

## The Violent Preservation of the Church: Luther's View of Christian Action in the Face of Destruction

Paul Strawn, Pastor, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Spring Lake Park, Minnesota

The Pastors Conference of the Western Zone of the Missouri District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Concordia High School, Concordia, Missouri, October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012

Over the past three years, Christian congregations in Iraq (Nov. 2, 2010)<sup>1</sup>, Egypt (May 8, 2011)<sup>2</sup> and Nigeria (June 17, 2012)<sup>3</sup> have been the scene of violent attacks resulting in great injury or death. While all of these attacks were carried out by Islamic groups of one stripe or another, immediately raising the topic of martyrdom, the case could be made in each situation for more complex, multifaceted motivations, than simply the desired death of Christians. To the dead and their families, such hair-splitting is beside the point. And within cultures where Christianity is an integral part of cultural identity, certainly naming those killed as martyrs would not be inappropriate. For the Christians around the world who viewed the graphic images of those incidents, a more immediate, practical, and yet age old theological question was raised: What should a Christian do if faced with destruction at the hand of another person? What if a gunman enters a nave during worship and begins to shoot members of the congregation—whatever the gunman's motivation might be? Should a Christian run away? Allow himself to be shot? Shoot back?

So far, such situations within the United States have not been incidents of martyrdom, but have been restricted to domestic disputes that have spilled out into the public arena<sup>4</sup>, the end result of illicit relations (sometimes even involving the clergy),<sup>5</sup> some sort of gang-like violence like that recently in Atlanta (June 7, 2012),<sup>6</sup> or unexplainable acts of troubled individuals<sup>7</sup>. Still, the question should be asked: Would a situation in which Christians, specifically because they are Christians, are attacked in a church, be any different than a situation in which an enraged husband, or vengeful gang member, or clearly deranged individual seeks the death of certain individuals within a congregation, or simply people in general?<sup>8</sup> Gut-reaction would quickly lead us to the conclusion that both are exactly the same situation, that the intention of the person who wishes to destroy other people is irrelevant; he or she should simply be subdued by whatever means possible, as quickly as possible.

But then what do we do with the martyrs of the church, especially those who could have run away, or could have fought back, who could have taken up arms, and defended themselves, but did not, believing that they should not, for their lives, their deaths, were in the hands of God? I do not think I have ever fully recovered from reading in college the description of the early Christian martyrdoms in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 263-339). That work, dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, contains the accounts of no less than 146 martyrdoms which after awhile, I simply needed to stop reading. The gruesomeness of the methods used was simply appalling. We forget, however, that martyrdom—being destroyed violently for our confession of our Savior Jesus Christ—was an integral

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2010/11/201011134724982931.html>. Cf.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010\\_Baghdad\\_church\\_attack](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Baghdad_church_attack).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8501118/Egypt-in-crisis-talks-after-Muslim-mobs-attack-Christian-churches.html>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/18/world/africa/3-churches-in-northern-nigeria-are-attacked.html>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/US/florida-church-shooter-jeremiah-fogle-questioned-wifes-fidelity/story?id=14559194>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/05/02/missouri-woman-admits-plotting-to-kill-her-husband-with-her-pastor/>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/06/07/2-dead-2-injured-in-georgia-church-shooting/>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/03/us/03amish.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>8</sup> So the Columbine High School Massacre (April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999), Norway Massacre (July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011), and just recently, the Aurora Theater Shooting (July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

part of the Christian life in the first three centuries of the church. The Acts of the Apostles recounts how the Apostles “[rejoiced] that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Jesus]” (5:41). It also includes the martyrdom of Stephen (chp. 7) at the hands of the Sanhedrin, and the pogrom in Jerusalem following the martyrdom of James (chp. 12) by Herod. Tradition tells us that all of the apostles of Jesus, except for John, were martyred. “The blood of martyrs”, so the 2nd-century church father Tertullian of Carthage (160-225), was “the seed of the church”, and the church’s reaction to those who avoided martyrdom, led to the Novatianist schism in Rome in the third century, and Donatist schism in North Africa in the fourth. Martyrdom would play a significant role in missions activities throughout the centuries and martyrdom by the hand of fellow Christians was an integral part of the Reformation period. Little known, but closer to the present day is the annihilation of over one million Armenian Christians by the Ottoman Turks beginning in April of 1915 and coming to a completion during the closing years of the Ottoman empire (1922). It has been estimated that almost 7000 members of the Roman Catholic clergy were killed in Spain in the summer of 1936 in what is now known as “The Red Terror”.<sup>9</sup> More familiar are accounts from the Rwandan genocide of 1994 during which the church buildings into which thousands fled for sanctuary were simply surrounded, bulldozed or burned to the ground.<sup>10</sup>

For his part, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was confronted by and had to grapple with almost all of the issues raised by these instances of violence against Christians, both ancient and modern. He personally was placed under the ban on May 25, 1521 by Emperor Charles V (1500-1558) with the *Edict of Worms*<sup>11</sup>, making Luther not only an enemy of the church, but an enemy of the state. That meant that for the rest of Luther’s life, anyone could have “robbed, injured or killed him without legal consequences.”<sup>12</sup> How was Luther to understand such a status as a Christian? Should he have simply turned himself into the authorities? Begged for forgiveness from the church? Faced with his own imminent destruction at the hands of both the church and the state—institutions established by God—Luther was also faced, while sequestered in the Wartburg castle, with the violent actions of his fellow professor at Wittenberg against the church, Andrew Karlstadt (ca. 1480-1541), who in 1521/22 led iconoclastic riots in that town, forcing Luther’s return.<sup>13</sup> After his return, Luther would also have to come to grips with the violent actions taken against those who supported his reforms but were outside of the physical and political protection of his prince, Fredrick the Wise (1463-1525). Two Augustinian monks in Antwerp, for example, Johannes van Esschen and Hendrik Voes, refused to recant Luther’s teaching, and so on July 1, 1523, on the basis of the *Edict of Worms*, were executed by the authorities in Brussels.<sup>14</sup> Another monk, Hendrik von Zutphen, was kidnapped, tortured, and executed not by the authorities, but by an angry mob in Hemmingstedt on December 11, 1524. Both events elicited responses from Luther.<sup>15</sup> The following year occasioned the rebellion now known as the *German Peasants’ War*, undertaken, so it was thought, with Luther’s blessing; and its putting down, also with comment by Luther. The aftermath, including many executions, both just and unjust, did not go unnoticed by him,

---

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red\\_Terror\\_\(Spain\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Terror_(Spain)).

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan\\_Genocide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_Genocide).

<sup>11</sup> “For this reason we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, where upon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.”  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict\\_of\\_Worms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict_of_Worms).

<sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial\\_ban](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_ban).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Holger Sonntag, “Afterword,” in *Christians Can Be Soldiers* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2010), p. 110 f.

<sup>14</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict\\_of\\_Worms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict_of_Worms).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *A New Song Here Shall Be Begun*, AE 53:211-216; and *The Burning of Brother Henry*, AE 32: 261-286.

and would be addressed the following year (1526) in the work *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be in a Holy Estate*, recently retranslated and published under the title *Christians Can Be Soldiers*<sup>16</sup>(CCBS). There Luther grappled with the basic questions of the Christian's role in violent action in general, and specifically those undertaken by the state.

It could be argued that since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, times have changed, and so what Luther has to say or not to say about this subject really is of no consequence. As Christians, however, we actually continue to live in the same time as Luther, and that is, the End Times. The Church still exists as do the states established by God.<sup>17</sup> Thus the violence experienced by Christians by whatever human agency is not simply physical, emotional, or mental, but theological, apocalyptic, even Satanic. The Christian lives constantly, as Luther put it, not in a beautiful meadow, but on a battlefield, the battlefield which is the End Times, in which Christ "is by our side upon the plain with His good gifts and Spirit," a battlefield for which the Christian has been fitted with the "full armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11 ff.). Lutheran theology, Christian theology, makes little sense when this basic theological context of the Christian is forgotten. Therefore the present question of providing for the safety of Christians gathered together within a specific building in this place or that is more far-reaching than perhaps it would, at first, seem. It is not simply a question of violence against Christians, or the just violence of Christians on behalf of their neighbors, but also what is increasingly being interpreted by the world as the unjust violence of Christians against their neighbors.

### **Violent Action of Christians on Behalf of Their Neighbors**

***"But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one" Luke 22:36.***

The appearance of *Christians Can Be Soldiers* affords the opportunity to the modern reader to once again visit the question as to the extent and purpose of the violent action of Christians on behalf of their neighbors. The title of the work is somewhat deceptive, for it addresses not just the actions of Christians serving as soldiers for a given government, but of Christians in general, whenever they are faced with an option, in view of their individual offices, to act violently, perhaps even in opposition to their government. *Christians Can Be Soldiers* is a pivotal work in this regard, written as it was (as noted above) after iconoclastic violence in Wittenberg, Lutheran martyrdoms at the hand of the church and the state, and the Peasants Revolt and suppression. It was preceded by *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to all Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion* (1522),<sup>18</sup> *Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* (1522),<sup>19</sup> *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523),<sup>20</sup> and *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*.<sup>21</sup> *Christians Can Be Soldiers* thus represents much reflection on Luther's part and is the basis for what follows.

It is commonly understood that Martin Luther's view of Christian action in the face of destruction was developed in view of the Second Table of the Law, the love of our neighbor which is commanded by

---

<sup>16</sup> Trans. by Holger Sonntag, Ed. by Paul Strawn (Lutheran Press: Minneapolis, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> So Luther contended noting: "The Gentiles thought differently. They knew nothing about God nor recognized worldly authority as God's order. Instead, they considered worldly authority to be created and established by man. They thought it was not only equitable, but also praiseworthy, to depose, murder, and exile useless, evil authorities." CCBS, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> AE 45:57 ff. AE = Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955 ff.).

<sup>19</sup> AE 51:70 ff.

<sup>20</sup> AE 45:81 ff.

<sup>21</sup> AE 46:17 ff.

God. Since that love is expressed chiefly in the Christian's office, as defined by the *Table of Duties* in the *Small Catechism*, it is the Christian's office, not his person, which primarily informs his actions in the face of destruction.<sup>22</sup> The Christian does not respond violently on behalf of his person as Christian.<sup>23</sup> The Christian's person—he himself—is ready and able to die at any moment with no thought of the eternal outcome of that death.<sup>24</sup> According to his office, however, the Christian has a responsibility to others, to his neighbor, to remain alive so he can continue to serve in love. So the Christian husband and father, when attacked, does not fight back to preserve his own life, but in order to remain the husband of his wife and the father of his children. They need his loving service, so he must act on behalf of his office to preserve his life. On this basis alone it could be asserted that a church building security system be put in place not because the Christians within that building are afraid to die, but because they wish to preserve their love for their neighbors by protecting the expression of that love in the offices that the individual Christians within the building maintain within a given society. If, for example, a congregation in a small town was attacked, a congregation in which the local doctor, dentist, policeman, grocery store owner and school teacher were killed, the effect on the community, just on the basis of their offices alone, would be devastating, perhaps even signaling the end of the community.

Such violent action on behalf of the Christian's neighbor does, however, have limitations. It occurs within the context of his citizenship within a specific country. The limits for such action are established by the government of a given country,<sup>25</sup> and are so limited, because the government itself is established by God. Of course, since the beginning of the Enlightenment (ca. 1650-1800), the divine establishment of government has seemed gradually to fade out of the general consciousness of the Western world, replaced by the concept of the divine establishment, the "inalienable rights," of the individual. As the Roman Empire demonstrated two thousand years ago already, however, these two concepts need not be mutually exclusive. And certainly for the Apostle Paul they were not. Thus the Apostle Paul's appeal to Caesar (Acts 25), i.e. his usage of governing authorities to save his life, remains informative. Why teach submission to governing authorities (Romans 13)? Why not flee the prison in Philippi when an earthquake made his escape possible (Acts 16)? Why not allow himself to be ripped apart by the angry mob in Jerusalem (Acts 21) in Stephen-like martyrdom? By appealing to the government, Paul sought protection of his person (to maintain his office of proclaiming the Gospel to the Gentiles), not on the

---

<sup>22</sup> "There is no getting around it, a Christian has to be a secular person of some sort. As regards his own person, according to this life as a Christian, he is in subjection to no one but Christ, without any obligation either to the emperor or to any other man. But at least outwardly, according to his body and property, he is related by subjection and obligation to the emperor, inasmuch as he occupies some office or station in life or has a house and home, a wife and children; for all these are things that pertain to the emperor. Here he must necessarily do what he is told and what this outward life requires. If he has a house or a wife and children or servants and refuses to support them or, if need be, to protect them, he does wrong. It will not do for him to declare that he is a Christian and therefore has to forsake or relinquish everything. But he must be told: "Now you are under the emperor's control. Here your name is not 'Christian,' but 'father' or 'lord' or 'prince.' According to your own person you are a Christian; but in relation to your servant you are a different person, and you are obliged to protect him." Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount* (1532) AE 21:109.

<sup>23</sup> "Christians, of course, have no authority to fight on the basis of their Christianity. Christians as Christians have no worldly authority." CCBS, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> "...when it is seen that authorities completely disregard their own souls' salvation by being unjust, what is it to you that they destroy your property, body, spouse and child? They cannot harm your soul." Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> "As far as their spirits are concerned, Christians are subject to no one but Christ. Yet the bodies and goods of Christians are indeed subject to worldly authority and owe it obedience. When Christians are called into the military by worldly authority, they should and must fight out of obedience. Not as Christians, mind you, but as those within the world, citizens, obedient people as far as their body and temporal goods are concerned." Ibid., p. 25.

basis of his faith in Christ, not on the basis of his humanity, on "human rights", but on the basis of another office which he also held, and that is Roman citizen.

(Perhaps the challenge for the modern Christian in this regard, especially in the United States, is that he has forgotten the power, the authority, and even the responsibility of the office of citizen which he in fact possesses. Unlike some other countries like Indonesia, Christians in the United States still have great political opportunity and power as citizens. Christians as citizens can serve at every level in federal, state and local government. Christians as citizens can propose legislation and rally for its support. Christians as citizens can vote and protest. Christians as citizens can speak out publically via the media. Lack of success in these areas does not mean a lack of either political opportunity or power. And also does not relieve the Christian of the responsibility of citizenship.)

Within this context, that of the Christian's office as citizen, pause must be given to consider the early Christian martyrs, who perhaps had no such protections, or had their rights within the Roman government suspended or revoked, had no standing within the Roman government as citizens, or simply were victims of mass hysteria.<sup>26</sup> What is to be thought of divine establishment of government in such an instance? Should something have been done for those Christians? Would it have been appropriate for the Christians to rebel in Spartacus-like fashion?<sup>27</sup> Perhaps their meaning ultimately became their "limited action"—what they could undertake in the face of a lack of basic political protection, even by the God-established government—and that was nothing. The Roman world then looked on as Christian men, women and children were gruesomely executed, and in fact, in those executions, the martyrdoms, saw revealed the savage animals that the Roman citizens themselves actually had become. This issue was not one of the relevance or lack thereof of citizenship in a given country, but of responsibility of citizenship in the care of and concern for fellow citizens.

Thus today, as at that time, the limitation of protection of Christians as Christians by modern governments—even to the detriment of the Christian person—cannot be blithely overlooked, or ignored, as a legitimate and even God-given aspect of Christian life in those countries, some sort of political "freedom of the Gospel" justifying an enlightenment-like Christian mob mentality to accomplish its purposes in government overthrow. Christian action on behalf of the neighbor must take place within the context of limited political freedoms—freedoms *always* limited in *some* way in a given country. And yet, especially during the last century, the question was raised again and again as to whether or not it was in fact a Christian's duty to assist in the violent overthrow of a sitting government—if that government limited the political freedoms, the human rights, of its citizens. Most famously we think of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's (1906-1945) involvement in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). But also we should be reminded of the revolutionary activities of Roman Catholic priests and nuns in central and South America in the 1950's, 60's and 70's, spawning the school of thought known as Liberation Theology,<sup>28</sup> and of Protestant missionaries in south-eastern Nigeria, during the Biafran Conflict (1967-70), and even now, the sticky-wicket of the political meaning of house churches in China.

It is at just this point, where the person of the Christian, in his office as citizen, and the actions of the God-given authority of the government, come into conflict. In *Christians Can Be Soldiers*, Luther takes

---

<sup>26</sup>Intriguing in this regard is the relatively recent work which has been done on the correspondences between officials in outlying reaches of the empire, and Rome, when it came to the persecution of Christians in particular. A sampling demonstrates that more than one provincial officer questioned the wisdom of destroying Christians who were assets, great assets, to their communities.

<sup>27</sup> "Spartacus ... (c. 109–71 BCE) was a leader of the slaves in the *Third Servile War*, a major slave uprising against the Roman Republic." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spartacus>.

<sup>28</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation\\_theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology).

quite some time discussing just this issue, summarizing again what he had asserted in his earlier works surrounding the peasants' revolt:

"The question you will ask now is this: "Why should we suffer under tyrants? You are too easy on them! Based on your teaching their evil will only increase! Is everyone's life, spouse, children and assets to remain in such danger? Who will want to do anything worthwhile in such a situation?" I reply: I cannot teach anyone who wants to do only what seems to them to be right and good. Such people will simply go ahead with their plots and plans and kill all their authorities. We'll see how that works out eventually. I can only teach those who truly want to do what is right. To such people I say that those in authority are not to be kept in check with sacrilege and rebellion, as did the Greeks, Romans, Swiss, and Danes. There are other ways to accomplish this."<sup>29</sup>

So how can Luther take this position? That bad government should be tolerated? He gives five reasons: 1) Bad governments harm themselves by treating their people poorly;<sup>30</sup> 2) Would not the people risk everything they have—their lives, homes and families—to follow such a bad government into war if they believed they personally would profit from it? The end result would be the same: Destruction at the hand of bad government;<sup>31</sup> 3) God remains present, even if government is evil; God desires the destruction of bad government, but our sin does not allow it (Job 34:30: "He lets a knave rule because of the sins of the people,");<sup>32</sup> 4) Bad governments always run the risk of causing rebellion;<sup>33</sup> 5) Christians need not avenge themselves.<sup>34</sup> Citing these five reasons for toleration of bad government, Luther then notes additionally that changing a government is much easier than its improvement,<sup>35</sup> and ultimately, individuals in rebellion do not have divine authority to do so:

"There is a great distinction between being unjust and punishing injustice, between the law and the fulfilling of the law, between justice and the administration of justice. Every human being has a share in justice and injustice. But the authority to define and administer what is right and wrong belongs alone to God, the Lord of right and wrong. God alone delegates such authority to earthly authorities and their representatives. No one is to usurp this power unless it is certain that he has received such authority by the command of God, or from his servants, the

---

<sup>29</sup> CCBS, p. 43 f.

<sup>30</sup> "In fact, by doing such things authorities harm themselves more than you. How? They condemn their own souls. A destruction of their own lives and possessions follows. Is not their injustice then sufficiently avenged?" *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>31</sup> "What would happen if these same authorities waged war? Would not then your own life, property, spouse and children be in danger of annihilation? Would not you be put in danger of being captured, tortured and killed for your authority's sake? Would you kill your authorities in that case?" *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> "We are quick to acknowledge that we are governed by a knave. No one, however, wants to acknowledge that a knave does not rule on account of his knavery, but on account of the sin of the people. The people do not recognize their own sin and think that the tyrant rules because of his knavery. This is how blind, perverted, and mad the world is." *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> "Additionally there remains the great mass of heathen, godless, and unchristian people, who, if God imposes it, resist their authorities unjustly and wreak havoc, as the Jews and Greeks and Romans often did." *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>34</sup> "God has yet another way of punishing those in authority. He can raise up an alien authority, such as the Goths against the Romans and the Assyrians against Israel. In other words, there is certainly enough avenging, punishment, and danger to keep tyrants and authorities in check. God does not let them be evil in joy and peace. He is right behind them. Indeed, he surrounds them. Like a rider on his horse, God has tyrants between his spurs and keeps a tight rein on them. This agrees also with the natural law which Christ teaches in Matt. 7:12: "Do unto others what you would have them do to you." *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>35</sup> "Changing authorities and improving authorities are two different things. They are as far from each other as heaven is from earth. Change can be easy. Improvement is difficult and full of risk. Why? It is not a matter of our will or ability. It lies in God's hands and is only according to his will." *Ibid.* p. 50.

earthly authorities. What would become of the world if everyone in the right would themselves punish those in the wrong? If that would be the case, male servants would strike their master, female servants their mistress, children their parents and students their teacher. That would really be good order! What need would there be for judges and worldly authority established by God?"<sup>36</sup>

So what of Christians, who in fact have an office in government, and whose office within government requires that they act violently, even at times, killing other human beings? Other Christians? Here we are thinking of policemen, but more particularly of soldiers. Our current war has been understood to be, to an extent, a Christian/Muslim conflict. In Luther's day, however, the wars that were fought between princes, between states, were more often than not, wars fought between Christians. The same could be said for our own Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the European theaters of World War I and II. This simple yet poignant point was brought home by a soccer match, played in no man's land, between the British and German troops, on Christmas Eve, 1914, during World War I,<sup>37</sup> an event in which the warring armies in trenches yards apart, heard their enemies singing carols about the birth of Christ. It is the mass slaughter of millions of Christians, particularly in the Great War, which ended the "Superman Theology" of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, ushering in the endlessly speculative dialectic theology of Karl Barth (1886-1968), creating the apocalyptic sagas such as *The Lord of the Rings*, of J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973), the *Chronicles of Narnia* of C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), (Roman Catholic and Anglican respectively), and providing for Lutherans a collection of letters by Hermann Sasse (1895-1976) published under the title *The Lonely Way*.

(On a personal note, while living in Germany for four years, my wife and I were befriended by an old Lutheran pastor in his 80's who had been a regular soldier in the German army during World War II, that made it to the outskirts of Moscow during the winter of 1941/42 where he manned a rocket launcher. His proudest moment had been freeing the Germans in the Volga region of Russia from oppression under Stalin. He had not been a National Socialist, a member of the Secret Service, but a member of the military, called to service during the war by his government. I thought to myself on more than one occasion as we talked: How strange it was, that we had a unity in Christ, and yet years ago, via our citizenship, via government action, our countries had been at war, he seeking to kill my wife's grandfather, my wife's grandfather seeking to kill him.)

So was it right, according to Luther, to act violently on the government's behalf, at the behest of the government, in wartime, even against other Christians? The short answer is yes. According to Luther, war was simply the massive outbreak of crime that needed to be swiftly brought to an end so that life could go on in peace and tranquility,<sup>38</sup> and the gospel could once again be preached. The act of war was like the amputation of a gangrenous leg, which would cause great pain to the body, but ultimately save its life.<sup>39</sup> When it comes to war, God is the Lord not simply of "power and might" (2 Chron. 20:6) as one of our new liturgies puts it, but the Lord of that power and might *realized concretely* in time and space, in history; he is therefore the Lord of Sabaoth, the Lord of armies. The armies' actions are God's actions,<sup>40</sup> and obviously, the swords and spears must be wielded by someone.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (Plume:2002).

<sup>38</sup> "But what is waging war rightly other than punishing wrongdoers and preserving the peace? The punishment of a thief, murderer or adulterer is a punishment for an individual doer of evil. The rightly-waged war, however, punishes collectively multiple wrongdoers, who have done as much damage as their number allows." CCBS, p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> "In summary, when it comes to war, one must not look at how it kills, burns, destroys and seizes. This is what narrow, simple children's eyes see. When it comes to a surgeon, such eyes look no further than the amputated hand or leg. Such eyes do not see that the point of the surgeon's actions is to save the entire body." Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> "Such tremendous strife, common throughout the entire world, which no one can endure, must be counteracted by the little strife called war or the sword. This is why God honors the sword so highly that he calls it his own order.

There were caveats to this simple answer, however. The first was that the use of war certainly can be abused.<sup>42</sup> War is one thing. Its abuse another. The second caveat was that war should not be an offensive, but a defensive war. It was Luther's contention that history proved that whoever started a war, ultimately suffered defeat. That ultimate defeat, so Luther, demonstrated the folly of such an offensive undertaking.<sup>43</sup> The third caveat was that such a war should be a last resort, only after much talking had occurred.<sup>44</sup> The fourth was that there is a time, when talking must be ignored, and war waged.<sup>45</sup> The fifth caveat: The just cause of the war should not be thought to guarantee victory, but such a war must be waged in the fear of God.<sup>46</sup> The sixth, that soldiers, while justly earning their pay, should not engage in war simply for personal gain, i.e. a soldier should not volunteer for service only for the pay which he receives.<sup>47</sup> The seventh and final caveat: A Christian cannot simply act without a conscience,

---

God does not want us to say or think that humans invented or established it. Because of this, the hand that uses this sword and kills is no longer man's hand, but God's hand. In such a case, it is not man, but God, who hangs, tortures, beheads, slays, and wars. All these are his works and judgments." CCBS, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> "John the Baptist, as noted above, taught soldiers true Christian doctrine, and still allowed them to remain soldiers. John's only demand: Soldiers should not abuse their position. They should do no one injustice or violence. They should be content with their wages. Clearly then the waging of war is confirmed by God's word and command in the New Testament as well. Those who use war rightly and fight obediently are obedient to his word and serve God by doing so." CCBS, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> "That is not to say that war is never abused. War is clearly abused whenever killing and injuring take place out of malice and not out of need. But this is the fault of the person waging the war, not war itself. Then again, when has there ever been a job or work or anything so good that it has not been abused by malicious and evil people?" Ibid., p. 18 f.

<sup>43</sup> "It has always been the case, and still remains true, that whoever starts a war unnecessarily is defeated. Such a person cannot escape God's judgment, that is, God's sword. In the end God finds and destroys him." Ibid., p. 19; "The question is properly framed this way: It certainly is not right to begin a war solely on the basis of the musings of every mad ruler. From the outset it should simply be said that whoever begins war is in the wrong. What is right is that whoever draws the sword first is defeated or at a minimum, punished in the end. It is a common fact of history that those who begin a war lose that war. Conversely, those who are forced to defend themselves are rarely beaten." Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> "Frederick, however, left his sword in its sheath. He always used words wisely, and pretended to be very frightened and to run away. He let others yell and scream while he remained seated before them. When asked why he let himself be verbally abused in this way, he replied: "I do not want to begin. But if I must go to war, you will see that I will bring it to an end." This is how he, even though many dogs snarled at him, remained unbiten. He saw that they were all fools. But he did not hold it against them." Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>45</sup> "War is war and cannot be of words alone. If such were the case, a given situation would become so convoluted that the angry, spiteful, and arrogant hotheads who are as tough as nails would become so weak that they would not be able to cut through butter when war finally began. After all, every ruler is duty-bound to protect those under his authority and maintain peace. That is his work. For this purpose a ruler bears the sword, Rom. 13:4." Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> "In fact, even though your cause for war is just, your spiteful confidence alone should bring about your defeat. After all, God cannot endure any pride or spite that is without humility and fear of him...Rather, God wants to be feared and wants to hear a song like this sung within our heart: "Dear Lord, my God, you see that I must wage war, although I'd rather not. Yet I do not base my confidence on my just cause, but on your grace and mercy. For I know that if I defiantly relied on a just cause you should justly let me fall as one who would justly fall, because I rely on my right, and not on your mere grace and goodness."" Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>47</sup> "Still it is true: If one serves in the military with a heart and mind that seeks and thinks of nothing but acquiring wealth; if wealth is the soldier's only motivation to the point that he does not gladly welcome peacetime; if a soldier is sad because there is no war—this man certainly goes beyond what is good and is the devil's; even if he



and must decide personally whether or not the cause of the war is just. If he knows it is not, he must refuse to serve. Luther writes:

“Another question is this: “What if my government wages war wrongly?” Answer: If you know for certain that your government is in the wrong, then you should fear and obey God more than men, Acts 5:29. You should not go to war and serve, for there you cannot have a good conscience before God. You say: “Ok, but my government forces me to serve. It will take my freedom from me and send me to prison. What is more, I would be despised and humiliated before the world. I would also be considered a coward, and an ungrateful citizen who abandons his country in its time of need.” Answer: You must risk it and lose for God's sake what is taken from you. He can give it back to you a hundredfold, as he promises to do in the gospel, Matt. 19:29: “Who leaves house, farm, wife, goods for my sake, will receive it back a hundredfold.”<sup>48</sup>

But this dilemma is no different than what is faced by other workers when the government would insist that a Christian perpetrate an injustice on its behalf.<sup>49</sup> The bigger question is when in fact such injustice is occurring. If the Christian cannot decide, so Luther, he is obligated to serve.<sup>50</sup>

So within the realm bordered by such caveats the Christian can indeed participate in military service, being the hand of the government, being the hand of God in which he can act violently in defense of his neighbor, but also in defense of his office. If the thought should occur that the situation should be simpler, that there should be a simple “Yes” and “No”, “Do” or “Don't” we should realize that the situation today for the United States military in Afghanistan is no less complicated than it was in Luther's day. As one specialist, who will soon be returning to that theater of operation recently shared with me in a conversation, put it: “We spend much more time learning when to shoot, than how to shoot.”

### **Violent Action of Christians Against their Neighbors?**

***“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” Matthew 11:12—from the traditional Gospel Reading for Reformation Sunday.***

The question of the legitimacy in these End Times of violent action undertaken by Christians on behalf of our neighbor, our office, and our government leads us to an even deeper question, and that is the seemingly more frequent attempts by the world to interpret Christian faith and life as one of violent action enacted against a neighbor. Certainly the Persian Gulf Wars, and now the war in Afghanistan, have been interpreted publically by some, even Christians themselves, to be wars of religion, of Christianity's triumph over Islam for Israel's sake, even to the extent of raising the question within the U.S. military if indeed American Fundamentalist Christians—those who subscribe to dispensational pre-

---

waged war out of obedience to the call of his government. Why? That soldier makes an evil work out of a good work. He does not care as much about serving in obedience and out of duty as enriching himself.” Ibid., p. 86 f.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 89 f.

<sup>49</sup> “But a person must also anticipate such danger in all other lines of work when the authorities force you to commit injustice. Yet because God wants to have father and mother forsaken for his sake, one must certainly also forsake governments as well for God's sake.” Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>50</sup> “However, if you do not know or cannot ascertain whether your government is in the wrong, then you are not to weaken uncertain obedience by an uncertain right. Seek instead your government's best interest in the manner of love. “For love believes all and does not think evil,” 1 Cor. 13:7. In such a way you are safe and do rightly before God.” Ibid.

millennialism--are actually "trying to use the military to start wars to fulfill Bible prophecy."<sup>51</sup> A popular response to such an idea—that American Christians are purposely causing war—has been the appearance of bumper stickers and jewelry which, using the symbols of world religions, spell out the word "coexist." The message is simple: It is religion which is causing war. Therefore religion must be curbed.

An even more disturbing trend is the move by a number of governments to stifle the preaching of specific Christian doctrines, labeling their proclamation as "hate speech." Here we can mention the Swedish Pentecostal pastor Åke Green, who famously in 2005 was convicted by his district court of hate speech for preaching against the sin of homosexuality. The case went all the way to the supreme court of Sweden, where the guilty verdict was overturned, but not because Green was not guilty:

"The Supreme Court stated that Åke Green had violated Swedish law as it currently stands regarding agitation against a group, and that the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression as well as freedom of religion does not protect him. However, the Supreme Court also stated that the freedom of expression as well as freedom of religion provided by the European Convention on Human Rights, which is superior to Swedish law, gives him protection, since jurisprudence shows that a conviction would probably not be upheld by the European Court."<sup>52</sup>

Canadian pastors with ties to the state also apparently are restricted somewhat in speaking out against homosexuality, as are now, with the repeal of the famous "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy, American chaplains serving in the U.S. military.

But is this governmental restriction of the preaching of pastors any different than some sort of self-imposed restriction by a pastor who wishes not to cause trouble within the congregation he serves? Little known outside of Minnesota is the fact that Minneapolis yearly hosts the second-largest gay pride festival in the country. Due to a large homosexual community, Lutheran pastors in the Twin Cities are more and more having to come to grips with congregation members, whose children, brothers and sisters, are publically declaring themselves to be gay, publically entering into "committed relationships," and even adopting children. Ten years ago, speaking out against homosexuality was not difficult. Now it is becoming a challenge. The relatives who were once appalled by even the thought of such a thing, now live as though it were nothing of importance, and are beginning to resent any condemnation of homosexual activity by their pastor.

But this is really no different than what happened when married couples began to divorce. And abortion became common. And couples began to live together. In each of these cases, the challenge to the pastor became the proclamation of God's Word, of Christian doctrine, when such sins occurred in the congregation he served. Why? It did not take any pastor worth his salt long to discover that when such situations were confronted, often, all hell broke loose. And it still does. A pastor speaking to a young couple that no one knows, that wishes to get married in the church, and is living together, is one thing; a pastor who dares to say anything to the son of the head elder, and the daughter of the LWML president, who are living together is another. In the first instance, the pastor is sharing God's Word. In the second, the pastor is often viewed to be acting inappropriately, "picking on" the couple, even acting violently. Why? Because the response to the sin addressed is often violent, involving screaming and yelling and wild gesticulating. Here the Swedish and Canadian governments are not wrong in recognizing that the condemnation of homosexuality may indeed lead to violence—to violent response to the Word of God as when two years ago in Minneapolis, Bibles being handed out at the gay pride festival were

---

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.defendproclaimthefait.org/>. Cf. Brian L. Stuckert, "Strategic Implications of American Millennialism," Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, at: <http://www.defendproclaimthefait.org/ArmyMillennDoc.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%85ke\\_Green](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%85ke_Green).

grabbed by some, ripped into pieces, thrown to the ground, and stepped upon.\* Or even just two weeks ago in Minnesota, when four churches—including two Lutheran churches—were vandalized, sacrilegious graffiti being left on their doors.<sup>53</sup>

Theologically, such a violent reaction to the law of God is described in Romans 7(7-8, ESV): “...Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, *produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.*” For Luther, the production of “all kinds of covetousness” was not simply the sudden recognition, as if in a mirror, of all kinds of covetousness, but almost an enhancement, a showing and inciting of the same. In his *Antinomian Disputations*, recently translated into English for the first time, he compares the effect of the law to that of water on limestone:

“The law snuck in, he says (Rom. 5:20), so that sin would abound, so that sin would be sinning beyond measure (Rom. 7:13). When the law was added, it aroused these passions. And certainly, if the law had not come, then sin would have been a good companion and had snored. Without the law, that poor sin would not have been exhibited and revealed. Therefore the law compels to sinning. For just as limestone does not at all burn without water, but where you add water, it begins to burn, thus is also the law, as Augustine said.(i) Therefore the law is the efficient cause of sin as water poured over the limestone is the effective cause. Now, therefore, whatever does cause a man to be set ablaze and provoked more to sinning, that is not to be taught; indeed, it is to be prohibited. The law is such, as has already been said. Therefore the law is not to be taught. The question is here, whether the water merely shows that the limestone burns or whether it itself sets it ablaze? Indeed, it itself sets it ablaze. Now I respond: This simile of Dr. Augustine solves the argument. For if this nature or this heat were not in the limestone, even water would by no means set it ablaze, like when it is poured over other things. But because there is in the limestone a certain fiery and ardent nature, water sets it quickly ablaze. This is also how it is with us, because our nature is evil, secure, and malicious because of the breath of the Serpent in paradise, as we have already often said. Yet when the law comes, that depraved and corrupt nature is provoked more and more, as, because it sees that it cannot deliver what the law demands, it begins to be resentful against God, to be angry, to boil with rage. And it becomes more and more wicked against God. For thus we all are by nature such, that we desire all the more the things forbidden to us, as someone said:

We always strive for the forbidden  
and we desire what has been denied.  
They do not want what you want;  
what you do not want, they desire all the more.

This is why the law is not the effective cause of sin, but it shows that nature is sinful, and by prohibiting it, arouses sin. Yet by its power it appears to obtrude natural malice and cause it to act, as it were. For if it were utterly silent, men would live pleasantly, they would not get so angry at God, they would not sin so much, and sin would not be so bountiful. We already said that the law is not the effective cause of sin, but its ostensive cause, not its increasing cause, but the demonstrating cause of this so perverted and corrupted nature of man.”<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.kare11.com/news/article/992555/391/Vandalism-spree-targets-churches-in-Buffalo>.

<sup>54</sup> *Only the Decalogue is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, Ed. and Trans. by Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), p. 181 f. Cf. p. 102; 202;

Of course, all that the law does is shows what is already there in the heart of man, bringing it into relief, and man then reacts to it, sometimes violently.

In that such a reaction to the Law can indeed occur, however, is it the responsibility of the church to cease to preach and teach the Law? In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther's extensive treatment of Romans 7, Luther admits that the proclamation of true Christian doctrine, including the Law, will indeed lead to conflict, true conflict, and he takes Erasmus to task for preferring the public peace above all else.<sup>55</sup> There, it should be noted, the issue was not the condemnation by the church of an immoral act of the Second Table of the Law, but of the First as well, specifically "lying or deceiving" by God's name, or in other words, teaching false doctrine. Does the modern pastor have a responsibility here? It might be suggested that just as the rise of divorce, abortion, and public fornication (cohabitation and homosexuality) has stifled speaking out about such for the sake of congregational peace, so has the inter-marriage of Christians of different denominations, marriage to non-Christians, or even marriage to Muslims, Hindus, etc. created an environment where the pastor must tread lightly, or risk violent repercussions.

So here should be noted the truly apocalyptic nature of Christian preaching which in these End Times "convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8). Insofar as the Christian himself is faced daily by the reality of the existence of his part in the world, of his Old Adam, he is not free from such "convicting," but must be confronted as well, and indeed might find himself reacting violently. Writing on this text Luther notes the true reaction of the world to its judgment by the Holy Spirit through preaching:

"Yet the term 'judgment' is used almost exclusively for the second aspect of judgment or sentence, namely, condemnation and the result or the implementation of condemnation. It is in this way that Christ also speaks here about judgment and wishes to point out, that when the Holy Spirit delivers the two parts of his sermon in the world, and convicts it of sin and righteousness, the world will not accept it. Neither will the world accept nor wish to be convicted of being in sin and being without righteousness. The world will also not let itself be moved by being offered Christ's righteousness. The world rather will assert everything against such teaching and convicting of the Holy Spirit and condemn and persecute it. The world will even pretend to do the right thing by doing so and be in no way obligated to put up with having its wisdom and righteousness—which it considers to be God's gifts and worship—destroyed. It rather pretends to be obligated to resist such preaching by force. The Holy Spirit must continue to convict for the sake of such judgment. He must also teach that conviction and tell the world that it and its judgment are condemned along with its prince and head, the devil. Here then begins the strife: One judgment runs into conflict with the other. For the world also asserts its judgment and wisdom against the conviction of the Holy Spirit and despises this teaching. It does this because the conviction of the Holy Spirit does not originate in the world's wisdom and in people who are great and excellent in the eyes of the world, but is preached by poor, lowly people. The world opens its mouth against this and says: "What is this but a few disoriented

---

<sup>55</sup> "In a word, these declarations of yours amount to this — that, with you, it matters not what is believed by any one, anywhere, if the peace of the world be but undisturbed; and if everyone be but allowed, when his life, his reputation, or his interest is at stake, to do as he did, who said, "If they affirm, I affirm, if they deny, I deny:" and to look upon the Christian doctrines as nothing better than the opinions of philosophers and men: and that it is the greatest of folly to quarrel about, contend for, and assert them, as nothing can arise therefrom but contention, and the disturbance of the public peace: "that what is above us, does not concern us." This, I say, is what your declarations amount to. — Thus, to put an end to our fightings, you come in as an intermediate peace-maker, that you may cause each side to suspend arms, and persuade us to cease from drawing swords about things so absurd and useless."\*\*16.

beggars rebelling against the ordained power and wishing to reject and refute everything that was believed by everybody before their time, which was established by God himself?" This is how the world condemns and curses both doctrine and preachers and continues to shut their mouths with threats of force."<sup>56</sup>

Not surprisingly then, we must simply admit that the world is once again viewing the preaching of Christians, much like the temple authorities viewed the preaching of Christ which "stirred up the people" (Luke 23:5) and the Jews of Jerusalem interpreted the preaching of Paul, who was said to be "teaching everyone everywhere against the people" (Acts 21:28). In other words, the world is reacting violently to the preaching of Christ, as did the silversmiths who rioted in Ephesus, and is blaming those preaching Christ, for that violence. In that Christians, too, continue to have a foot in the world via the Old Adam, we also can be tempted to react similarly.

So what then is the church to do? Out of Christian love, in order to maintain some sort of public peace and order in Erasmian fashion, is the church to cease to preach the Gospel in all of its articles? As it allows one sin after another after another to stand within the church (cf. 1 Cor. 5), if not officially, practically, in order to get along in the world, in order to get along with ourselves, in order not to cause conflict and strife, are we gradually morphing into a church like that in Thyatira, practicing "love and faith and service" and yet tolerating sin (Rev. 2:19 ff.) in order simply to get on in the world? Or must we simply accept, and deal with the fact, that the good works, the Christ-likeness of the Christian, is naturally at conflict with the world, always doing battle with it, with the world's accompanying reaction? Here Philipp Melancthon's (1497-1560) words from the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (1531) are informative, putting the entire discussion of the violence "caused" by Christians, that is, "done against" Christians in the world into perspective:

"Good works should be done because God has commanded them and in order to exercise our faith, to give testimony, and to render thanks. For these reasons good works must necessarily be done. They take place in a flesh that is partly unregenerate and hinders what the Holy Spirit motivates, fouling it with its impurity. Because of faith they are nevertheless holy and divine works, sacrifices, and the reign of Christ, whereby he shows his rule before the world. For in these works he sanctifies hearts and suppresses the devil. And in order to keep the Gospel among men, he visibly pits the witness of saints against the rule of the devil; in our weakness he displays his strength. The dangers, labors, and sermons of the apostle Paul, Athanasius, Augustine, and other teachers of the church are holy works, true sacrifices acceptable to God, battles by which Christ restrained the devil and drove him away from the believers. David's labors in waging war and in governing the state are holy works, true sacrifices, battles of God to defend the people who had God's Word against the devil, that the knowledge of God might not perish utterly from the earth. We feel the same way about every work done in the most humble occupation and in private life. Through these works Christ shows his victory over the devil, just as the distribution of alms by the Corinthians was a holy work (1 Cor. 16:1), a sacrifice, and a battle of Christ against the devil, who is determined that nothing happen to the praise of God. To disparage works like the confession of doctrine, afflictions, works of charity, and the mortification of the flesh would be to disparage the outward administration of Christ's rule among men."<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> *Convicted by the Spirit*, Trans. by Holger Sonntag, Adapt. by Paul Strawn (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2009) p. 70 f.

<sup>57</sup> AAC IV, par. 189-92, *The Book of Concord*, Trans. and Ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 133.

## Conclusion

The challenge for the Church today when faced with its *physical* destruction, on the one hand, does not seem to be too great a challenge. According to Luther, if the Christian must protect his neighbor by protecting his office, if the Christian must serve as a citizen in the government, even in the military, in time of war, difficulties are not insurmountable.

More challenging, however, would seem to be the *spiritual* destruction of the church. Here, if the church agrees with the world, that the gospel of Jesus Christ incites violence, and so out of some sort of misplaced understanding of Christian love, feels obligated to cease to preach that gospel in these End Times, then in fact, the church will quickly cease to be the church, and the gospel itself will be lost, as the Confessions put it, "from the face of the earth."