PRAISE FOR

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Carty has wisely selected and intelligently abridged Luther’s most important political writings from 1520 to 1546. His introductions to the selections are careful and insightful, written with a full awareness of the large secondary literature. In sum, a highly recommended resource.

—Denis R. Janz
Provost Distinguished Professor
Loyola University New Orleans

In this book, the author and compiler has done those interested in Luther’s political thought a great favor: combining excerpts from Luther’s political treatises with selections from his biblical interpretations and from his practical writings, each with a brief, instructive introduction. In so doing he provides a fine overview of Luther’s theological, biblical, and practical reflections on the role of politics in the life of a Christian. In a world infected by confusions between politics and faith, the book serves as a useful antidote: a fine introduction that will benefit scholars, pastors, and lay persons interested in Luther’s remarkable view of this important topic.

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Ministerium of Pennsylvania Professor of Church History
The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

This is a valuable anthology for anyone wishing to understand the depth, complexities, and contexts of Luther’s political thought. Of particular importance is its attention to Luther’s later, post-1523 writings. The introductory essay and brief, historical introductions to the extensive extracts from Luther’s works are helpful overviews of the historical, theological, and philosophical issues at stake.
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Dean of Graduate Studies and Professor of Political Science
University of Kansas

Jarrett A. Carty offers an inspired collection of the most relevant political writings of Martin Luther into one volume. In the brief commentaries on each work, Dr. Carty interestingly sheds light on those different contexts in which Luther concerns his political ideas and shows how well-developed and consistent his political theory really was. The volume offers a fascinating study to the history of political thought in the age of Reformation. It is something that contemporary scholars of the sixteenth-century political thought in general and of the Reformation in particular should read.

—Virpi Mäkinen, D.Theol.
Acting Professor in Systematic Theology, University of Helsinki
CONTENTS

Preface vii
Abbreviations xi

PART ONE: INTRODUCTORY ESSAY 1
Luther’s Theory of Temporal Government 3

PART TWO: THE POLITICAL WRITINGS OF MARTIN LUTHER 27
The Reformation of Temporal Government 29
Sermon on the Ban (1520) 30
Treatise on Good Works (1520) 35
To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate (1520) 44
Christian Liberty (1520) 72
Letter to Philip Melanchthon (July 13, 1521) 91
A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion (1522) 95
Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed (1523) 102

The Political Teachings of Scripture 145
Commentary on 1 Peter (1522) 146
Exposition of Psalm 127 for the Christians at Riga in Livonia (1524) 158
Lectures on Titus (1527) 162
Lectures on Zechariah (1527) 168
Commentary on Psalm 82 (1530) 173
Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (1532) 206
Commentary on Psalm 2 (1532) 218
CONTENTS

Preface of Doctor Martin Luther to His Lectures
on the Ecclesiastes of Solomon & The Ecclesiastes of Solomon,
with Annotations by Doctor Martin Luther (1532) 232

Commentary on Psalm 101 (1534) 241

Dr. Martin Luther’s Preface to the Song of Songs &
Dr. Martin Luther’s Brief but Altogether Lucid Exposition
of the Song of Songs (1539) 277

Lectures on Genesis (1535–1545) 292

Luther’s Applied Political Thought 317

To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish
and Maintain Christian Schools (1524) 318

Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images
and Sacraments (1525) 335

Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious
Spirit (1525) 346

Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles
of the Peasants in Swabia (1525) 353

Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525) 375

An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants (1525) 382

Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved (1526) 401

On War Against the Turk (1529) 434

Dr. Martin Luther’s Warning to His Dear German People (1531) 459

Infiltrating the Clandestine Preachers (1532) 479

Luther’s Last Observation Left in a Note (1546) 483

Bibliography 485

Subject Index 489

Scripture Index 517
Despite the immense amount of scholarly material about Martin Luther and his theology, very little—quite surprisingly little—has been published about his political thought. Even though Luther has been generally considered to hold a significant place in the history of political ideas, extensive studies of his contributions are rare. Moreover, aside from several gems of scholarship, Luther’s political thought suffers further from many persistent, misleading, and often contradictory assumptions and interpretations. To avoid these, care must be taken in order to understand—as far as it is possible—Luther’s political ideas as he understood them himself, and this necessitates taking care to read many works throughout the decades of his life as a reformer. This volume aims to greatly facilitate that task.

Studies of Luther’s political thought hardly ever venture beyond analysis of his 1523 treatise *Temporal Authority*, despite the demonstrable fact that his politically relevant writings span far and wide across his career. This means that this important treatise is considered in isolation, devoid of its context, and quite apart from the long and ample developments Luther made in his political thought throughout his storied life as pastor, theologian, and church reformer. But discovering and compiling the ‘politically relevant’ works is a gargantuan undertaking due to the enormous volume of Luther’s output. Adding even more difficulty to this daunting collection are the considerable breadth of subjects, forms and styles of his work. Thus, even with relatively unlimited time, uncovering and analyzing his political ideas has first required a deep familiarity with his entire career and published works.

This anthology collects many of Luther’s politically relevant writings into one volume with short commentaries on each work and a large introductory essay. This book therefore seeks not only to make the primary sources of Luther’s political thought accessible, but to show that he had a well-developed and consistent political theory that
spanned his entire career as a reformer. The introductory essay gives an interpretive key to the primary sources explaining Luther’s view of temporal authority as one of the “two kingdoms” ordained by God to govern the “outer man.” What then follows the essay is the collection of Luther’s political writings into three large sub-collections. In “The Reformation of Temporal Government” the primary sources display Luther’s early political thinking leading up to and including his seminal treatise *Temporal Authority*. In “The Political Teachings of Scripture” the selected commentaries and lectures show what Luther believed to be the strong biblical basis for his political thought. These sources have been particularly neglected in the study of Luther’s political ideas. Finally, the section “Luther’s Applied Political Thought” contains Luther’s writings on various events, crises, and controversies that have not only great political importance but also allowed him to apply and expand on his own thinking. Most notably here are of course Luther’s writings leading up to and including the Peasants’ War of 1525, and his treatises on resistance to authority and military service. Within each section, his writings have been ordered chronologically.

All of the primary texts featured in this volume are taken from the *Luther’s Works* series published by Concordia Publishing House and by Fortress Press. The volume and page numbers of the comprehensive *Weimarer Ausgabe* of German or Latin originals (for Luther wrote and published seemingly countless works in both languages) have also been given for those who wish to further study a particular text in its original language.

In accordance with keeping an eye on brevity and concision, many of the texts below are excerpted and shortened. Moreover, many of the footnotes from the *Luther’s Works* translations have been cut or abridged. Of course, a great deal of the original intent, breadth, and meaning of the text is lost with such editorial decisions. But in constructing a manageable anthology of Luther’s writings, such decisions are inevitable.

For the same reasons this anthology does not present a biography of Luther or a history of his times. In the introductions to the excerpts, references are made to the English translations of Martin Brecht’s three-volume biography of Luther, the most authoritative and richly detailed biography to date.

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1 In the introductions to the excerpts, references are made to the English translations of Martin Brecht’s three-volume biography of Luther, the most authoritative and richly detailed biography to date.
reader knows something of Luther beyond his political ideas. Luther the political thinker is inextricably tied to Luther the theologian, the pastor, the Christian, and the man.

I wish to warmly thank the many people without whom the creation of this volume would not have been possible: my outstanding colleagues and students at the Liberal Arts College, Concordia University (Montreal) and my great friends, especially those in academia who have given advice and encouragement along the way, most notably Geoff Kellow, Chris Matusiak, Brooke Cameron, Frank Colucci, Brendan Dunn, Kevin Cherry, Geoff Bowden, Grant Brodrecht, and Will Mullins. A warm thanks is also due to Professor David M. Whitford of United Theological Seminary for his very helpful reviews and constructive criticisms of the manuscript. I am also very grateful for the direction and guidance of my editors The Reverend Edward Engelbrecht and The Reverend Doctor Benjamin T. Mayes, and the production editor Ms. Sarah Steiner, at Concordia Publishing House. A special thanks is also due to Paul Landgraf for his valuable assistance with the index and manuscript. It has been a pleasure to have this book project lead by such professional and friendly people.

I must reserve a very special thanks for Professor Michael P. Zuckert at the University of Notre Dame. During my time as a doctoral student under Michael’s supervision, the idea for this anthology was first conceived. His encouragement, academic prowess, and friendship have kept my sights on making it to publication. Moreover, Michael’s help in improving the manuscript was invaluable: he meticulously reviewed every page, made many corrections, and gave insightful recommendations. Though I take full credit for the errors that remain, I cannot take full credit for this book’s strengths.

Finally I wish to thank my family for the enduring love and support. To my parents Patrick and Carol, my sister Paula and her husband Rob, and to my dear wife Nikki and our new little daughter Hannah, this book is dedicated to all of you, with love.
PART ONE

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY
LUTHER’S THEORY OF TEMPORAL GOVERNMENT

INTRODUCTION: A CONSISTENT POLITICAL THINKER?

What was the essence of Martin Luther’s political thought? How did he view civil government? In answering these simple questions, one confronts the colossal task of interpreting the work of one of the most prolific authors in the history of the printed word, alongside a multitude of (often hotly disagreeing) scholars writing in a multiplicity of languages and academic disciplines. Few historical figures have garnered the attention paid to Luther, and this publicity has endured from the sixteenth century to our own twenty-first. It is thus no surprise that Luther’s political thought has been interpreted in manifold ways. He has been seen as an advocate of modern absolutism, a natural law thinker, a champion of modern individual liberty, a champion of medieval political thought, an ancestor of National Socialism, an advocate of neither the nation nor the modern

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2 J. N. Figgis, Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius, 1414–1625 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1907).
6 Rudolf Thiel, Luther (Berlin: Neff, 1941); Otto Scheel, “Der Volksgeandanke bei Luther,” Historische Zeitschrift, 161 (1940). This argument was not only made by Nazi scholars reinventing German historical icons in the Third Reich; see William M. McGovern, From Luther to Hitler: the Story of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1941); Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953): Volume 2, 154–155; Deitrich
state,⁷ a consistent political theorist⁸ and an utterly inconsistent, overestimated and contradictory one.⁹

But even if one puts aside much of these interpretations and attempts to delve into Luther’s own writings, enormous challenges remain. Consider the sheer volume of his life’s work. The standard German and Latin collection of Luther’s writings, D. Martin Luthers Werke,¹⁰ is comprised of over one hundred volumes (including the collection of Luther’s correspondence, the Briefwechsel) averaging hundreds of pages each. The standard English translations of Luther’s writings are found in the series Luther’s Works (LW),¹¹ comprised of fifty-four volumes plus an index (though it has recently begun expanding to include more volumes). In addition to this overwhelming amount of primary source material is the incredible breadth of subjects, forms and styles: from polemical tracts to theological treatises, Biblical commentaries to hymns, Luther wrote on a whole litany of subjects in a wide variety of literary forms.

Moreover, Luther was not a political philosopher such as Thomas Hobbes or John Locke; he never considered himself called to such a task, for his life was preoccupied with theology and church reform in all of its immensity and complexity. But his theological ideas were intimately connected to his politics and he saw them to have profound political implications. But that makes it difficult to select his political works from among his collected theological writings. Yet even with appropriate primary materials in hand, readers can be misled by Luther’s own words. For instance, his central teaching of the “two kingdoms” (the geistliche [“spiritual”] kingdom and the weltliche [“temporal” or “worldly”] kingdom) can be confusing because of the

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⁸ W. D. James Cargill Thompson, The Political Thought of Martin Luther (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1984).


manner in which he employed his terms. Luther often used the German words *Reich* (“kingdom”) and *Regiment* (“government” or “regiment”) interchangeably, or at least for different aspects of the same reality of God’s rule over creation. In general, Luther used *Reich* to refer to the domain or sphere of rule and used *Regiment* to refer to the means of wielding power and authority in the *Reich*. But he frequently used *Reich Gottes* and the Latin *regnum dei* to refer to God’s general sovereignty over all creation, and thus blurring its distinction with the two kingdoms. Luther also used the words *Oberkeit* (“authority”) and *Gewalt* (“power” or “force”) somewhat interchangeably with “kingdom” and “regiment” (or at least without clear conceptual distinctions) as is especially the case in the seminal political writing, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*. These closely related ideas of the two kingdoms and two regiments as well as Luther’s imprecision have caused considerable disputes in scholarly interpretation of his political thought.

Because of this imprecision, Luther’s political thought has been open to the charge of inconsistency, and in some extreme interpretations, incoherence. For example, J. W. Allen, in his overview of sixteenth century political theory, charged that Luther’s political ideas were “gravely misunderstood and his influence on political thought has been both misrepresented and very grossly exaggerated.” Influential works such as R. H. Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* were as harsh as Allen; of Luther’s texts

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13 Here in the very title, Luther employs the word “authority” for the temporal/secular regime: *Von weltlicher Oberkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei*. Harro Höpf1 (ed., trans.) has a helpful glossary in his *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): xxxii–xxxviii.

14 W. D. J. Cargill Thompson’s article “The ‘Two Kingdoms’ and the ‘Two Regiments’: Some Problems of Luther’s ‘Zwei-Reiche-Lehre,’” *Studies in the Reformation* (London: Athlone Press, 1980): 43–59, has contributed much to clarify this interpretive difficulty. Cargill Thompson also briefly accounts for the scholarly disputes that have arisen over Luther’s imprecision. 

on “social morality” Tawney argued “it is idle to scan them for coherent and consistent doctrine.” 16

Several other issues have fueled the charge of inconsistency and political opportunism. Perhaps the most significant was Luther’s change in policy over the right of resistance to the Holy Roman Emperor at the Torgau meeting in 1530, and his support (albeit nuanced) for the Protestant territories’ defense alliance known as the Schmalkaldic League. In the interpretation of his political thought, the change has sometimes been considered a flat self-contradiction, 17 although at other times it has been simply overlooked altogether. 18

The question of resistance has attracted much German language scholarship over the past century, comparatively few studies in English, with notable exceptions, have grappled with its meaning and importance for Luther’s political thought. 19

The charge of inconsistency has also been made against Luther on just what constituted the proper jurisdictions of the spiritual and temporal governments. Marriage is but one example: beginning early in the Reformation with writings such as To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation (below, pp. 44-71), Luther assigned it as a matter for civil government rather than the church. Yet by his preaching in January of 1544, Luther critically inserted himself into the adjudications over marriage of the Wittenberg consistory. For Luther, the matter was one of conscience and thus a matter of the spiritual kingdom: the Wittenberg consistory, as the temporal authority had

18 There is a tendency of scholars of Luther’s political thought to concentrate on his early writings from the 1520s without reference to the significant political challenges and ideas Luther wrestled with in his last fifteen years. For example, the only recent English anthology of Luther’s political writings contains a mere single writing post-1530 (Dr. Martin Luther’s Warning to His Dear German People): J. M. Porter, Luther: Selected Political Writings (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974; reprinted, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2003).
LUTHER’S THEORY OF TEMPORAL GOVERNMENT

overstepped its jurisdiction in ruling over matters of conscience and therefore beyond its proper domain.20

Perhaps a more directly political example of Luther’s apparently inconsistent political thought was his change of view over the adoption of Roman law in the Holy Roman Empire. In To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, Luther had complained that the secular law had become a “wilderness” under the influence of a recently revived Roman law, and thus advocated a return to customary German laws (pp. 67-68); however, by 1530 in his Commentary on Psalm 101 (pp. 265-266) Luther was praising Roman law for both its reasonableness and its foundation in natural law.

Luther has even been open to charges of more general inconsistencies, contradictions, and intellectual problems. His supposed rejection of “reason” has been a powerful and persistent example. Given that Luther once blasted “reason” as the “devil’s prostitute,” this popular charge has been, however misleading, perhaps not that surprising.21 G. K. Chesterton, for instance, in his well-known biography of Thomas Aquinas, judged Luther as the antithesis of Thomistic philosophy: “it was the very life of Lutheran teaching that Reason is utterly untrustworthy.”22 Similarly, philosopher Jacques Maritain argued Luther to be a father of the modern self, an anti-intellectual man of will “wholly and systematically ruled by his affective and appetitive faculties.”23 If Luther was truly such a disparager of human reason, his thought would suffer an inseparable and even pathological self-contradiction if it could be shown at all to be reasonable.24

Thus with this litany of interpretive problems, Luther’s political thought has been interpreted in many different ways, often reflecting more about the interpreter’s preoccupations than necessarily about Luther’s ideas. Several popular modes, among others, continue to this

20 See the new English translations of Luther’s sermons preached in Wittenberg from Epiphany of 1544: LW 58:53–87. See also Benjamin T. G. Mayes, Counsel and Conscience (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).
21 LW 40:174–175.
24 Theodor Dieter has shown us that great consideration must be given to the contexts of Luther’s criticisms of “reason.” See “Martin Luther’s Understanding of Reason”, Lutheran Quarterly, 25, no. 3 (2011): 249–278.
THE POLITICAL TEACHINGS OF SCRIPTURE
COMMENTS ON THE FIRST EPISTLE OF SAINT PETER (1522)

In the summer of 1522, Luther preached on the first epistle of Saint Peter and a printing of the commentary was made in 1523. In his foreword, Luther claimed that the epistle was one of the “noblest” writings of the New Testament, since it was the “genuine and pure gospel” which the foreword explained as the affirmation of God’s grace and mercy gained through the death of Jesus Christ and the promise of salvation in his resurrection. For him there were no distinctions between teachers of the Gospel except style: the gospel message was one. For Luther the Gospel was the purpose and message of scripture, and the source of its unity despite a host of differences between the books. The writings of the apostles Paul and Peter were exemplary of this gospel unity amidst the different contexts of their epistles.

It is striking therefore, that in addition to this gospel message at its core, 1 Peter echoes the ethical teaching of Paul’s Romans about obeying the governing authorities. It seemed to Luther then, with the apostles Paul and Peter in agreement, that the Gospel was accompanied by a definite political-ethical teaching. Moreover this study of 1 Peter came at a time when the question of the proper relationship to political authorities was becoming a vitally important question to Luther.

Luther’s commentary on 1 Peter prefigures his treatise Temporal Authority in that it contains an extensive treatment of the “two kinds of government.” The temporal sword, he argued, was created for the sake of bringing order to a world plagued by sin; consequently, it was a work of Christian love to obey and serve the secular order, even if that order—like Roman imperial rule for the epistle writer—was unchristian or unjust. Even a government of Turks would have to be obeyed and honored, Luther believed. Thus this early commentary shows that he was very far from the coming radical reformation politics, like those attempted in the city of Münster in the 1530s, that sought to bring about the kingdom of God on earth through a

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100 There has been difficulty in dating this commentary, especially since the Weimar edition had dated it in 1523. However, the evidence now determines that Luther preached this commentary in 1522, especially since we know that Luther preached on 2 Peter at the beginning of the following year, even though the printing of this commentary on 1 Peter was not made until 1523. See LW 30:ix–x.
Christian revolution. Here Luther also outlined the limits of secular authority, designating it ruler of “external matters only” and thus showing how the papacy transgressed the limits of spiritual government by attempting to compel belief with laws. The Christian lives freely as a servant of God, the epistle argues (1 Peter 2:16), thus affirming one of Luther’s main arguments in Temporal Authority and in his seminal work on the subject, Christian Liberty. Luther’s preaching on 1 Peter was thus a very significant work in the development of his political thought.

The text below is from Luther’s Works, Vol. 30, pp. 73–83.

[Commenting on 1 Peter 2:13–17]


Thus St. Peter proceeds in the proper order and teaches us how we should conduct ourselves in every situation. So far he has spoken only in general terms and has told us how one should conduct oneself in all positions in life. Now he begins to teach how one should conduct oneself toward the secular government. For since he has now said enough in the first place about how one should act toward God and for oneself, he now tells us how one should conduct oneself toward all people. This is what he wants to say: In the first place and above all, you should walk in a true faith and keep your bodies under discipline, lest they follow evil lusts. Therefore let obedience to the government be your first concern.

The Greek for what I have translated into German with aller menschlicher ordnung, “to every human institution,” is κτίσις. The Latin word is creatura. Our men of learning did not understand this either. The German language expresses well what the little word means when one says: Was der Furst schaffet, das soll man hallten, “One must do what the prince commands.” That is how the apostle uses the little word here. It is as if he were saying: “What the government commands, obey it.” For schaffen means “to command,”

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102 WA 12:328–337.
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