



# Luther on Ecclesiastes: Nature in the Light of Grace

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**M**artin Luther delivered a series of lectures on Ecclesiastes at the University of Wittenberg in 1526, wrestling with “the special style of this author, which often diverges from the ordinary usage of the [Hebrew] language and is very strange to our way of speaking.”<sup>1</sup> But the commentary deriving from this, *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, did not appear until 1532 nor, after these trying and tumultuous years, without considerable editorial help from friends and assistants. Assuming for the purpose of commentary the text’s ascription of its authorship to King Solomon,<sup>2</sup> Luther reads the text as a statement of political theology. This canonical relation allows him to import themes from the book of Proverbs, especially concerning the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom. Yet the commentary is of interest not only as an innovative reading vis-à-vis the exegetical tradition of a difficult text<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes* (1532), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), 15:7. Hereafter referred to as *LW*.

<sup>2</sup> In his 1524 *Preface to Ecclesiastes*, however, Luther acknowledges the complexity of the composition, indicating that Solomon was not directly its author. In this preface he urged that the book’s critique of human free will is its essential theme. *LW* 35:263–4.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 123–27.

*Though it may seem strange, Martin Luther had an affinity for the Teacher of Ecclesiastes, especially for both his rejection of the trust human beings place in their wisdom, and his respect for the overarching power of God, even when human beings cannot understand it. With Ecclesiastes, Luther laughs at the pretension of those who would seek to know wisdom without knowing God.*

but as a mature statement of Luther's own political theology and his considered reflections on the relation of nature and grace.

Hermeneutically, Luther insists with contemporary humanists that we fasten upon "the purpose and aim of the author, which it is important to keep in mind and to follow in every kind of writing and even more important here." For Luther the key text in this regard is Ecclesiastes 2:24: "There is nothing better for man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God." Luther comments, "This is the principle conclusion, in fact the point, of the whole book. . . . A remarkable passage, one which explains everything preceding and following it."<sup>4</sup>

It yields for Luther the teaching of *holy secularity*, to be sure not as a blanket sacralization of the way things are but rather as designating the "field of battle" over which and for which an apocalyptic war between Satan and the God of the gospel is being waged with the fate of the creation at stake. Into this battle the Christian people of faith are called and enlisted: "Christians should be exhorted to live in the very midst of the crowd, to marry, to govern their household, etc. Moreover, when their efforts are hindered by the malice of men, they should bear it patiently and not cease their good works. Do not desert the battlefield but stick it out."<sup>5</sup> Such spiritual warfare includes, pointedly, drinking one's beer or changing the baby's diaper to glorify God—and to spite the devil!

#### MISREADINGS OF ECCLESIASTES

From the outset Luther acknowledges the considerable confusion in the exegetical tradition about the content and indeed status of this evidently *skeptical* book *within* the book of *faith*.<sup>6</sup> But with the help of the aforementioned key verse, and as a good Augustinian in theological anthropology, Luther discerned Augustine's "restless heart" behind the "curiosity" of the "speculative philosophers" who would ascend to heaven above only to conclude that the gods do not care for us who are mere mortals.<sup>7</sup> In Luther's reading, however, Solomon is a wise man and an experienced ruler and, according to his office, is "speaking simply about the human race and is clearly confining himself within the limits of human nature."<sup>8</sup> Yet Solomon can speak in this limited way just because he knows that attention to mere life on the earth is also "from the hand of God." The ambiguity is important and its resolution crucial. The "realm of vanity," as we shall see, is the realm of nature seen only in the light of nature.<sup>9</sup> But the same realm can and should also be

<sup>4</sup> LW 15:24.

<sup>5</sup> LW 15:106.

<sup>6</sup> R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 191–93.

<sup>7</sup> LW 15:55, 99.

<sup>8</sup> LW 15:9.

<sup>9</sup> LW 15:14.

seen in the light of grace.<sup>10</sup> The shift between these perspectives gives the epistemic access that reads the text correctly as *holy* Scripture.

Consequently, it is also a bad interpretation by the pious, in reaction against the agnostic reading of the book by speculative philosophers, if they “suppose that the knowledge of nature, the study of astronomy or of all of philosophy, is being condemned here and to teach that such things are to be despised as vain and useless speculations. For the benefits of these arts are many and great, as is plain to see every day. In addition, there is not only utility, but also great pleasure in them in investigating the nature of things.”<sup>11</sup> The middle way between the theological agnosticism of speculative philosophers and pious know-nothingism is a pragmatic conception of knowledge as that which benefits and befits earthlings who are not God. “Knowledge does not refer to speculative knowledge, but to a practical and experiential insight, discretion in the performance of actions, which we call experience and practice in human affairs.”<sup>12</sup> The philosophers’ suspicion that the author of Ecclesiastes was, like some of them, an Epicurean hedonist is a smear which Luther himself suffered from papist opponents. Luther’s affirmative but deflated view of earthbound human knowledge is, on the other hand, not a natural insight but a spiritual gift, the Holy Spirit’s gift of true wisdom consisting in fear of the Lord.<sup>13</sup> Luther thus sees the state of nature described by Ecclesiastes in the light of grace and thinks Solomon does so too.

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Consequently, it is not the philosophers but especially “theologians” who “most wickedly” abuse Ecclesiastes by retooling the skepticism of the philosophers to teach that one must be “in doubt and uncertainty about the grace and love of God.”<sup>14</sup> The *crux intellectum* for Luther is whether Ecclesiastes militates against the gospel truth that “Christ is our mediator and is the author of an absolutely certain grace and salvation, freely offered to us and conferred upon us by God.”<sup>15</sup> Such is a possible construal of Ecclesiastes, Luther concedes, if the reader has not

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<sup>10</sup> I import Luther’s scheme of the three lights of nature, grace, and glory to organize this essay’s presentation of his commentary.

<sup>11</sup> LW 15:9.

<sup>12</sup> LW 15:28.

<sup>13</sup> For helpful elaboration of this crucial differentiation from Kantianism, see Marius Timman Mjaaland, *The Hidden God: Luther, Philosophy, and Political Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 125–33.

<sup>14</sup> LW 15:3.

<sup>15</sup> LW 15:4.

been grasped by the Spirit and thus reads this text about nature only in the light of nature rather than in the light of grace in Christ.

But chiefly, throughout his commentary Luther singles out the more subtle but “no less noxious” doctrine of “contempt of the world”—that is, when the “world” is taken as those “things which have been created and established by God.” Christ is not a foe of nature for Luther but has come to redeem and fulfill nature so far as it has been ruined by the devil.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, “it is foolish and wicked when many preachers inveigh against glory, power, social position, wealth, gold, fame, beauty, or women, thus openly condemning the creation of God. . . . For God has made all things to be good and to be useful for some human purpose.”<sup>17</sup>

Philosophical readings of Ecclesiastes, then, which insinuate atheism vis-à-vis the good Creator of the material world are mirrored by theological readings of Ecclesiastes which imply agnosticism vis-à-vis the certainty of salvation, leading respectively to libertinism or asceticism. Luther rejects both as failures to read the text as Scripture.<sup>18</sup> For they have taken the repetitive formulation about the fleetingness of all things created *objectively* with regard to the world God has created rather than *subjectively* with regard to the human relationship to the good but temporal gifts of God the creator. The true “vanity of vanities” resides not in the temporal gifts of God but in the inconstant and faithless heart of human creatures.

## GIVING GOD AND GIFTED CREATURES

But of course, whatever is temporal is also fleeting—unless in a specific way carefully defined the eternal God is also temporal and promises a share in his own divine life to mortal beings who may then live in time by faith. Luther reads Ecclesiastes’ “fleetingness of all things” as speaking about affections and desires: “The heart is a constantly yawning chasm; it wants everything, and even if it obtained everything, it would go on looking for still more.”<sup>19</sup> As a consequence of this constant inconstancy of human desire, the more things change, the more they remain the same.<sup>20</sup> “The feeling that is never satisfied is always the same.”<sup>21</sup> There-

<sup>16</sup> See Luther’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 15 in *LW* 28:59–213.

<sup>17</sup> *LW* 15:8.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, for the same reason Luther struggles with the misogyny of the notorious passage in Ecclesiastes 7 (*LW* 15:130–33). His treatment of the passage corresponds to the larger interpretive strategy: Solomon confines his observations to life under the sun from the perspective of his office in human government. At the same time, the observation of nature in the light of nature alone under the conditions of fallenness cannot but lead to the kinds of philosophically skeptical and theologically agnostic conclusions also in the interpretation of the female as the male’s misfortune. Ecclesiastes “is speaking about the female’s sex as it is outside the state of grace, in the state of nature, and “under the sun.” Nature does not make prescriptions for the works and miracles of God” (132). Thus, in the light of grace “as a creature of God, a woman is to be looked upon with reverence” (130). To be certain, Luther immediately denies that the woman rules the man, but rather says she is subject to the man. The question to Luther is whether this subordination reflects the order of creation or the postlapsarian distortion of it.

<sup>19</sup> *LW* 15:19.

<sup>20</sup> *LW* 15:101.

<sup>21</sup> *LW* 15:20.

fore it is the height of spiritual wisdom to know that one has a gracious God who approves of our works and actions according to Romans 8:16. “For unless our heart immerses itself in the will and good pleasure of God, it can never sweeten bitterness of heart; it will always remain bitter unless the heart is filled with the good pleasure of God.”<sup>22</sup> “The human heart ought to be content with the things that are present and to stifle its affection for the things that are future. The fact that it does not is truly the vanity of vanities. Therefore this is what he is saying . . . there is nothing new in human beings, but God does many new things.” The gifts of God are genuinely new every day. “God by his works and gifts does many great and ever new things.”<sup>23</sup> God, one might say, ever surpasses God in gift-giving. And a self-surpassing God—namely, the God of the gospel—is eternally capable of time.

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#### VANITY OF VANITIES: ENVY AND GREED

The *proper*—that is, *Johannine* and incarnational—understanding of “contempt for the world” thus also indicts ascetic contempt for materiality and embodiment. What is properly contemptible is “depraved affection and the desire of us men who are not content with the creatures of God that we have and with their use but are always anxious and concerned to accumulate [more] as though we were going to live here forever”<sup>24</sup>—that is, as if we could make time stand still to possess it as our own rather than to receive it ever new as gift. It is “envy,” ultimately of God (the serpent’s *sicut Deus eritis*), which animates the restless heart’s abuse of the creation to put private greed before public need (as Luther was also writing about concurrently in his treatises against usury).<sup>25</sup>

“This is the vanity of the human heart, that it is never content with the gifts of God that are present but rather thinks of them as negligible; and it continually looks for others, and then still others, and is not satisfied until it achieves what it wishes, whereupon it despises what it has achieved and looks for something else.”<sup>26</sup> The wicked thus begin their hell in this life because they have “lost every

<sup>22</sup> LW 15:148.

<sup>23</sup> LW 15:21.

<sup>24</sup> LW 15:8.

<sup>25</sup> Paul R. Hinlicky, “Luther in Marx,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2:322–41.

<sup>26</sup> LW 15:10, 63.

consideration of the blessings, the creatures, and the things of God on account of [their] greed. . . . [The greedy person] thinks of nothing, wonders at nothing, yearns for nothing—except money in the same way the ambitious man looks at nothing but honor. The lover does not look at his own wife but is always looking at another woman.”<sup>27</sup> The commandments against coveting are universal in scope and correspond to the loss in the human heart of love of God in violation of the first commandment. To make matters worse, the righteous suffer the envy of these wicked who want the appearance of their righteousness but not the substance of it. No one “who only wants to do the right thing will ever be without envy in the world.”<sup>28</sup> It is this entire dynamic of envy circulating through humanity which is vanity, a fleeting chase after wind which perishes as soon as it is grasped.

But Solomon “denounces the inconstancy and vanity of the human heart, which enjoys neither present nor future goods; it does not acknowledge or give thanks for the blessings it has received, and it vainly pursues the things which it does not have.”<sup>29</sup> Thus the properly Johannine “despisers of the world are those who accept everything as God sends it to them, using everything with thanksgiving while it is present and freely doing without it if the Lord takes it away.”<sup>30</sup> Willingness to suffer for righteousness’s sake is for Luther, following the gospel of John, the faith of the martyrs, who know that even when one has fallen into the hands of the persecutors, one has not fallen out of the hand of God. “To Christians this is a great comfort, so that they know that death has not been placed into the power of tyrants nor into the hands of any creature and so that they are not extremely fearful about death but die like children when it pleases God.”<sup>31</sup> The times for everything under the sun are in God’s hands. All—the pleasure but also the pain—comes as gift from above.

## QUIETISM?

There are a number of passages in Luther’s commentary on Ecclesiastes which could be read as inculcating resignation to injustice and some generalized human passivity. But this reading would be akin to those of the philosophers and theologians who read the book’s description of natural life solely in the light of nature. Certainly this was the great complaint of the Enlightenment against Luther on behalf of its characteristic doctrine of the sovereignty of the modern self, casting off its self-caused immaturity to seize the agenda from the God who had never showed up to bring in the kingdom in his absence. But this Cartesian-Kantian doctrine of the modern self as causal agent is predicated on an anthropological dualism grounded in the sovereignty of thinking things over extended things with all the cruel economic and political implications of that now-fading imperium.

<sup>27</sup> LW 15:96–97.

<sup>28</sup> LW 15:64

<sup>29</sup> LW 15:11.

<sup>30</sup> LW 15:31.

<sup>31</sup> LW 15:51.

Luther's commendation of a definite passivity in relation to the sovereign grace of God is based on the explicit rejection of this dualistic anthropology (which is why opponents accused him of Epicureanism). But what actually transpires when anthropological dualism is rejected for the sake of a holistic doctrine of the human self in theological anthropology? The crucial question becomes: What captures desire?

Ecclesiastes, Luther says, "teaches us to neglect our own counsels and anxieties, by which our heart is troubled. So it is that when the gospel rejects the righteousness of works, it sets our consciences free, not our hands. For God has commanded the work, but forbidden the anxiety. . . . He is forbidding care and anxiety, but demanding toil."<sup>32</sup> This distinction, which separates Luther from anti-nomians, marks the "royal road" between pride and despair.<sup>33</sup> "You are foolish if you either presume that you alone can accomplish everything or despair of everything when it does not go your way."<sup>34</sup> The theological antidote to despair is hope—not optimism based on a rational projection into a calculable future, but hope in the incalculable God who daily does new things. In the interim, hope imitates the heavenly Father who causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good alike.<sup>35</sup> To be God is to give. This knowledge of God's sovereign and paternal creativity is the ground of hope. "For God does not let himself to be surpassed in generosity, but surpasses our generosity in endless ways."<sup>36</sup> Luther consequently admonishes those who give only from that which they do not need. "But you should know that the poor man ought to eat with you, so that you would rather do without something than that he should be in want."<sup>37</sup> Hardly a quietest admonition!

## THE ONTOLOGY OF CREATION

When Luther with Ecclesiastes admonishes that the world cannot change itself for the better, it can certainly sound like political pessimism. But in the light of grace which Luther shines on the text, it is in fact the realism of Christian hope which perceives a fallen creation subjected to futility lest in its restless and exploitative ambition it utterly ravage the earth. The statement of Ecclesiastes 5:2, "God is in heaven and you are upon earth," was famously cited by Karl Barth to this effect in the preface to the second edition of his Romans commentary, crediting Kierkegaard. But both of these modern theologians learned this ontology of creation from Luther, and from Augustine before him.<sup>38</sup> "Do you therefore fear God . . . and let

<sup>32</sup> LW 15:70.

<sup>33</sup> LW 15:74.

<sup>34</sup> LW 15:124.

<sup>35</sup> LW 15:146.

<sup>36</sup> LW 15:171.

<sup>37</sup> LW 15:173.

<sup>38</sup> Simeon Zahl has helpfully articulated Luther's debt to Augustine in this respect, in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

him rule by his counsel[?] For he is in heaven, and you upon earth.”<sup>39</sup> “You are not God, neither the founder nor the restorer of the divine ordinance.”<sup>40</sup> The God of the Bible certainly rebukes government when it violates its own divine institution, but this rebuke of government is committed to the ministry of the word for the sake, then, of recalling government to its task of rough justice in the fraught and contested social world of sinful human beings.

It is in this context of Christian realism that Luther takes up the question of theodicy with the temptation to atheism which it brings and the impetus therefrom to assertion of the sovereign self in place of the absent God. “In fact you will say there that there is no God, unless you are fortified with the fear of God and the acknowledgment of the truth. For you will see the oppression of the poor and the subversion of justice. Then you will murmur, ‘How unjustly these things happen!’ And you will say: ‘Where is God? Why does he put up with these things?’”<sup>41</sup> This lament parrots the great question of the prophet Habakkuk. So far as it is the genuine prayer of faith under affliction and assault, it is profoundly scriptural. But according to Luther, if it is not answered with that prophet’s resolution concerning the righteousness of living by faith, disgust and despair of human government in the world lead to the so-called “Benedict option” of those who consider themselves “resident aliens” (Gnostic sparks of divine light trapped in a material body with unruly passions and embedded in unjust social relations—no exit!). The alternative is the willingness of a Bonhoeffer to sin boldly in the thick of the battle—also no exit!

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Luther, of course, was not thinking of Stanley Hauerwas or Rod Dreher but of the medieval monks: “For when they saw that this world and its affairs are administered unjustly, they concluded that it is best to live a solitary life and not to become tangled in such affairs or in public business, so as not to be compelled to see and bear such injustice.”<sup>42</sup> But as we witness in today’s “cancel culture,” “whoever does not want ever to be offended will find more things that offend him than anyone else does”—a bottomless pit of internecine contrastive identity mechanisms.<sup>43</sup> To use an expression of nineteenth-century Marxism, the wisdom Ecclesiastes teaches is for Luther an exposé of the utopian folly of such “false consciousness.” This is a consciousness so infatuated with surface appearances that it

<sup>39</sup> LW 15:81.

<sup>40</sup> LW 15:169.

<sup>41</sup> LW 15:83.

<sup>42</sup> LW 15:89.

<sup>43</sup> LW 15:92.



uncritically confuses appearance with reality, social construction with the materials that are constructed, language with the reality to which it refers, the sign with the thing signified, and thus opinion with truth.

“Truly the world is ruled by opinions. God rules by realities, but we are troubled by opinions and lose the reality just as that dog did in Aesop.”<sup>44</sup> Primarily for Luther this confused consciousness is the *opinio legis*, the “legalistic mindset,” which assumes the merit of freely willed action and its reward in place of the mentality of the Spirit which consists in the merit of Christ and its gratuitous gift to all the helpless who put trust in it. This for Luther, however, is not merely consolation for the troubled individual but a penetrating political insight into the folly of ideological bewitchment. “For certainly no one is so evil that he would do evil if he knew that it is so evil in the sight of God. That is why he calls them fools, ignorant and blind men, who do many things as though they were good, and do them with great seriousness, but do not know that the sacrifices, which they carried out with such zeal, are utterly wicked. . . . But you see that the highest and best zeal and religion is called foolish and evil.”<sup>45</sup> Of course, the same insight applies to today’s *secularism*, taking this present age and appearance with religious devotion “as if we would be here forever”—as ultimate reality and thus fought over with fanatical zeal.

#### SOLOMON’S POLITICAL ECONOMY

Political wisdom is insight into government of a fallen, but nevertheless beloved, world in which envy and greed motivate the governors as much as the governed. The wisdom from above which is the fear of the Lord thus brings much vexation to those who govern, considering “how miserably and dreadfully things happen in this world. . . . For anyone who is very wise has many reasons to become angry” at the way things are.<sup>46</sup> And yet to moderate this righteous anger, Luther reads Solomon’s Ecclesiastes as a statement of communitarian political economy which “recommends a social existence and a community of goods . . . , [working] not only for ourselves alone but also for the benefit of others. . . . Solitary accumulators, who are not human beings but beasts and dogs, are condemned by Solomon. It is more beautiful, he says, to live a social existence with a community of goods. . . . He is recommending human community and association in the enjoyment of things, against the solitary life of the miser.”<sup>47</sup>

The authority given to natural law and human reason in this domain derives from the mandate of creation in Genesis 1:26–28, subjecting earthly things to humanity as steward of God’s creation.<sup>48</sup> Thus for Luther, Solomon “is here speaking not of personal righteousness but of communal or political justice, not of

<sup>44</sup> LW 15:96.

<sup>45</sup> LW 15:76.

<sup>46</sup> LW 15:28.

<sup>47</sup> LW 15:68.

<sup>48</sup> LW 15:49.

righteousness before God but of justice in governing others and before the world.”<sup>49</sup> Wisdom in government requires *equity*,<sup>50</sup> achieving a rough equality in practice. Equity requires a living governor to turn from the abstract universal of written rules to unanticipated circumstances qualifying particular cases. The wise ruler therefore moderates the laws “as a driver does with a wagon and to adjust everything in accordance with places, times, persons, etc. . . . For the highest wisdom is not the knowledge of the laws and statutes themselves but the knowledge that wisdom is not heeded in this world. . . . One should not trust force but rule by wisdom, which often saves everything in the kingdom when force ruins everything.”<sup>51</sup> This is the peculiar human wisdom mandated in Genesis 1:26–28—namely, that we have been created “as human beings so that we might act by reason and accomplish more through it than all the animals with their strength.”<sup>52</sup>

Thus it may seem that Luther wants it both ways in this iteration of his “two kingdoms” thinking: denying authority to reason over things above the sun but bestowing authority on reason to reign over all things under the sun. But just this “two kingdoms” wisdom, so to distinguish and relate the competencies of human reason, is the fear of the Lord, the knowledge of what we are responsible for in light of the knowledge of what God does for us. The unique expression in Ecclesiastes, “under the sun,” is consequently interpreted by Luther along the lines of the Johannine “in the world but not of the world,” another scriptural source of Luther’s “two kingdoms” distinction. Ecclesiastes “distinguishes life and godliness from the life of the world, or life under the sun.” Holy secularity really is *holy*, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom from above establishing itself precisely in distinguishing itself from the kingdom below. “To have a happy heart and to rejoice in present things with the fear of God is not a thing of the world but a gift of God. It comes from heaven, from beyond the sun. But being afflicted with these things means being no different from the beasts.”<sup>53</sup>

With Ecclesiastes, and our contemporary postmodernists, Luther thinks that by the light of nature humans appear to be no different than the beasts: in the end both perish. If the Lord did not give his Spirit, no one could say that humans are different from the beasts because people and cattle, being made of the same dust, also returned to the same dust.<sup>54</sup> Flirting indeed with Epicureanism, Luther cites approvingly the philosophical naturalist of antiquity, Lucian, “a man of great understanding and delight” who ridiculed “the opinions of the philosophers about the soul.”<sup>55</sup> But Luther locates human dignity in divine calling, which at once empowers and limits human agency by the medium of language. Confidence in

<sup>49</sup> LW 15:124.

<sup>50</sup> On Luther’s conception of equity, see H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

<sup>51</sup> LW 15:125.

<sup>52</sup> LW 15:125.

<sup>53</sup> LW 15:58.

<sup>54</sup> LW 15:60.

<sup>55</sup> LW 15:60.

immortality is but a happy heart which rejoices in present things, conscious that temporal gifts and eternal ones alike come from above.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, the “two kingdoms” political economy is not just there to be apprehended naturally. It must be generated by the insertion of the gospel of grace, by the One who binds the strong man to enter his house and plunder his goods. Preeminently, this is the new thing that the Lord by his Word and Spirit accomplishes.

### SOLOMON’S WARNING

Is this not prescient of our condition in so-called postmodernity, which is really modernity desperately continued by other—surreptitious—means after collapse of confidence in the great capitalist and communist metanarratives which validated the Anthropocene and tried to bring its project of human sovereignty to victorious conclusion in the tragic twentieth century? In the absence of divine calling, how can human dignity based upon demonstrable human agency be validated except as a desperate assertion of the sovereignty projects ravaging the earth and spiraling into juggernauts of self-destruction?<sup>57</sup> When he penitently awoke from the ruins of Nazi Germany, the erstwhile fan of Adolf Hitler and Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus observed that there had been “no fear of God” in the land. One certainly wonders whether preaching today whose chief burden is to tell us that “God is not a problem” is in the company of the Althaus of the 1930s in this our American time of “Weimarization.”

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*Thus Luther’s warning here accords in substance with the so-called “Serenity Prayer” that Reinhold Niebuhr composed for democratic—that is, self-governing—citizenship: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” That is so because the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.*

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Luther’s Solomon tells us how things are under God’s sovereignty in the realm of nature reconfigured by the light of grace. Solomon, for Luther, presupposes but in this treatise “is not speaking about the deeds of God, which are not confined to the area under the sun but are everywhere, but about those things that are done by men and what happens under heaven. This is the place in the realm committed to us, for the works of God are above heaven, below heaven and everywhere. It is,

<sup>56</sup> LW 15:59.

<sup>57</sup> Paul R. Hinlicky, “Complicity and the Truth of the Christological Path of Ecclesial Resistance: Summons to a New Catechesis for a Time of Despair,” in *Truth-Telling and Other Ecclesial Practices of Resistance*, ed. Christine Helmer (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2021), 47–62.

therefore, of works that we do by our plans and our powers”<sup>58</sup> that he speaks. This is the work in particular of government. Luther focuses upon the fraught institution of government. The treatise thus essentially consists in a prophetic warning. If it is despair of human government that makes monks, it is government that displays human character—usually for ill. For “unless there is some Solomon to exhort and console him, government crushes the man, extinguishes him and utterly destroys him.”<sup>59</sup> Hence with Solomon’s help, rightly understood, the light of nature may yield to the light of grace.

Thus Luther’s warning here accords in substance with the so-called “Serenity Prayer” that Reinhold Niebuhr composed for democratic—that is, self-governing—citizenship: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” That is so because the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. It is neither “good intentions” nor “wisdom [of the speculative philosophers] that accomplishes anything, not even genuine wisdom [of the learned sciences], but the will of God so that we learn to pray (Matthew 6:10): ‘Thy will be done.’”<sup>60</sup> This petition is the practice of the fear of God: “to walk by faith, which permits God to reign and prays that the kingdom of God may come, but meanwhile tolerates and bears with all evils . . . and to turn one’s cause over to him who judges justly.” But faithless “princes,” living in nature only under the light of nature, “who want to reform and correct everything in the best possible way often do a great deal of harm.”<sup>61</sup> In truth, such faithless princes grab the tiger by the tail; they don’t play the game, but the game of domination plays them so that the more things change, the more they remain the same. “Governing men belongs only to God. Therefore anyone who has charge of administration should know that he is administering matters which cannot be controlled by any human counsel. The hearts of men do not lie in our own power. Only those who have the fear of God are easy to govern,” beginning with rulers themselves.<sup>62</sup> This demand for true self-awareness is Luther’s warning from Ecclesiastes: “This is what it means to fear God: to have God in view, to know that he looks at all our works, and to acknowledge him as the author of all things, both good and evil.”<sup>63</sup> For this is the God of reality, not of opinions, whom, to love and to trust, we must also fear. ⊕

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<sup>58</sup> LW 15:23.

<sup>59</sup> LW 15:5.

<sup>60</sup> LW 15:25.

<sup>61</sup> LW 15:27.

<sup>62</sup> LW 15:160.

<sup>63</sup> LW 15:55.