

For The Benefit of the Entire Country

Luther and Schools

[Educating Society at the Time of the Reformation]

At the end of January of 1524, Martin Luther published an appeal in Wittenberg in which he called for establishing and further maintaining schools in the cities. The document appeared with the title, “*To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany, That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools.*”¹ That Luther took up this question is amazing, especially because at this time he was very busy with other things. But there were reasons—as we shall see.

1. The Occasion

When the Reformer returned to Wittenberg from the Wartburg in March of 1522, an anti-education current had taken over there. At its head stood Luther’s faculty colleague, Andreas Karlstadt (1480-1541). He had been impressed by the “Zwickau Prophets.” They maintained that they did not need Holy Scripture because God’s Spirit spoke to them immediately.

Karlstadt came to the conviction that all elementary and higher education was superfluous. The apostles Jesus called had been simple fishermen and had understood Jesus’ teaching better than the scribes of that time. For this reason, Karlstadt stopped teaching at the university and resigned his office. The head of the Wittenberg city school, Master George Mohr, publicly called on the parents not to send their children to school anymore. In the middle of 1522, the Wittenberg city school was closed completely. The building was used temporarily as a “bread bank” (bakery).²

Luther was horrified at this development. Because of it, the university reform which he and his Wittenberg colleagues had encouraged (since 1518) was again called into question.³ Luther received written inquiries from irritated friends who wanted to know what was going on in Wittenberg. He had to assure them in his letters that his new theology was in no way aiming at the destruction of academics. Just the opposite. He heartily welcomed all academic subjects which were useful for understanding and explaining the Bible better—above all, rhetoric and the ancient languages.⁴ Therefore it seemed necessary to Luther publicly to point out the importance of schools, as he did in his writing of 1524.

Connected with this was the fact that through Luther’s church-reform writings (especially the so-called main church-reform writings of 1520) the old church and societal structures were in the process of dissolving. Luther had criticized monasticism and the system of endowments and had called for their abolishment because they rested on the error that through them, a person could acquire merit before God. Now more and more monks and nuns were leaving the monasteries and convents. The buildings stood empty and unused. The peasants and those who lived in the cities were happy that they didn’t have to give their donations and levies for the monasteries and convents.

¹ Luther, *To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany...*; In: WA 15:27-53; Walch² 10:458-485; LW 45:339-378; Luther-Taschenausgabe, Berlin 1981ff [LTA], vol. 5, pp. 206-234 (the German quotations are taken from this edition); future citations will be referenced as “Luther, *To the Councilmen.*”

² The school was opened again in the fall of 1523 by Bugenhagen. (H. Junghans, *Wittenberg als Lutherstadt*, Berlin 1972, p. 115).

³ Jens-Martin Kruse: *Luther und die Wittenberger Bewegung 1516-1522*, Hamburg 2000, *Universitätstheologie und Kirchenreform*, Magazine: LUTHER 73 [2002], vol. 1, pp. 10-31.

⁴ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, Berlin, 1989, vol. 2, p. 140.

2. The Appeal and the Recipients

Luther's writing from the beginning of the year 1524 is an urgent appeal not to forget the schools. He turns to the leaders in the German cities. He asks them to do what is necessary to stop the demise of the schools. He even calls on them to establish new schools.

Luther also knows, of course, that the parents are primarily responsible for the education of children and young people. Unfortunately, however, their education was often neglected. The parents were so busy either with day-to-day work around the house or with their jobs that they had no time for educating and training their children, or they were not in a position to do it, because they themselves had not attended school.⁵

For this reason, Luther turns to the local authorities. It is striking that in his writing, he addresses city governments, not the princes. He did not expect much from the nobility and princes in this regard. At most, they concerned themselves with keeping good advisors for themselves. Otherwise, they were—as Luther says—more occupied with “sleigh riding, drinking, and parading about in masquerades.”⁶ In 1524 Luther turns with his appeal to the aspiring middle class of the expanding cities as the driving force of societal development at the time. The local governing authorities were the ones who could best assess the local conditions and take action.

Three reasons moved Luther as a reformer of the church to turn to the local governing authorities in this matter. He calls attention to the following:

1. It is no coincidence that the schools are experiencing a decline at just this time. The devil is behind it. He is using the upheaval in the church which was triggered by the Reformation to harm the Kingdom of God. He is doing that first and foremost in this way, that the parents are “fleshly-minded.” That is, above all they think about their earthly life and their prosperity in this world. That is exactly the way it is both in private life and publicly. People prefer to put their money into the building of streets and dams or into the purchase of weapons instead of seeing to it that their children are instructed and grow up as good Christians.⁷
2. Secondly, Luther acknowledges that he himself had made the case for the closing of the papal schools. He calls them “asses' stables” and “devils' schools” because they almost completely obscured the gospel with their scholastic theology. But now through the Reformation, the gospel has again been put on the lampstand so that its light shines brightly. This precious time cannot now be allowed to pass unused. Luther therefore asks urgently:

Let us remember our former misery, and the darkness in which we dwelt. Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God's word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history. If we let it just slip by without thanks and honor, I fear we shall suffer a still more dreadful darkness and plague. O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and word while it is there! **For you should know that God's word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been.** It has been with the Jews, but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have nothing.

⁵ Luther, *To the Councilmen*, WA 15:34; Walch² 10:466; LTA 5:215; LW 45:355.

⁶ Ibid. WA 15:45; Walch² 10:477; LTA 5:226; LW 45:368.

⁷ Ibid. WA 15:30; Walch² 10:462; LTA 5:211; LW 45:350.

Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it; but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year.⁸

3. But still more important for Luther is the third reason parents have for educating and teaching their children: God himself commands it in his Word. That was true already in the old covenant where the people of Israel were admonished again and again to teach their children about the law and grace of God (Dt 6:7; 32:7; Ps 78:5f). In the new covenant that has not changed. The Lord Christ himself, with an eye toward children, warns, "*If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea*" (Mt 18:6).

In this connection, Luther uses the animal world as a comparison.

There is not a dumb animal which fails to care for its young and teach them what they need to know; the only exception is the ostrich, of which God says in Job 31 [39:16, 14] that she deals cruelly with her young as if they were not hers, and leaves her eggs upon the ground. What would it profit us to possess and perform everything else and be like pure saints, if we meanwhile neglected our chief purpose in life, namely, the care of the young? I also think that in the sight of God none among the outward sins so heavily burdens the world and merits such severe punishment as this very sin which we commit against the children by not educating them.⁹

Luther even quotes a proverb from his time, "It is just as bad to neglect a pupil as to despoil a virgin."¹⁰

Luther expressed himself on this topic not just in 1524. In the forewords to both of his catechisms (1529) he once again impresses on the parents, that they are primarily responsible for the Christian education of their children. They should regularly instruct their family and their help (servants, maids) in the basics of the Christian faith.¹¹

Finally, in the year 1530 Luther once again turns to the general public by having a sermon printed which bears the title, "*A Sermon on Keeping Children in School*."¹² In it Luther writes:

My dear sirs and friends, you see with your own eyes how that wretch of a Satan is now attacking us on all sides with force and guile. He is afflicting us in every way he can to

⁸ Ibid. WA 15:31ff; Walch² 10:464; LTA 5:213; LW 45:352.

⁹ Ibid. WA 15:32ff; Walch² 10:465; LTA 5:214; LW 45:353.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Luther, Foreword to the Small Catechism, § 11.19 (BSLK 503.505; BSELK 854:30ff; 856:5ff; Pö § 485:488; Trigl. 534:536. Luther, Foreword to the Large Catechism, § 1ff (BSLK 545ff; BSELK 912:4ff; Pö § 565ff; Trigl. 566f).

¹² Luther, *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (July, 1530). WA 30 II:517-588; Walch² 10:416-459; LW 46:207-258. [In the future: Luther, *A Sermon* 1530].

destroy the holy gospel and the kingdom of God, or, if he cannot destroy them, at least to hinder them at every turn and prevent them from moving ahead and gaining the upper hand. Among his wiles, one of the very greatest, if not the greatest of all, is this—he deludes and deceives the common people so that they are not willing to keep their children in school or expose them to instruction. He puts into their minds the dastardly notion that because monkery, nunning, and priestcraft no longer hold out the hope they once did, there is therefore no more need for study and for learned men, that instead we need to give thought only to how to make a living and get rich.¹³

With this sermon too Luther fights against this error from 1530 on. And he not only criticizes, he also makes suggestions as to how things could work differently.

3. Concrete Suggestions

Luther's appeals for the establishment and promotion of schools did not, however, amount to only theoretical considerations or motivations. He also offered very concrete suggestions about how teaching should be done and what should be taught in the schools.

3.1 Who should be taught?

Luther writes in 1530:

This is why I hold that there was never a better time to study than right now, not only because knowledge¹⁴ is so abundant and cheap,¹⁵

[Because now,] not only Holy Scripture but also knowledge of all kinds is so abundant, what with so many books, so much reading, and, thank God, so much preaching that one can learn more now in three years than was formerly possible in twenty. Even women and children can now learn from German books and sermons more about God and Christ—I am telling the truth!—than all the universities, foundations, monasteries, the whole papacy, and all the world used to know.¹⁶

He is concerned not only that the boys be educated but also that girls and women have a share in a school-based education.¹⁷ Finally, he also translated the Bible into the German language so that not only a few privileged people (for example, scholars, priests) but all simple Christians could read God's Word for themselves.

3.2 What should be taught?

At the top of the list for Luther as an ecclesiastical teacher is the training of preachers. The schools should lay a good foundation for this by imparting to the students basic knowledge in the Biblical languages. In

¹³ Ibid. WA 30 II:522f; W² 10:420; LW 46:217.

¹⁴ [The German is *Kunst*.] With "*Kunst*" Luther means here the so-called Liberal Arts (*artes liberales*), which were taught in the lower-level courses.

¹⁵ Luther, "*A Sermon*," WA 30 II:566; W² 10:446; LW 46:244.

¹⁶ Ibid.; WA 30 II:546f; W² 10:435; LW 46:232.

¹⁷ Cmp. Luther, *To the Councilmen* (WA 15:47; W² 10:479; LTA 5:228; LW 45:370.) "In like manner [that is, like the boys] a girl can surely find time to attend school for an hour a day and still take care of her duties at home."

this respect, Luther's desire agrees with the program of humanism which took up the cause of the rediscovery of the ancients and their sources of knowledge.

But for Luther, it was about more. He confesses about himself, "I know full well that while it is the Spirit alone who accomplishes everything, I would surely have never [reached my goal] if the languages had not helped me and given me a sure and certain knowledge of Scripture."¹⁸

In Luther's view, "although faith and the gospel may indeed be proclaimed by simple preachers without a knowledge of languages, such preaching is flat and tame; people finally become weary and bored with it, and it falls to the ground. But where the preacher is versed in the languages, there is a freshness and vigor in his preaching, Scripture is treated in its entirety, and faith finds itself constantly renewed by a continual variety of words and illustrations."¹⁹

What Luther says about the other academic subjects is also completely in agreement with humanism. In his appeal of 1524, he specifies instruction in history, singing, and musical theory.²⁰ What he has in mind with this in particular becomes clear a little later when he says that libraries should be established which are accessible for everyone. In them he wants—next to various editions of the Holy Scripture and good Bible commentaries—the following:

Then, books that would be helpful in learning the languages, such as the poets and orators, regardless of whether they were pagan or Christian, Greek or Latin, for it is from such books that one must learn grammar. After that would come books on the liberal arts, and all the other arts. Finally, there would be books of law and medicine; here too there should be careful choice among commentaries.²¹

3.3 How should instruction take place?

Right here, in the matter of the teaching of history, Luther gets very practical. Here he shows what great benefit good instruction in this area provides not only for the church but for all of society. Therefore one should not leave the instruction (above all in this area) to the parents, but to "virtuous school teachers, men and women" who are well trained in the languages and other disciplines. Luther raves about this kind of instruction:

... they would then hear of the doings and sayings of the entire world, and how things went with various cities, kingdoms, princes, men, and women. Thus, they could in a short time set before themselves as in a mirror the character, life, counsels, and purposes—successful and unsuccessful—of the whole world from the beginning; on the basis of which they could then draw the proper inferences and in the fear of God take their own place in the stream of human events. In addition, they could gain from history the knowledge and understanding of what to seek and what to avoid in this outward life, and be able to advise and direct others accordingly. The training we undertake at home, apart from such schools, is intended to make us wise through our own experience. Before that

¹⁸ Luther, "To the Councilmen" WA 15:42; W² 10:475; LTA 5:224; LW 45:336.

¹⁹ Ibid. WA 15:42; W² 10:474; LTA 5:224; LW 45:365.

²⁰ Luther speaks literally about "singing and music, with the entirety of mathematics." He distinguishes between singing as a practical skill and musical theory which belonged to the Quadrivium of the seven "artes liberales."

²¹ Luther, "To the Councilmen" WA 15:52; W² 10:483; LTA 5:233; LW 45:376.

can be accomplished we will be dead a hundred times over, and will have acted rashly throughout our mortal life, for it takes a long time to acquire personal experience.²²

Luther's reflections and suggestions go even further. He also has specific ideas about how the instruction of children should look in the future. Pedagogy up to this point, which was based on force and corporal punishment, he categorically rejects. As an elementary school student he experienced this himself, painfully! In contrast he emphasizes:

Now since the young must always be hopping and skipping, or at least doing something that they enjoy, and since one cannot very well forbid this—nor would it be wise to forbid them everything—why then should we not set up such schools for them and introduce them to such studies? By the grace of God it is now possible for children to study with pleasure and in play languages, or other arts, or history. Today, schools are not what they once were, a hell and purgatory in which we were tormented with declension and conjugation drills, and yet learned less than nothing despite all the flogging, trembling, anguish, and misery. If we take so much time and trouble to teach children card-playing, singing, and dancing, why do we not take as much time to teach them reading and other disciplines while they are young and have the time, and are apt and eager to learn?²³

What is ushered in here is the “discovery of the child” in pedagogy.²⁴ The historical narrative today usually starts with the premise that this discovery first took place through the work of Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670). However, with all legitimate appreciation of Comenius' pedagogical writings, one should not overlook the fact that a very significant impulse for this came from Luther and his theology, which starts with the gospel. (I will have more to say about that in a moment.)

4. The Theological Foundations of Education

Luther proceeds from the premise that the education and training of children and young people is a God-given task. God himself is the one who is acting in it. The parents and educators are only his tools or representatives (*vicarii Dei*). As such, they are the “very highest after God.”²⁵

With this, Luther gives the office of parents a completely new status.²⁶ He moves the family into the center of society and increases its value. This is an entirely new way of thinking which stands in contrast to the medieval conceptions of marriage and family. Now Luther says, whoever gets married does not do so (as previously) because he is too weak for the spiritual estate with its abstinence (celibacy), but rather because he wants to fulfill the task God gave at creation (Ge 1:28).²⁷ Whoever raises children or (as a teacher) educates them, does an extremely important work.

In this, Luther's new teaching of vocation finds expression. It's not the clergy or the monks turning their backs on the world who are especially close to God. No, whoever conscientiously fulfills his earthly vocation serves God in the place God put him. That is also true of parents who take seriously their duty to

²² Ibid. WA 15:45; W² 10:477; LTA 5:227; LW 45:368-369.

²³ Ibid. WA 15:43; W² 10:478; LTA 5:227f; LW 45:369.

²⁴ Herbert Gudjons, *Pädagogisches Grundwissen*, 10th Edition. Bad Heilbrunn 2008, p. 79.

²⁵ Luther, *Large Catechism*, 4th Commandment (BSLK 587, §107; BSELK 948:21; Pö § 632; Trigl. 610, § 107)

²⁶ Yoshikazu Tokuzen, *Pädagogik bei Luther*, in: *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers 1526-1546*. Published by H. Junghans, Berlin 1983, p. 325.

²⁷ Ge 1:28: “Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth...”

raise their children. They should bring up their children “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ep 6:4). They bear responsibility for this before God. In the *Large Catechism* Luther reminds them of this:

For He does not wish to have in this office and government knaves and tyrants; nor does He assign to them this honor, that is, power and authority to govern, that they should have themselves worshiped; but they should consider that they are under obligations of obedience to God; and that, first of all, they should earnestly and faithfully discharge their office, not only to support and provide for the bodily necessities of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but, most of all, to train them to the honor and praise of God. Therefore do not think that this is left to your pleasure and arbitrary will, but that it is a strict command and injunction of God, to whom also you must give account for it.²⁸

By raising their children and sending them to school, parents are fulfilling the task given them at creation. They are obeying God’s commandment by serving him and their neighbor (their fellow man). God rules the world in two ways: through the “spiritual government” and through the “secular government.”²⁹

- a) In the spiritual government, it’s about service to the Church which gives people an understanding of God’s Word. Here Luther says:

The estate I am thinking of is rather one which has the office of preaching and the service of the word and sacraments and which imparts the Spirit and salvation, blessings that cannot be attained by any amount of pomp and pageantry. It includes the work of pastors, teachers, preachers, lectors, priests (whom men call chaplains), sacristans,³⁰ schoolmasters, and whatever other work belongs to these offices and persons. This estate the Scriptures highly exalt and praise.³¹

Through the public ministry (the ministry of the Word) people are pointed to the way of salvation. They hear how through Christ they become free from sin, death, and the devil.

Beyond that, however, [the preacher] does great and mighty works for the world. He informs and instructs the various estates on how they are to conduct themselves outwardly in their several offices and estates, so that they may do what is right in the sight of God.³²

Yes, also “peace, the greatest of earthly goods, in which all other temporal goods are comprised, is really a fruit of true preaching.”³³

- b) The second goal of education is service to one’s neighbor in the secular estate and office. It is concerned only with earthly life. Therefore Luther says that secular service corresponds to the

²⁸ Ibid. BSLK 603 §167f; BSELK 990:9; Pö § 654; Trigl. 628, § 168-169

²⁹ Luther speaks of the spiritual and worldly “kingdom” (thus the doctrine of the two kingdoms). He means with this God’s two different ways of ruling.

³⁰ Sacristans in the 16th century were not only responsible for order in the sanctuary, but also frequently functioned as cantors in the worship service and as teachers in the village schools.

³¹ Luther, “*A Sermon*” 1530. WA 30 II:528; W² 10:424; LW 46:220f.

³² Ibid. WA 30 II:536; W² 10:429f; LW 46:226.

³³ Ibid. WA 30 II:537; W² 10:430; LW 46:226.

publicly ministry “like a shadow to the body.” Nevertheless, he does not hold earthly service in low regard but rather firmly maintains:

Nevertheless, worldly government is a glorious ordinance and splendid gift of God, who has instituted and established it and will have it maintained as something men cannot do without.³⁴

In secular government, reason has its rightful place. For what is needed here is “not fist and weapons; heads and books must do it. Men must learn and know the law and wisdom of our worldly government.³⁵ ... for in the preaching office Christ does the whole thing, by his Spirit, but in the worldly kingdom men must act on the basis of reason—wherein the laws also have their origin—for God has subjected temporal rule and all of physical life to reason (Genesis 2 [:15]).³⁶

Even though Luther emphasizes the precedence of spiritual government, he does grant to the secular government a high position next to it. In his practical proposals, he remains realistic. In a very level-headed way, he looks for practical solutions. And so he writes already in 1524:

So you say, “But who can thus spare his children and train them all to be young gentlemen? There is work for them to do at home,” etc. Answer: It is not my intention either to have such schools established as we have had heretofore, where a boy slaved away at his Donatus and Alexander³⁷ for twenty or thirty years and still learned nothing. Today we are living in a different world, and things are being done differently. My idea is to have the boys³⁸ attend such a school for one or two hours during the day, and spend the remainder of the time working at home, learning a trade, or doing whatever is expected of them. In this way, study and work will go hand-in-hand while the boys are young and able to do both. Otherwise, they spend at least ten times as much time anyway with their pea shooters, ball playing, racing, and tussling.³⁹

One sees in what is said that Luther is far from chasing after ambitious ideals like universal compulsory school attendance. But he does make forward-looking proposals.

Luther’s esteem for the secular government also shows itself in how he values the office of school teacher.⁴⁰

I will simply say briefly that a diligent and upright schoolmaster or teacher, or anyone who faithfully trains and teaches boys, can never be adequately rewarded or repaid with any amount of money, as even the heathen Aristotle says. Nevertheless, this work is as shamefully despised among us as if it amounted to nothing at all. And still we call ourselves Christians! If I could leave the preaching office and my other duties, or had to do so, there is no other office I would rather have than that of schoolmaster or teacher of

³⁴ Ibid. WA 30 II:554; W² 10:439; LW 46:237.

³⁵ Ibid. WA 30 II:557f; W² 10:441; LW 46:239.

³⁶ Ibid. WA 30 II:562; W² 10:444; LW 46:242.

³⁷ Two Latin textbooks which were used in schools during and after the Middle Ages.

³⁸ Right after this Luther also talks about the girls who should go to school!

³⁹ Luther, “*To the Councilmen*,” WA 15:46f; W² 10:478; LTA 5:228; LW 45:370.

⁴⁰ Even the most recent educational research shifts the focus again more onto the personality of the teacher. Compare, for example, in this regard John Hattie, *Visible Learning*, London/New York, 2009.

boys; for I know that next to that of preaching, this is the best, greatest, and most useful office there is. Indeed, I scarcely know which of the two is the better. For it is hard to make old dogs obedient and old rascals pious; yet that is the work at which the preacher must labor, and often in vain. Young saplings are more easily bent and trained, even though some may break in the process. It surely has to be one of the supreme virtues on earth faithfully to train other people's children; for there are very few people, in fact almost none, who will do this for their own.⁴¹

And in one of his Table Talks he says:

If it were up to me, no one would be allowed to become a preacher who has not previously worked as a school teacher. Unfortunately it is the case that working at schools is disregarded. Everyone who studies theology immediately rushes for the pulpit. It would be better if after studying, everyone would first have to teach school for ten years. After that he can gladly stop.

The work at a school is hard and is valued much too little. But in a city a good school teacher is just as valuable as a pastor. We can do without princes, nobles, and mayors, but we can't do without school teachers. For they train those who shall later rule the world. If I were not a preacher, I could imagine no other calling for myself that I would prefer than that of a teacher. When one takes up this vocation, he should not look at how it is thought so little of in the world, but rather keep in view what God thinks of it and how he will reward it on the Last Day.⁴²

5. The Impact of the Reformation on the Educational System

We heard previously how Luther championed maintaining existing schools and starting new ones, and the proposals he made for them. Now we shall look at what impact his appeals had. What became of them? What was the reaction to them?

Since 1525 Luther and his co-workers urged the new Saxon Elector, John (the Constant), to help with the reorganization of church affairs. Through the Reformation—as has already been said—church structures were to a great extent broken.⁴³ The theological qualification of the pastors (formerly priests) and their financial support had to be regulated in a new way. Finally, the Elector let himself be convinced to direct a country-wide visitation in his principality.

Luther belonged to those who, beginning in February of 1527, visited the congregations in the Wittenberg area (the so-called Electoral Circuit) as part of a trial run. What he experienced in doing this caused him to be appalled. He speaks about this in the foreword to his *Small Catechism*:

The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare this Catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy! Good God! What manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas! many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach. Nevertheless, all maintain that they are Christians, have been baptized and receive the holy Sacraments.

⁴¹ Luther, "A Sermon" 1530. WA 30 II:579; W² 10:454; LW 46:252f.

⁴² Luther, *Table Talks*. WA TR 5:5, 28, 16 (September 1540, by Mathesius)

⁴³ St. Menzel (op. Cit., p. 263) speaks of the "collapse of the pastoral and educational infrastructure."

Yet they cannot recite either the Lord's Prayer, or the Creed, or the Ten Commandments; they live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs; and yet, now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all liberty like experts.⁴⁴

One result of these experiences was that in 1530 Luther turned anew in his printed sermon to the responsible parties in the city and country and called on them to provide for the establishment of schools. (We have heard about that.) Already in 1523, in the foreword to the Leisniger Ordinance for a Common Chest,⁴⁵ he had called for using the buildings and monies which had been freed up when the cloisters were closed primarily for schools.⁴⁶

In his sermon of 1530, Luther tries to make clear with simple arithmetic that there were a lot more clergy positions and church expenses to pay for in the papal church. So it should be an easy thing now to raise the necessary means to pay for a pastor, teacher, and cantor.⁴⁷

As deplorable as the school situation was in the 1520s and 1530s, in the long run the appeals of the Reformation appear not to have gone unheard. That is true, of course, above all for those parts of Germany embraced by the Reformation, where education in a school gradually became an across the board phenomenon. In what follows, I will direct my focus above all to central Germany (Saxony and Thuringia) from where the Reformation originated.⁴⁸

Even the princes and nobles, who for the most part were the beneficiaries of the closure of the cloisters, let themselves be induced in individual instances to promote schools. This was, for instance, the case with Elector Moritz of Saxony (1521-1553). He turned three former cloister schools into public schools and provided them with the financial means to serve as schools to prepare young men for service in the evangelical church or Saxon government (*Fürsten- or Landesschulen*): 1543, the Cistercian Cloister Pforta (by Naumburg) and the Augustinian Canons Cloister St. Afra in Meißen, as well as the Augustinian Cloister in Grimma (where the hymn writer Paul Gerhardt [1607-1676] received his schooling). These institutions were what we today would call elite schools. They made it possible for 100-150 students in each school—a third of whom were to come from the nobility and two-thirds from the middle class—to receive a free education which led to the university.⁴⁹

Above all, however, it was the Saxon Ernestines⁵⁰ who made a name for themselves in the area of schools and education. After the loss of the electoral crown⁵¹ in the Smalcald War (1547), they directed their

⁴⁴ Luther, *Preface to the Small Catechism*, in: BSLK 501f; BSELK 852:8ff; Pö §481; Trigl. 532 § 1-3.

⁴⁵ The "Common Chest" was the charity fund of the time from which, above all, costs for the care of the poor were met. Leisnig is a small city in the vicinity of Grimma (in the Leipzig countryside).

⁴⁶ Luther, *Preface to the Leisniger Ordinance for the Common Chest* (WA 12:11-15; W² 10:954-961; LTA 3:198-204; LW 45:169-176).

⁴⁷ Luther, "A Sermon" 1530. WA 30 II:549; W² 10:436; LW 46:234.

⁴⁸ One could give further examples of the early founding of schools, for example the St. Egidien-Gymnasium in Nurnberg, which was built according to Melanchthon's plans and serves as the prototype for the German Gymnasium, or the Zwickau Latin School which had existed since 1291 already but flourished in the time of the Reformation.

⁴⁹ Stefan Menzel, *Die albertinischen Fürstenschulen...*, Stuttgart 2017, p. 271.

⁵⁰ In the year 1485, the Wettin duchy of Saxony was divided up among the two brothers, Ernst and Albrecht. From this developed the dynasties of the Ernestines (with their center in Torgau and Weimar) and the Albertines (with their center in Meißen and Dresden).

⁵¹ After the defeat of the Saxon Elector Prince Johann Fredrich, Emperor Charles V transferred the electoral crown to the Albertinian Duke Moritz (nephew of George the Bearded).

activities primarily toward the support of education and culture in their duchies. It is no accident that later Weimar became virtually the literary cultural capital of Germany when Goethe and Schiller were active there.

The Ernestines ruled the western part of Saxony which is today called the federal state of “Thuringia.” Different from their Albertinian cousins in Dresden, among the Ernestines there was no primogeniture. That is, after the death of a prince, the rule did not “automatically” go to his oldest son. Among the Ernestines, the inheritance was divided up among the various sons each time. That led to a gradual splintering of the land. The various regions were then called Saxony-Weimar, Saxony-Gotha, Saxony-Altenburg, Saxony-Meiningen, Saxony-Coburg, etc.

In Jena the Ernestines founded a “high school” (Gymnasium) in 1548, which ten years later (1558) was converted into a university. An effort was made there to hold on to the inheritance of Luther when the followers of Melancthon (the so-called Philippists) had taken control in Wittenberg. At the beginning of the 17th century, the famous Lutheran Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) taught in Jena. Later the famous philosophers Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte worked there as professors (19th century). Distinguished scholars (like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz) or naturalists (like Otto von Guericke) studied in Jena in the 17th century.

At the end of the Reformation century, the situation had changed considerably from the beginning of the century—at least in Thuringia and Saxony. There was hardly a city or village in which there was not a school. The visitation reports from the second half of the 16th century prove that there was at least an elementary school in almost all locations. Research shows that in Saxony and Thuringia at the time a higher level of literacy was reached among sections of the population than otherwise in Germany.⁵²

Evidently people had taken seriously Luther’s desires to make the Bible accessible to each individual in his native German language, and had implemented it in a practical way.⁵³ But the children did not learn just reading and writing in school. Particular value was also placed on music. In 1620 the theologian and composer Michael Altenburg wrote:

Not only the contemplation of the excellent and splendid compositions but also the places where music is in vogue testify that dear music has climbed very high.⁵⁴ For I need not say anything now about music at electoral and princely courts. After all, in almost every little village, especially in Thuringia, one may expect music, both vocal and instrumental, to be well organized and to flourish as gloriously and elegantly as is possible in each place.⁵⁵

And in 1795 Johann Heinrich Voß (1751-1826) of Königsberg says about this, Thuringia is a land “where every peasant knows music (i.e., is well-versed in music).”

In particular, church music profited from this development. It had already been dear to Luther’s heart. He worked together with the Torgau cantor, Johann Walter (1496-1570), who published a “Little Spiritual Choirbook” in 1524. This contained choral movements for three to five voices, which were intended for

⁵² Wolfgang Schmale, *Der Januskopf der Alphabetisierung; Kursachsen in der frühen Neuzeit*, Tübingen 1999.

⁵³ For Albertinian Saxony compare: Ralf Thomas, *Die Neuordnung der Schulen und der Universität Leipzig* in: Helmar Junghans (publisher), *Das Jahrhundert der Reformation in Sachsen*, Berlin 1989, pp. 113-131.

⁵⁴ That is, has reached a very high level.

⁵⁵ Michael Altenburg, foreword to “*Erster Teil neuer lieblicher und zierlicher Intradn mit sechs Stimmen*,” Erfurt 1620 (cited in: Menzel, op. Cit., p. 262.)

students to sing in worship. The book, which continued to be expanded, went into its seventh printing in 1551.

The high concentration of talented church musicians in central Germany over the next centuries can't be explained without this context. The list of names reaches from Heinrich Schütz⁵⁶ to Johann Sebastian Bach. These protagonists of evangelical church music received their training at Lutheran schools. Their compositions do not concentrate on the Word by chance. They wanted to contribute to making the Word of God in Holy Scripture understood to the hearer through musical means.

The Thirty Years War brought a difficult step backward for the blooming educational landscape of central Germany. The central location in the "heart of Germany" led to vast stretches of land being devastated for years by acts of war and epidemics. In the end, the population in Germany sank to a third of what it was before the war.

In this situation, it was again one of the Ernestine princes who made an outstanding contribution to the revival of the school system. Duke Ernst the Pious (1601-1675) began a school reform in Saxony-Gotha in 1640. It started at the Gotha Gymnasium, which had been founded in 1524 by Luther's friend Friedrich Myconius. The principal there, Andreas Reyher (1601-1673), wrote a school ordinance in 1642 in which, in addition to instructional content, he prescribed mandatory school attendance for all 5-12 year old "boys and little girls."

For the Duke, it was a matter of putting into daily practice the objectives of the Lutheran Reformation.⁵⁷ The results could be seen. In Saxony-Gotha, universal mandatory school attendance was implemented, something which in other German states could not be realized until much later (for example, Prussia made instruction obligatory in 1717,⁵⁸ Electoral Saxony required school attendance from 1835 on, and not until 1918/19 was school attendance required throughout the German Empire).

On the one hand, German federalism (many independent states) proved to be an advantage for the educational system because in the individual states, different initiatives and models could be instituted.⁵⁹ On the other hand, reports from that time also complain that "local absolutism" led continually to minor princes, large landowners, or manor lords hampering universal schooling for their own selfish reasons.⁶⁰

6. Closing Thoughts

Perhaps Luther's appeal of 1524 "*To the Councilmen*," raises the question: How does the Reformer and churchman reach the point that he involves himself so forcefully in questions of earthly government? Why does he not leave that to the state and local politicians who regulate these questions?

⁵⁶ Schütz received his basic musical training in Weißenfels using the "*Compendium musicae*" by Heinrich Faber who prepared this text book on the basis of Luther's ideas regarding education in the schools. Compare: Hans-Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Musik im Abendland*, 3. Edition, Munich 2000, p. 391.

⁵⁷ This is called the "Reformation of Life." Compare Ernst Koch, *Das konfessionelle Zeitalter—Katholizismus, Luthertum, Calvinismus (1563-1675)* in: *Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen*, vol. II/8, Leipzig 2000, p. 249.

⁵⁸ That is, it was made mandatory for the parents to see to the education of their children. This did not have to happen in a school, but could also be done in private settings (for example by tutors in the home).

⁵⁹ To this day, educational policy in Germany is the domain of the federal states.

⁶⁰ An expert opinion of the law faculty in Wittenberg in 1661 talks about the fact that there were among the children "extremely gifted individuals in the countryside" who unfortunately would not be used for the benefit of the entire land.

This was no accident, nor was it blunder. Rather, one can cite various reasons for it. In conclusion, I'll summarize them once again.

- a) Luther sees himself compelled to write about schools because the Reformation, unfortunately, led to a collapse of the former pillars of societal life. He wanted to “seek...[the] prosperity of the city” (Je 29:7). In his own words from 1524, he emphasizes, “I am not seeking my own advantage, but the welfare and salvation of all Germany.”⁶¹
- b) Above all, however, we have to mention the realignment of Christian ethics prompted by Luther. In his early writings he makes it clear that true worship of God does not happen in a situation where one withdraws himself from the world and delights in self-chosen pious works. Rather each person should serve God at that place where God has placed him in this world: the farmer or craftsman at his job, the women in conducting the affairs of the home, parents in raising their children, the nobility and princes in the affairs of government, etc. God acts in this world through people. They are his tools (Luther says “masks”) behind which the Creator and Preserver of the world hides himself.

That is the new vocational ethos of the Lutheran church and theology.⁶² It rests not on an inspired idea of Luther but on the fact that he takes seriously the statements of Holy Scripture which talk about this.

- c) In his appeals, Luther speaks extensively about the fact that it is a command of God for the parents to raise their children well. Where that exceeds the capacity and ability of the parents, the governmental authorities are required. But it is finally not the club of the law with which Luther wants to accomplish something.⁶³ He also says that it rests on a lack of thankfulness when the education and training of children is neglected.⁶⁴ The point is that we are not to have received the grace of God in vain. Children are a gift of God (Ps 127:3) with whom we should deal responsibly. The Lord Christ calls on parents to bring their children to him (Mt 19:14).

How blessed should a poor human being consider himself to be, when he is found worthy before God, that he may be beneficial to a child and help him to come to Christ...?⁶⁵

In the conclusion of his sermon from 1530, Luther writes:

God grant that we may obey his word, in praise and thanksgiving to our dear Lord for his precious blood so freely offered for us; and may he preserve us from the abominable sin of ingratitude and forgetfulness of his blessings. Amen.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Luther, “*To the Councilmen*,” WA 15:53; W² 10:485; LTA 5:234; LW 45:377f.

⁶² Cmp., Robert Kolb, *Berufen, Kühe zu melken...*; *Luthers Lehre vom Beruf*, in: Theologische Handreichung 31 [2013], Heft 4, http://www.elfk.de/html/seminar/index_htm_files/Kolb_Christ%20und%20Beruf_LTSwww.pdf

⁶³ Tokuzen, op. Cit., p. 330.

⁶⁴ Luther, “*To the Councilmen*,” WA 15:50; W² 10:482; LTA 5:232; LW 45:374.

⁶⁵ Luther, “*A Sermon*” 1530; WA 30 II:520. (From the new prefaces of Luther in the publication of Nickel Schirlentz, 1541; missing in W² and LW!)

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* WA 30 II:588; W² 10:459; LW 45:258.

With his education initiative and his revaluation of earthly vocation, Luther kicks open the gate to the modern era. He was the first to work in earnest with a “differentiation of human life according to gender, age (discovery of the child), and the functions of people in society.”⁶⁷ The following centuries are characterized by the free development in academics and technology which this unleashed.⁶⁸

One can only agree with Hubert Kirchner who in an introduction to Luther’s “*To the Councilmen*” of 1524 says, “It belongs to the features of the Reformation movement that it leads to effects which exceed considerably the scope of specifically ecclesiastical thinking, teaching, and life.”

It was not Luther’s intention to create a new societal order but his return to the Biblical message unleashed (as a byproduct so to speak) considerable changes in the secular realm as well. I have tried to indicate some of them in this essay.

⁶⁷ Michael Kotsch, *Der Pietismus als Weiterführung der Reformation*, in: *Martin Luther—Aus Liebe zur Wahrheit*, published by B. Schwarz, Dillenberg 2016, p. 469.

⁶⁸ Cmp. E. Lerle (publisher), *Luthers Bedeutung für den Fortschritt in der Methodenlehre*, in: *Dem Erbe verpflichtet*; Gedenkschrift zum 500. Geburtstag M. Luthers, Berlin 1983, pp. 7-24.

Bibliography

- Conrad **Bergendoff**: Luther on Ecclesiastical Visitations; see: <http://mercyjourney.blogspot.de/2012/08/luther-on-ecclesiastical-visitation.html>
- Martin **Brecht**: Martin Luther, Ordnung und Abgrenzung der Reformation 1521-1532, Bd. 2; Berlin 1889, pp. 140-143
- Veronika **Albrecht-Birkner**: Reformation des Lebens; Die Reformation Herzog Ernsts des Frommen von Sachsen-Gotha und ihre Auswirkungen auf Frömmigkeit, Schule, Alltag im ländlichen Raum (1640-1675), Leipzig 2002
- Hans-Heinrich **Eggebrecht**: Musik im Abendland, 3rd Edition., München 2000
- Jonas **Flöter**/Günther Wartenberg (Hg.): Die sächsischen Fürsten- und Landesschulen; Interaktion von lutherisch-humanistischem Bildungsideal und Elitenbildung, Leipzig 2004
- Herbert **Gudjons**: Pädagogisches Grundwissen, 10th Edition, Bad Heilbrunn (Klinkhardt/UTB) 2008
- John **Hattie**, Visible learning Routledge, London, New York 2009
- Helmar **Junghans**: Wittenberg als Lutherstadt, Berlin ²1982 (p. 114f).
- Ernst **Koch**: Das konfessionelle Zeitalter – Katholizismus, Luthertum, Calvinismus (1563-1675), in: Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen, Vol. II/8, Leipzig 2000, p. 249.
- Michael **Kotsch**: Der Pietismus als Weiterführung der Reformation, in: Martin Luther – Aus Liebe zur Wahrheit, Published by B. Schwarz, Dillenburg 2016, p. 469.
- Jens-Martin **Kruse**: Luther und die Wittenberger Bewegung 1516-1522, Hamburg 2000
- Jens-Martin **Kruse**: Universitätstheologie und Kirchenreform, in: Zeitschrift „Luther“ 73 [2002], Volume 1, pp. 10-31
- Ernst **Lerle**: Luthers Bedeutung für den Fortschritt in der Methodenlehre, in: Dem Erbe verpflichtet; Gedenkschrift zum 500. Geburtstag M. Luthers, Published by Ernst Lerle, Berlin 1983, S. 7-24.
- Martin **Luther**: An die Rathherren aller Städte Deutschlands, christliche Schulen einzurichten, 1524 (WA 15,27-53; Walch² 10,458-485; LTA 5,206-234; LW 45,339-378) [Luther, Ratsherren]
- Martin **Luther**: Eine Predigt, dass man die Kinder zur Schule halten soll (Juli 1530); WA 30 II,517-588; W² 10,416-459; LW 46,207-258 [Luther, Predigt 1530].
- Stefan **Menzel**: Die albertinischen Fürstenschulen und die mitteldeutsche Musiklandschaft ca. 1550-1600: in: Die Reformation; Fürsten – Höfe – Räume, Published by Armin Kohnle und Manfred Rudendorf, Leipzig und Stuttgart 2017
- Wolfgang **Schmale**: Der Januskopf der Alphabetisierung; Kursachsen in der frühen Neuzeit, in: Alphabetisierung und Literalisierung in Deutschland in der frühen Neuzeit, Published by Ernst Bödecker, Tübingen 1999
- Franz **Spitzner**: Geschichte des Gymnasiums und der Schulanstalten zu Wittenberg aus den Quellen erzählt, Leipzig 1830 (especially pp. 5-7)
- Ralf **Thomas**: Die Neuordnung der Schulen und der Universität Leipzig; in: Helmar Junghans (Publisher), Das Jahrhundert der Reformation in Sachsen, Berlin 1989, pp. 113-131.
- Yoshikazu **Tokuzen**: Pädagogik bei Luther, in: Leben und Werk Martin Luthers 1526-1546, Published by Helmar Junghans, Berlin 1983, Vol. 1, pp. 322-330

Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church:

- Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, Vollständige Neuedition, Published by Irene Dingel, Göttingen 2014 [Abbreviation: **BSELK**]
- Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche (Lateinisch-Deutsch), Göttingen 1930 [Abbreviation: **BSLK**]
- Unser Glaube; Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche; Ausgabe für die Gemeinde [in modern German]; Published by Horst Georg Pöhlmann, 3rd Edition, Göttingen 1991 [Abbreviation: **Pö.+ §**]
- Concordia-Triglotta; Die symbolischen Bücher der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, deutsch-lateinisch-englisch; St. Louis/Mo. 1921 [Abbreviation: **Trigl.**]

Editions of Luther's Works:

- Dr. Martin Luthers Werke (Kritische Gesamtausgabe), 127 Bände, Weimar 1883-2009 [WA]
- Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften, Published by J. G. Walch, 23 Volumes, 2nd printing, St. Louis/Mo. 1880-1910 [W²]
- Martin Luther, Taschenausgabe, 5 Volumes (in modern German), Berlin 1981ff [LTA]
- Luther's Works, hg von Jaroslav Pelikan und Helmut Lehmann (American Edition), Philadelphia 1957-1986 [LW].

Dr. Gottfried Herrmann

(The author is Professor of Church History and the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Leipzig and Director of the Concordia Publishing House of the Evangelical-Lutheran Free Church in Zwickau.)