

# Luther's essay ON WAR AGAINST THE TURK

Colleagues,

Two days from today our eldest grandson Peter turns 18 yrs old. It's got me thinking. That used to be "draft age" for military service when I turned 18—also when Peter's father turned 18 a generation later. And each of us duly registered for the draft on that birthday in 1948 and 1977. Neither of us was ever called up. There's no conscription in place in the USA as Peter rounds the bend, but the drums of war are beating much louder in our land on his birthday than they ever were when his father and father's father had 18 candles on their cakes. Of course, there'll be hoopla on Saturday as we gather to celebrate. But sobriety too. For 18 yr olds not everything awaiting them tomorrow is a piece of cake. The bad news/good news that Jesus gave his disciple Peter at the end of John's gospel signals our message to our Peter for such a time as this: "Another [may] carry you where you do not wish to go." And after this Jesus said to him, "Follow me." The first Thursday Theology response to September 11 a year ago [ThTh 170] claimed that the "'R" word repentance was our best response to the catastrophe. Jesus, Amos, Isaiah, Augustine, and Luther were cited as warrants for that claim. My hunch is that not too many of you checked any of those five authorities to see if they did indeed support that. So now, with repentance continuing to be an alien in our land, and war-talk oozing from every media pore, this week's Thursday Theology offers a Readers Digest version of Luther's classic treatise—foundational for the argument in ThTh 170 13 months ago—ON WAR AGAINST THE TURKS. This was his counsel to his people in 1529 as 600,000 Muslim soldiers camped outside the gates of Vienna, his counsel for . . .

Peace and Joy!

**Martin Luther: ON WAR AGAINST THE TURK**  
**>From LUTHER'S WORKS, vol. 46: 157-205**  
**Revised translation by Robert C. Schultz.**

[The treatise is dated 474 yrs ago yesterday, "October 9, 1528"]

*Preface: Luther's pastoral purpose: "So that innocent consciences may not be deceived" by the current propaganda on this topic. He reviews his past argument with the papacy on the Turks. When the pope excommunicated him (1520), he cited as one of Luther's heresies his words from two years earlier: "To fight against the Turk is the same as resisting God, who visits our sin upon us with this rod of his anger." [Isaiah 10:5] That's still true, but the context 10 yrs later is different, so here's how it applies today.*

**Introduction**

1. Warfare is a dicey issue for Christians. Controversial too. Jesus says: Don't resist evil. But obeying secular authority is also God's mandate.
2. Civil governments are God-given realities. God authorizes them. Calls leaders to their jobs through local historical processes.
3. The current papacy is all wrapped up in the current business of the war against the Turks, and its hands are dirty. Specifically on two points:
  - a. it continues to urge a pre-emptive strike without

any concern for anyone's prior repentance, especially repentance by the papacy itself. "I shall never advise a heathen or a Turk, let alone a Christian, to attack another or begin war. That is nothing else than advising bloodshed and destruction, and it brings no good fortune in the end. It never does any good when one rascal punishes another without first becoming good himself."

b. it calls for this war "in the name of Christ." That is the real abomination, the pope and other bishops desert their God-given office as bishops of the Gospel and assume secular military calling.

On both counts the word of God says "No."

4. Look at the dismal track-record so far—we've been beaten by the Turks in every engagement. That shows the true value of such papal political theology. Also shows "clearly that God is not with us in our war against the Turks." God "mocks" all wars fought under the banner of the church. He gives some examples. "If we will not learn from the Scriptures, we must learn from the Turk's scabbard."

Luther's primary concern in this essay to his Christian audience: "I want to teach you how to fight with a good conscience," that means, how to fight and continue to please God. It's not: how to fight and be sure that you'll win.

### **LUTHER'S TWO KEY POINTS**

1. The Turk has "no right or command" to wage war on us, yet God is using him as the "rod of his anger" against our (phoney) European Christianity.
2. Since we are now confronting two enemies: both God and the "rod of his anger," the Turk, we must be clear just

who is authorized to fight in this war and how. To this question the answer is: "two and only two: one is named Christian, the other Emperor Charles."

### **Part I.**

The first "authorized" warrior—to "fight" the first enemy—is any & every Christian. "The fight must be begun with repentance, and we must reform our lives, or we shall fight in vain as Jeremiah says in chapter 18." The "strategic value" of repentance? "The first thing to be done is to take the rod out of God's hand, so that the Turk may be found only in his own strength all by himself." Repentance does that. Even though Christians are "spread thin" in the world, God listens to the repentant remnant. So repentance is the church's calling. "Every pastor and preacher ought diligently to exhort his people to repentance and to prayer. They ought to drive us to repentance by showing our great and numberless sins and our ingratitude, by which we have earned God's wrath and disfavor, so that he justly gives us into the hands of the devil and the Turk." Even though the bigwigs will laugh at this, not to do so makes God angrier still.

"After people have thus been exhorted to confess their sin and amend their ways they should then be most diligently exhorted to prayer and shown that such prayer pleases God." Scriptures are full of examples and Luther cites some: Especially Abraham praying for Sodom and Gomorrah, a prayer based on God's commitment to spare the place if five righteous ones could be found there. "It is easy to see," he claims, that God wants the praying faithful "to set themselves in the way of his wrath and stave it off. That is what I meant about "Taking the rod out of God's hand."

Interlude: Some info on the Turks, i.e., on the religion of Islam. Luther has read "some parts" of the Koran, and "when I

have time I must translate it into German." He thinks it's a "shameful book."

1. Jesus gets praised, but is not the savior of the world, only a prophet. Mohammed supersedes Jesus. He is God's last word. By putting "Christ beneath Mohammed . . . everything is destroyed."
2. The sword (=murder) is the basic law in Muslim civil government. It is the foundation of the expanding Muslim empire. As Augustine also noted: "an empire has seldom come into being except by robbery, force, and wrong . . . without any justice." Though God is using the Turk now as the rod of his anger, God finally recompenses the bloody practice of all empires. "They shall go down to hell, even though it may take the Last Day to send them there."
3. Monogamous marriage is despised. These three cut the heart out of God's way of running the world (true religion, true civil authority, true domestic life). There are 3 other items of importance about Islam:
4. War is always a Holy War;
5. Its radical iconoclasm forbidding any "imaging" of God at all;
6. It's works-righteous message of salvation—just like the papacy.

Luther then comes to the summary of his counsel to the "first man" [= any Christian] authorized to "fight" God, the first enemy, in War against the Turk. Remember: none of this person's fighting is done with the sword.

### **Then comes Part II.**

The second one authorized to fight the "second enemy" in this war is Emperor Charles V. Luther directly addresses "Emperor Charles, who ought to fight against the Turk . . . for it is his duty as a regular ruler appointed by God, to defend his

own.” And his very next sentence reiterates his repentance prerequisite: “I repeat it here: I would not urge or bid anyone to fight against the Turk unless the first method mentioned above, that men had first repented and been reconciled to God, etc., had been followed. If anyone wants to go to war in another way, let him take his chances.”

Even though Luther “see[s] clearly that kings and princes clearly are taking such a foolish and careless attitude toward the Turk that I fear they underestimate God and the Turk too greatly,” he proceeds “to point out [Charles’] duty [=his call from God] and to instruct his conscience.”

1. Charles is in command by God’s ordinance. Obeying Charles is obeying God.
2. The proper goal for Charles in the conflict is “simply to protect his subjects,” not at all as “protector of the church and defender of the faith . . . which only makes things worse.”
3. If Rome were ever to get involved it should be as a preacher to “hold God’s commandment before them [=the political leaders, Charles included] and make it an unavoidable issue, and say: the empire is given and committed to you by God for you to protect, rule, counsel, and help, and you not only should, but must do this at the risk of losing your soul’s salvation and God’s favor and grace.” All this even though “it is evident that none of you believes this or takes it seriously.”
4. The right “banner” for the Emperor carries “the commandment of God that says, ‘Protect the good; punish the wicked.’” Yet even here a caveat. “It is not enough for you to know that God has commanded this or that to you; you should do it with fear and humility, for God commands no one to do anything on the basis of his own

wisdom and strength.” Those who “trust in their own bravery and military numbers” are the ones who lose in battles recorded in the Bible, for “God is forgotten and despised.”

In his summary to the emperor Luther says: “If these two things are present, God’s commandment and our humility...then we are strong.” But if we lose the war, “it is certainly because one of the two things is lacking; 1) we were going to war either without God’s commandment, or in our own presumption, or 2) the first soldier, Christian, is not there with his [repentant] prayers.”

### **WHERE DO YOU FIND FOLKS LIKE THIS IN EUROPE IN 1528?**

1. Luther does a survey of the current European population. Believers are few and far between. Yet they are there and the Bible tells often that “the godless were saved . . . for the sake of one godly man or woman.” “So we will not be frightened or moved in any way if the great majority . . . are unbelieving and have an un-Christian mind.” And then with a sigh, “of course, it would be good if all were upright, but that is scarcely possible.”
2. Luther has harsh words for those who defect from their obedience to Charles and “desire the coming of the Turk and his government . . . and willingly submit to it.” Besides their breach of oath to their rulers (which gets them into trouble with God), and becoming accomplices in the Turk’s murder and bloodshed, such folks don’t know what they are getting into. Defectors to the Turk wind up as slaves in his empire.
3. How to respond to the claim: “Pope and the Turk are all the same.” There are frightening parallels as the pope commands armies, and shameless sexual immorality in Rome matches “what an open Sodom Turkey is.” “What are we to

to, then? Answer: treat the one like the other and no one is wronged: like sin should receive like punishment." "I do not advise men to wage war against the Turk or the pope because of false belief or evil life, but because of the murder and destruction which he does." No moral crusade of good vs. evil, but equitable recompense for destruction inflicted on those whom God calls the emperor to protect.

4. How about the claim: "Emperor has so many internal political battles, he can't take on the Turk too"? The turmoil within the Holy Roman Empire is a signal that "the empire is almost gone, Christ's coming is at the door, and the Turk is the token of the empire's end." "Nevertheless, the emperor should do whatever he can for his subjects against the Turks, so that even though he cannot entirely prevent the abomination, he may nonetheless try to protect and rescue his subjects by checking the Turk and holding him off."

### **Luther concludes: "Finally . . ."**

1. Remember, we could lose.
2. We need an empire-wide coalition.
3. It's not hopeless.
4. I'll pray, but "it will be a weak prayer, for because of the presumptuous way in which such great enterprises are undertaken, I can have little faith that it will be heard, and I know that this is tempting God and that he can have no pleasure in it."
5. I'm not optimistic when I see what our side is doing right now. It's contrary to everything I've said here about the word of God.
6. Yet I've done my calling, said what had to be said from the word of God.
7. "If it helps, it helps; if it does not, then may our dear



*Lord Jesus Christ help, and come down from heaven with  
the Last Judgment . . . and deliver us from all sins and  
all evil. Amen."*