pelagianizing-tendency of certain Jesuits. The Hampton and Sytsma essays will be of special interest to Anglicans seeking to better understand their Reformed heritage.

In his essay on John Calvin, Charles Raith II asks whether Calvin actually read Thomas Aquinas firsthand. Interestingly, Raith concludes that the evidence suggests Calvin did not have any direct engagement with Thomas. This helps to account for Calvin's occasional misunderstanding of the medieval scholastic distinctions employed by his contemporary Roman Catholic theologians.

The division among early modern Roman Catholics along Jansenist, Dominican, and Jesuit lines is well-known, but some articles in the book complicate this narrative. For example, Stephen Gaetano convincingly demonstrates that, while we might wish to speak of a Dominican soteriological consensus centered around the theology of the Spanish Dominican Domingo Báñez, there was in fact a significant amount of intra-Dominican disagreement on the doctrines of reprobation and a universal supernatural grace, to name but two. Moreover, Thomas Osborne Jr.'s essay establishes that some of the views on faith and the authority of Scripture taught by the Spanish Dominicans were so similar to the Protestant position that even the Reformed polemicist William Whitaker could claim that there was mere verbal disagreement between the two.

For this Protestant historian, the most fascinating essays engage the Roman Catholic tradition and its response to the Protestant soteriological debates over divine grace. Two especially stand out. The first of these, by Eric DeMeuse, looks at the Jansenists and their interactions with the Reformed and Thomists of their day. For example, Cornelius Jansen and his followers saw in Arminianism a Protestant form of Jesuitism. According to DeMeuse, the Jansenists were aware of the Synod of Dordt and generally saw the Contra-Remonstrants (i.e., the Reformed) as closer to the Augustinian doctrine of divine grace and a step removed from the less orthodox position taken by Calvin—even if the Reformed were still deemed Protestant heretics. After receiving a copy of the Canons of Dordt in Latin, Jansen said that the Canons “almost completely follow the doctrine of the Catholics with regard to predestination and reprobation” (248).

The second notable essay is authored by Matthew Gaetano. According to Gaetano, Thomists after the Synod of Dordt began to admit that the Reformed were substantially arguing the same doctrines that they had been defending against the Jesuits. In order to justify this argument, given how often they animadverted against Calvin's predestinarian theology, Thomists claimed that Calvin's unorthodox teachings on grace had been dismissed by later Reformed theologians. In other

words, the early modern Dominicans had a Calvin against the (later) Calvinists view of Reformed theology. They believed, with some justification, that the later Reformed orthodox—those represented by the Canons of Dordt—had shifted away from Calvin's teaching on free choice, reprobation, etc. By the mid-seventeenth century, a steady stream of Thomists began speaking up in support of the doctrines of grace taught by the Reformed. Perhaps the leading Dominican theologian in the middle of the seventeenth century, Jean-Baptiste Gonet argued that “many of the Calvinists abandoned Calvin” and embraced the Thomist position on free choice, predestination, and reprobation (312). Even Jesuits, as Gaetano shows, seemed to realize that the later Reformed were shying away from some of Calvin's less guarded statements. The early-seventeenth century Roman Catholic Martinus Becanus told an amusing story about Reformed theologian David Pareus' defense against the charge that Calvinists believe God is the author of sin. Becanus, the Jesuit, tells the story in first person:

Last fall, our own Nicolaus Serarius and I were at the mineral fountains of Schwalbach. There we randomly ran into David Pareus, a Calvinist and a professor at Heidelberg. We greeted the man very politely and he did so in turn. As we walked, he amicably and modestly objected to me that, I [...] wrote that “the God of the Calvinists is the author of sin.”

I responded that I had solidly proved that proposition from the words and opinions of Calvin. In response, he said, “Let it be that this is the opinion of Calvin but not of the Calvinists.” At this point, smiling, Serarius proposed the following: “Lord Pareus, this quarrel between us will be settled once that ‘ists’ [in ‘Calvinists’] is removed and all will be well.” Pareus was pleased [...] (318, translation slightly modified).

The truth of this story is not as difficult to believe after reading the various essays in *Beyond Dordt and De Auxiliis*. Catholics and Protestants relied on each other in early modern polemics. Because of the *lingua franca* of the day—Latin—theologians were able to keep up with what other Christian traditions in Europe were teaching. *Beyond Dordt and De Auxiliis* reminds us that just as the early modern theologians read outside their own tradition to understand it more fully, so contemporary Protestants and Roman Catholics will best understand our own traditions by reading earnestly outside of them. If there is any hope of reconciliation between Protestants and Roman Catholics, such reading will be essential.

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FOUCAULT AND THE HOPE OF RESURRECTION

THE POWER OF RESURRECTION: FOUCAULT, DISCIPLINE, AND EARLY CHRISTIAN RESISTANCE, BY PATRICK G. STEFAN. FORTRESS ACADEMIC, 2019 | REVIEWED BY MATTHEW COLVIN

April saw the anniversary of the incarceration of Wang Yi, the pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, China. His testimony and faithful suffering have been an inspiration to Christians around the world. One friend of mine described him and elder Qin Defu as “lions of the faith.” Anticipating his own arrest, Wang Yi wrote a Declaration of Faithful Disobedience to be released after he had been detained for two days. In it, he says,

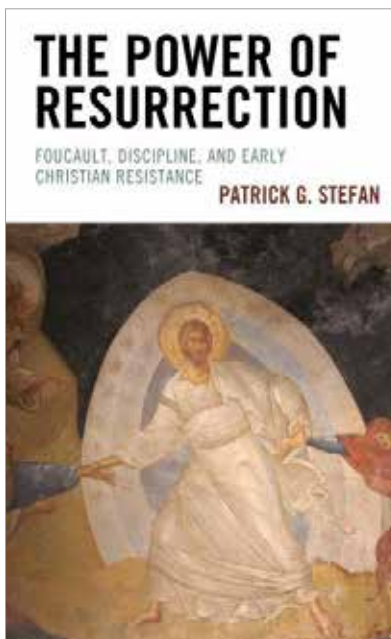
All acts of the church are attempts to prove to the world the real existence of another world...I hope God uses me, by means of first losing my personal freedom, to tell those who have deprived me of my personal freedom that there is an authority higher than their authority, and that there is a freedom that they cannot restrain, a freedom that fills the church of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ...if through this he continues disciplining and building up his church, then I am joyfully willing to submit...Those who lock me up will one day be locked up by angels. Those who interrogate me will finally be questioned and judged by Christ.¹

In these words from a modern Chinese pastor, we hear the unmistakable spirit of the persecuted Church in the first three centuries. Just as the martyrs of the first three centuries defied the power of governors and emperors in the name of the risen Christ, so Wang Yi’s eschatological perspective relativizes the power of the Chinese Communist Party.

The rise of Christianity within the Roman Empire has attracted scholarly attention in recent years. Rodney Stark’s *The Triumph of Christianity* appeals to such factors as the church’s better treatment of women, better treatment of the sick, and eschewing of abortion and infanticide—a sociological explanation in which theology is con-

spicuous by its absence.² At the other extreme, N.T. Wright has urged that theology was the centripetal force holding together the worldview of the messianic people of God, so that for the early Church, theology was load-bearing in a way that it had not been in previous ages.³ At the same time, there is an ongoing debate in New Testament studies about whether the New Testament, and especially the writings of the apostle Paul, contains veiled or not-so-veiled ideas aimed against the power of Caesar. On the one hand, Wright and Richard Horsley have claimed that anti-imperial polemic is an important part of the theology of the early Christian movement, albeit perhaps disguised or expressed in coded languages.⁴ On the other hand, John M.G. Barclay denies that there is any such anti-imperial message and accuses the “anti-imperial Paul brigade” of torturing the evidence.⁵

In the scholarship on these issues—both the “triumph of Christianity” and the subversion of Caesar’s power—there has been remarkably little reflection about just how such subversion actually took place. Patrick Stefan’s book supplies this lack, and it does so from a wide-ranging familiarity with the literature on the early church.



Stefan’s approach relies upon the analysis of power propounded by Michel Foucault. This has advantages and drawbacks. The downside is that the Foucauldian theory of power, like other tendentious and controversial theories (e.g. structuralism, feminist theory, Marxism, etc.), can become a bed of Procrustes that tortures the evidence. The upside is that whether the theory is true or not, it serves as a help-

1. Wang Yi, “My Declaration of Faithful Disobedience.” <https://www.chinapartnership.org/blog/2018/12/my-declaration-of-faithful-disobedience>
2. Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).
3. N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).
4. Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2014) and *Jesus and Empire: the Kingdom of the God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
5. John M.G. Barclay, “Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Judaism: Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 275* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 363-387.

1. Wang Yi, “My Declaration of Faithful Disobedience.” <https://www.chinapartnership.org/blog/2018/12/my-declaration-of-faithful-disobedience>

ful heuristic device to distinguish the different kinds of power and their mechanisms. Foucault's theory of power focuses things for us; it isolates them so that we can perceive them more closely; it highlights patterns and structures.

Foucault distinguishes several types of power. Of these, the two most relevant for Stefan's thesis are sovereign power and disciplinary power. In sovereign power, the sovereign controls his subjects externally, by public displays of his power over life and death. In the case of Caesar, this was via public executions, gladiatorial games, and the like. "This spectacle demonstrated the sovereign as the victor who regained his honor through the struggle between sovereign and subject."⁶ We may doubt this construal of capital punishment, especially when we recall that it was also imposed on Israelite society by the Torah, despite the lack of any obvious earthly "sovereign." There is also room to doubt whether the use of the death penalty in Christian societies past and present is an instance of "sovereign power," though Foucault would no doubt have said it is.

This sovereign power is contrasted with disciplinary power, in which the power of the authority is internalized in the soul of the subject by means of disciplinary mechanisms. These mechanisms are enumerated as (1) control of the subjects' activities, (2) their spatial distribution, (3) their organization into classes ("genera"), and (4) their

6. Patrick Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection: Foucault, Discipline, and Early Christian Resistance* (Lanham: Fortress Academic, 2020), 57.

combination into a united force (such as a military unit, or a hospital) to accomplish the will of the authority. Stefan believes that the first three mechanisms of Foucauldian disciplinary power (though not the fourth) are found in the early Church and that these mechanisms subverted and opposed the sovereign power of Caesar. The Foucauldian taxonomy of power is provocative, but difficult to swallow whole. Given the alleged overlapping compresence of multiple different mechanisms of power (sovereign, disciplinary, biopolitical) in the same society at any given time, so that evidence of any one apparatus is not evidence against the dominance of another apparatus, we may well ask whether Foucault's theory is falsifiable. Be that as it may, it remains a useful heuristic device. By using Foucault's categories, Stefan is able to give a provocative new reading of the evidence of early Christianity.

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For instance, Stefan shows that, since the sovereign power of Caesar was exercised by the public killing of the bodies of the condemned, the early Christian apologists insisted upon a bodily, physical resurrection. He gives a thorough survey of patristic sources, citing Pseudo-Justin, Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian, and Origen, but above all, Athenagoras: "[Without a body], man as such cannot be said to exist." (*Res.* 25.2-3). It is an impressive collection of authorities, and it gives the lie to recent misrepresentations of the patristic and Biblical doctrine, such as David Bentley Hart's denial of the physicality of the resurrected body.⁷

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7. David Bentley Hart, "The Spiritual Was More Substantial Than the Material for the Ancients" in *Church Life Journal* (July 26, 2018). <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-spiritual-was-more-substantial-than-the-material-for-the-ancients/>



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This hope of bodily resurrection shaped the Christian experience of time, first at the level of the week, then later via the Easter feast and other annual holy days. “The ever-increasing precise calendar of the Christian movement began to divide and order time for the subject so that the point of focus (resurrection) could penetrate the body using a program (liturgy) that would provide a schema of behavior that could differentiate the homogenous mass into individual units.”⁸ If there is a weakness to Stefan’s discussion, it is in its failure to give sufficient consideration to the ordering of time in Judaism—though he does acknowledge that the early Christian movement “borrowed from and grew alongside its neighbors, especially early Jewish synagogue worship.”⁹ The mother religion had, after all, set hours of daily prayer, a weekly Sabbath, and several annual feasts. It would be interesting to analyze Jewish “activity control” via the calendar in Foucauldian terms.

After the calendar, Stefan analyzes a second tool of disciplinary power: architecture. His analysis focuses on two structures, the third-century house church of Dura-Europos in Syria, and the fourth- through sixth-century Santo Crisogono in Rome. Stefan imaginatively reconstructs the activities within the eight rooms of the house church, positing a Roman soldier passing from catechumenate, to baptismal font, to eucharist—so that the early Christians “used this partitioned space for ritual, [and] these disciplinary mechanisms were...ritually infused with the theology of the resurrection.”¹⁰ Some of this reconstruction is substantiated by the frescoes that adorn the building’s walls, but on the whole, it is speculative (as Stefan admits), not least because the Dura building is fairly unique; we do not possess a large sample of Christian buildings from the third century.

Analysis of the house church could be improved by comparing that building with the famous third-century Jewish house-synagogue from the same city, similarly decorated with frescoes, and perhaps even more concerned with resurrection than the house-church.¹¹ Given that the layouts of the two religious buildings are similar (both were originally built as houses, after all), such a comparison might offer a salutary restraint upon speculative reconstructions of the theological use of space. In a similar way, Stefan’s analysis of Santo Crisogono as an instance of rank distinction enforced by architecture (a rood screen divided the nave from the chancel) invites questions about how such architectural innovations matched the development of clericality distinctions.¹² Both of these proposals—hierarchical observation in Dura-Europos and architectural distinction of rank in Santo Crisogono—are provocative and exciting ideas, but must be judged as yet unproven.

8. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection*, 137.

9. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection*, 136.

10. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection*, 177.

11. Cf. Edna Garte, “The Theme of Resurrection in the Dura-Europos Synagogue Paintings,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* Vol. 64, No. 1 (July, 1973), 1-15.

12. On this topic, cf. David Rankin, “Class Distinction as a Way of Doing Church,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 58 (2004), 298-315.

In connection with such “hierarchical observation,” Foucault drew upon Jeremy Bentham’s idea of the panopticon, a prison with a central observation room capable of gazing upon any of the radially-arranged cells at any moment. Stefan points out that panopticism is the key to Foucault’s idea of discipline: the subject of such discipline, being under constant observation by authority, internalizes the authority’s requirements and judgments and forms a “soul” (in the tendentious Foucauldian sense) that controls the subject’s own body from within, in contrast to the external application of sovereign power. Stefan claims that in the early Church’s discipline, the resurrected Jesus is the agent who wields this panoptic power.¹³

I would urge, however, that the Hebrew Bible has a strong doctrine of God’s omniscience and the impossibility of escape from his observation: witness the inability of the psalmist to evade God’s presence in Psalm 139 (“O lord, thou hast searched me...Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?”), or the fear of God’s inquisition in Job 13:9 (“...will it be well with you when He searches you out?”) and Jeremiah 17:10 (“I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways.”); examples could be multiplied.

This Biblical conception of God is the source for Bentham’s panopticon, which is a device contrived to mimic the effects of divine omniscience. Ancient Judaism produced a disciplinary society *avant la lettre*. Jews looked at pagan nations and saw their undisciplined behavior as the natural result of denying God’s omniscience: “They say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High? Behold, these are the ungodly (Ps. 73:11-12). Oddly, Stefan omits from his analysis some of the most

“panoptic” passages of the NT, such as Hebrews 4:13 (“And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”) or 1 Timothy 5:25 (“So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden”). In light of the Hebrew Bible’s description of YHWH in the same way, we may wonder whether the “panoptic” power of the risen Christ is not best described as a part of what Richard Bauckham has called his “divine identity.”¹⁴ Certainly, it can be best understood against this Jewish background.

In connection with this panoptic mechanism of disciplinary power, Stefan notes the eucharist as a locus of Christ’s real presence, the occasion when the early Christians were visited and inspected by their risen Lord. I might question, however, whether that presence of Christ in the eucharist is conceived of by the Biblical authors primarily as one of panoptic judgment rather than of visitation.¹⁵ Stefan does not discuss the Pauline view that Jesus visits and judges his church in a manner reminiscent of Passover (1 Cor. 11:30-32), but he cites Ig-

13. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection*, 95-96.

14. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

15. Matthew Colvin, *The Lost Supper: Revisiting Passover and the Origins of the Eucharist* (Lanham: Fortress Academic, 2019), 128.

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natus and Origen who believe that Jesus is presiding, and Justin, who believes that Jesus' flesh and blood are present.¹⁶

I commend Stefan's thorough demonstration of the centrality of resurrection as the motivating doctrine behind early Christian defiance of the Roman Empire's power. "The problem of the Christian martyr in the arena was that he did not play the part assigned to him by Caesar."¹⁷ Indeed, Stefan notes that in 257, the emperor Valerian changed the way Christian martyrs were treated in order to avoid embarrassment by martyrs resisting Caesar's right to death. "The martyr was not simply out to pursue honor and fame, but true glory, eternal life, and a front-row seat at the judgment day when his executioner would meet the true judge."¹⁸ A survey of early Christian burial practices and funerary inscriptions rounds out Stefan's survey of the evidence, and powerfully corroborates his thesis that the doctrine of resurrection was the motivating force behind early Christian defiance of the Roman Empire's power. I would only add that the power of resurrection in the mind of martyrs is no less evident in the defiant recitation of the Shema by Akiba as the Romans combed his flesh with iron hooks (b.Ber. 61b), or the taunts of the seven brothers killed by the torturers of Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc. 7). The transcen-

dent power of the creator is the common property of Christians and Jews; from it, the doctrine of resurrection follows as the necessary consequence when the unstoppable power of God meets the seemingly immovable fact of death. Stefan's work provokes this question: How did the doctrine of resurrection function differently in Christians than it did in Jews?

In the end, the book makes an extremely valuable contribution to scholarship on the first centuries of Christianity. By his integration of literary, archaeological, and liturgical evidence, Stefan brings the doctrine of resurrection down from the realm of ideas and demonstrates the many ways in which it was applied and lived out in the early Church. His illuminating thesis sheds welcome light upon the behavior of both Christians and their persecutors in our day as well. The church's response to persecution by Chinese authorities and other tyrannical governments embodies the same Spirit and is empowered by the same doctrine of resurrection.

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16. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection*, 107.

17. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection*, 205.

18. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection*, 206.

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