

Three Circles

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The cities that were the seats of governments in late medieval societies often had three rings of fortifications. Three concentric circles of walls guarded them from their enemies. They were designed in such a way that even if the two outer walls were breached, the city could still survive by preserving its main assets and providing an inner bastion to hold out against the enemy. This was so because the inner circle protected the heart of the city with its royal palace, its military garrison, its administrative center, and its stock of supplies.

This arrangement of a fortified city provides Luther with an apt illustration of the correlation of three foundational orders for human society: civil government, the family, and the church (LW 41, 176-77). Sadly, Luther's teaching on these three divinely orders is unlikely to receive much attention even by Lutheran scholars and commentators as we celebrate the anniversary of the Reformation this year. Yet Luther regarded it as vital part of his teaching, as is shown by his inclusion of the Table of Duties at the end of the Small Catechism. It was, in fact, so important for him that he summarized it in the Trinitarian appendix to his "Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper" from 1528 in connection with his profession of faith in Christ as God and man (LW 37, 364-66) and in his conclusion to the carefully crafted treatise "On the Councils and the Church" from 1539 (LW 421, 176-78).

These three sets of walls all rest on the invisible foundation of God's word, the divine ordinances that institute and sustain them. Without his word they would not exist, nor could they survive. These walls protect the city of God against the devil and his hostile forces. They do not just protect the city from being attacked and defeated by the devil; they prevent the devil from infiltrating the city and subverting the harmonious cooperation of its citizens in their respective callings. He is, as Luther says, "the enemy of God's order" (LW 40, 147). While his main target is the church, he also undermines it by attacking the order of the family and the order of society. And that best from within these orders!

The inner bastion protects the church, the holy heart of the city, God's own stronghold in the city. By its preaching of God's word as law and gospel, the church drives the devil from the conscience of its members and establishes a sanctuary for them where Christ rules with his Holy Spirit. It is the ultimate bulwark against Satan, a heavenly fortress that provides the base for Christ's defeat of all the powers of darkness. By its prayers for the family and good government the church protects them from sure destruction. While the devil can damage the church badly, he cannot destroy it, because it rests on Christ himself as its sure foundation.

The middle, intermediate set of walls protects the family with marriage as its productive heart. It nurtures the life of the city by producing children and caring for them. By its teaching of God's law, every family trains them for their calling as responsible, productive citizens; by its

teaching of the gospel, the Christian family also equips them to serve God in the respective callings. From a human point of view, the prosperity of the city depends on its health. God's word establishes and maintains the family as the foundation for moral order in society, an order that promotes what builds up the city and opposes the evil-doing that undermines it.

The outer set of walls is government with all its agencies. It provides a legal protective shield against social disorder and injustice; it maintains the legal regulative framework that is necessary for the family and the church to flourish. By its enactment of God's law, as set out in the second part of the Decalogue, good government maintains social harmony and justice; it punishes evil-doing and rewards good behavior. God's law establishes it as a just order that promotes the well-being of the whole society and protects the family and the church from subversion. It is the outer bulwark against the devil and his wicked cronies.

Even though these orders are currently under severe attack on every front in the western world, Luther's teaching on them is largely ignored by the church. That is rather odd because it speaks so well into our current context. Just a week ago, Paul Kelly, the editor at large of *the Australian*, our national newspaper, penned a rather perceptive article entitled "Blessed be the egoistic individuals." In it he argued that the drastic decline of the Christian faith in the USA and Australia has had direct consequences for our political system and public trust in it. He concludes: "The final logic is that everything depends upon politics. As the society of family and marriage becomes mired in confusion, as the society of church and religion is the target of assault, so the society of politics is being asked to assume a role and burden utterly beyond its capacity and guaranteed to leave community-wide unhappiness. The tripartite design that made the West such a workable and successful proposition is being torn apart. Once dismantled it cannot be put back together" (19, July 8-9, 2017).

Kelly is right about the tripartite design of our social order and its Christian origins. Yet he is wrong in his pessimistic judgment that it cannot survive. That may be so for the ideology for our intellectual, cultural elite. But it is not really so morally and spiritually. These three orders do not rest on human teaching and legislation; they rest on the divine foundation of God's eternal word. Since they have been established by God's word, He will sustain them with it, no matter what happens. His word stands in judgment over those who try to subvert and destroy them. His word and its practice by the church ensure their survival.