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A Disordered Estate: A Lutheran Approach to Institutional Evils

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The question of institutional evils weighs heavily on the mind of the American Zeitgeist. Institutional racism, once happily relegated to history as a relic of Jim Crow, has reentered the public discussion on a national level in a way not seen since the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. The new virtue of "fair-trade" is lauded as the solution for an exploitive economic system, while "going green" promises absolution of a company's carbon footprint. The extent

of government COVID-19 measures and the debate surrounding the inclusion of critical theories in public education dominate primetime and social media. These are all examples of how Americans are aware of institutional evils in a way they have rarely been before, and many Christians are looking to their churches for answers.

Lutherans have often felt handicapped by their theology in the face of institutional evils. On one hand is the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. Originally used to describe God's two-fold way of ruling his creation, it is too often flattened into an impenetrable barrier sanctifying the division of Church and State.¹ On the other hand stands vocation. Luther originally employed the doctrine of vocation to elevate the secular roles of life into holy orders.² Now, however, vocation is often used as a tool to limit the scope of a Christian's responsibility.³ Even when the two doctrines are freed of these misunderstandings, both offer incomplete guidance for addressing institutional evils. What are one's vocational responsibilities to a child laborer half a world away when making a purchase from a subsidiary of an international conglomerate? How does a Christian leverage their role in the church to address predatory policing? It is not that the doctrines of the Two Kingdoms or vocation are irrelevant or unimportant to these questions, but their use is limited. Something more is needed. It is my argument that the doctrine of the Three Estates offers a theologically Lutheran framework in which to address institutional evils. This medieval doctrine, employed by Luther and preserved by the Church of the Reformation, has fallen into general disuse in American Lutheranism; however, the Three Estates provide an avenue for both speaking theologically and acting ethically in a world of institutional evils.⁴

Speaking Theologically about Institutions: The Three Estates

The word "institution" calls to mind a variety of images: an institution of higher education, the institution of the family, the institution of the Lord's Supper. These examples are hardly "institutions" in the same way. So, theologically speaking, what is an institution? Luther provides a starting point. "But the holy orders and true religious institutions



Illustration from a 13th century French text depicting those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. Public domain.

established by God are these three: the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the civil government.”⁵ This quote taken from the *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528) introduces both the Three Estates and its terminological ambiguity. Orders, institutions, offices, estates, and hierarchies are all used by Luther throughout his life to describe the three-fold structure God created and employs to organize all human life.⁶ Although this three-fold structure is built into creation and does not change, history presents a myriad of patterns for manifesting church, government, and family.⁷ For the sake of clarity, the term “estate” will be used to refer to one of the three aspects of God’s ordering

of creation—church (*ecclesia*), family (*oeconomia*), and government (*politia*). On the other hand, the word “institution” will refer to a concrete manifestation of one of these estates. For example, the *estate* of government may be filled in a particular instance by the *institution* of the St. Louis Board of Aldermen, while in a different time and place it may be filled by the *institution* of the Great Khan of the Golden Horde.

The First Estate: Ecclesia

As an order of creation, the estate of church has its source in the creation account. Commenting on God’s prohibition to Adam in Genesis 2:17, Luther explains, “Here we have the establishment of the church before there was any government of the home and of the state... Moreover, the church is established without walls and without any pomp.”⁸ The church, when properly ordered, fulfills the estate’s created responsibility of orienting man to God in faith through the word. In the context of God’s prohibition to Adam, such an orientation is manifested as obedience. With the entry of sin, man’s relationship to God has become broken and no longer adheres to the proper ordering of the estate.⁹ The estate may now manifest in any number of deficient ways, and so does not refer exclusively to the *Christian* church. Instead, the estate of church may refer to any of man’s innumerable ways of reaching out to God.¹⁰ According to our terminology, the Christian church, heretical churches, and the Hindu temple are all institutions of the ecclesial estate because all are manifestations of man’s relationship to the divine.¹¹ No man may be excluded from this estate as Luther explains in the Large Catechism: “There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship” (LC I, 17).¹² The estate of the Church, as all the others, is an inescapable part of creation, even if it remains broken.

The Second Estate: Oeconomia

According to Luther, God established the second estate in his creation of Eve. He comments on Genesis 2:18, “Now also the household is set up. For God makes a husband of lonely Adam and joins him to a wife, who was needed to bring about the increase of the human race.”¹³ The second estate is not limited simply to marriage and procreation. It includes “everything that goes inside the house,” which in Luther’s day included the majority of the economic structure.¹⁴ Bonhoeffer describes this estate as “a participation by

Dollar: A Disordered Estate: A Lutheran Approach to Institutional Evils

man in the action of creation,” and references as an example the report in Genesis 4:14-21 of the foundation of the first city, the creation of musical instruments and tools, and the propagation of mankind.¹⁵ The vast majority of human activity is contained within this estate: the education of children, the development of culture, and the entirety of economic systems, including their attendant institutions such as businesses and banks.

The Third Estate: Politia

Compared to the breadth of the estate of marriage, the jurisdiction of the governmental estate is relatively narrow. It is concerned with the preservation of creation through the punishment of evil and the imposition of worldly justice.¹⁶ Because of its role in combating sin, Risto Saarinen describes Luther’s understanding of this estate as less a “created order” and more of an “emergency order.”¹⁷ Luther himself is explicit that civil government would be unnecessary without sin. However, he is less explicit regarding its source.¹⁸ Nowhere in his Genesis commentary does he identify a moment of divine institution for the estate of government as he did for the other estates.¹⁹ Despite this ambiguity of source and its “emergency” status, the government for Luther remains a divinely ordered estate imbued with the authority of God.

Institutional Evil

What then, theologically speaking, is an institutional evil? Using the definitions above, an institutional evil is an instance in which a particular concrete manifestation of an estate (i.e., an institution) does not pattern itself off the divine ordinance of its respective estate. There are two general ways in which this can happen. First, an institution may become disordered either by negligence or overreach to an extent that it threatens the proper functions of its co-estates. This is an inter-estate disordering and is rectified by the correct exercise of the other two estates’ institutions. The second type of institutional evil is an internal disordering which threatens the function of the disordered estate. This intra-estate evil is corrected by “emergency vocations” that are only sanctioned by the need to preserve the correct functioning of the estate. Often these two types of institutional evils will occur in the same instance, and so a particular disordered institution may require both inter-estate intervention and intra-estate “emergency vocations.” However, for the sake of clarity, we will address each type individually and on its own terms.

Inter-Estate Correction

Lutherans are rightly sensitive to the dangers of muddling important theological distinctions. The Two Kingdoms doctrine serves as a bulwark against the inappropriate mixing of the temporal authority of the secular order and the spiritual authority of the church. Yet Luther himself often called on his princes to correct abuses within the church. Essential to understanding Luther’s rationale is a grasp of his dual appeal to the princes. On the one hand Luther appealed to the princes as fellow Christians to correct the negligence of the church from within the ecclesial estate. On the other hand, Luther appealed to the princes *qua* princes to exercise the authority of the governmental estate to correct the gross injustices of the institutional church. It is this second appeal that falls under the category of

intra-estate correction and to which we now turn.

Correction by the Politia

In the two years following the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses, it had become obvious that the ecclesial authorities were unwilling to take up the challenge of church reform. In the face of continuing clerical abuses, Luther called on the temporal authorities to rectify the situation in his 1520 appeal “To the Christian Nobility.”²⁰ In this work Luther attacked three metaphorical walls behind which papal supporters were shielded from outside correction. Papal supporters argued as follows: (1) the “spiritual estate” is beyond the jurisdiction of the temporal authorities, (2) only the pope may interpret scripture, and (3) the pope alone may call a council.²¹ For our discussion of inter-estate correction, only the first wall is relevant. The other two will be treated more fully in a subsequent section.

In his attack on the first wall, Luther overturns the papal teaching of the primacy of the spiritual estate. He does not, however, accomplish this by urging the primacy of either the government or home. Instead, Luther reunifies the three estates into an interconnected whole. The medieval interpretation of the Three Estates created a system of three distinct, siloed social orders to which an individual could belong.²² The clergy belonged to the first estate—the “spiritual estate.” The nobility belonged to the second estate—the estate of government. Finally, the peasantry was relegated to the estate of labor which corresponds to Luther’s estate of marriage and the home. Within this tripartite division of society, the church positioned the spiritual estate above the rest and therefore beyond the jurisdiction of the temporal authorities. Luther attacked this atomized understanding of the estates that would exclude certain Christians from the spiritual estate as “pure invention.”²³ It is absurd, Luther argues, to build walls between the estates because, if it were taken to its logical conclusion:

Then tailors, cobblers, stonemasons, carpenters, cooks, innkeepers, farmers, and all the temporal craftsman should be prevented from providing pope, bishops, priests, and monks with shoes, clothes, house, meat and drink, as well as from paying them any tribute. But if these laymen are allowed to do their proper work without restriction, what then are the Romanist scribes doing with their own laws, which exempt them from the jurisdiction of the temporal Christian authority?²⁴

If the home estate is permitted to service the spiritual estate, then the governmental estate must also be allowed to do so through its proper function. This is because what distinguishes the estates from each other does not come down to people. For Luther all people belong to each estate simultaneously.²⁵ The same individual who is the prince of the *politia* is also both a son of his father in the *oeconomia* and a congregant of his pastor in the *ecclesia*. Even the hermit monk who rejects family and political affairs cannot retreat into the church alone. At most, Luther says, the monk who abandons all else for the “spiritual” can only neglect his responsibilities in the other two estates.²⁶ On one hand, what distinguishes the estates is their function and not their occupants since each person lives in all three estates simultaneously. On the other hand, individuals are distinguished within particular estates by the offices he or she occupies within it, and so an individual is subject to the responsibilities and obligations of their role within an estate regardless of other offices they may occupy in another.²⁷ Thus, when an institution of the ecclesial estate by thievery or corruption impinges on the duty

Dollar: A Disordered Estate: A Lutheran Approach to Institutional Evils

of the governmental estate to preserve order and justice, “the temporal authority is under obligation to protect the innocent and prevent injustice.”²⁸ No one is beyond the jurisdiction of the temporal authorities where the preservation of justice is concerned.

Luther applies this principle to the estate of the home. Commenting on the plight of children who are forcibly married off by their parents, Luther states that the authorities must “deprive the father of his devilish power, rescue the child from him, and restrict him to the proper use of his parental authority,” because the prevention of such injustice falls within the governmental estate’s responsibilities to “guard and uphold the right.”²⁹ This duty to preserve justice may sanction the government estate to act even when the danger is not immediate. In a letter from 1524, Luther called on councilmen throughout Germany to establish public schools. In the letter Luther explicitly places the responsibility to educate children within the estate of marriage. However, when parents do not properly educate their children, the governmental estate suffers from a lack of qualified leaders. Luther complains to the councilmen: “Are we then to permit none but louts and boors to rule, when we can do better than that?”³⁰ It is the danger of an incompetent ruler impeding the smooth running of government that sanctions the governmental estate’s establishment of schools.³¹ This is not the temporal authorities entering into the estate of marriage as a kind of “emergency parent.” The establishment of public schools is the temporal authorities acting within the protective function of the governmental estate. Luther explains to the councilmen that a city is not only protected by “mighty walls” and a “goodly supply of guns and armor,” but that a city’s best defense is a cohort of “able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens.”³²

Correction by the Church

Luther is a wealth of deep theological thought on the proper relationship between the governmental and ecclesial estates. However, because of the challenges he sought to correct, he speaks more powerfully and frequently about governmental corrections of the church than the reverse. To find a Lutheran theologian exploring the role the church may play in correcting governmental institutional evils through the lens of the Three Estates, one must spring forward 400 years to World War II. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been sanctified in Lutheran hagiography for his resistance to the Nazi regime and his (albeit small) role in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Less well known is his theological work, *Ethics*, which he prepared during his time as a double agent. In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer intentionally follows in the footsteps of the reformer by applying Luther’s pattern of inter-estate correction through the proper exercise of the other estates.³³

The proper function of the church for both Bonhoeffer and Luther is that of proclamation. Where such proclamation takes place to sinful human beings, it takes the form of Law and Gospel. Where, however, such proclamation is directed not towards individual sinners but rather to institutions, the church’s proclamation functions as a guiding law that informs the estates of their proper shape and function.³⁴ Sinful man is wont to view the accomplishments of the temporal estates as the sum total of a collective will, “concluding that it is owing to its own cleverness, reason, and strength that a community or dominion endures and thrives.”³⁵ Luther teaches that those who occupy the institutions of home and government must recognize the divine power and purpose behind their role, even though the

estate demands that they “proceed as if there were no God and they had to rescue themselves and manage their own affairs.”³⁶ It is only the proclamation of the church that informs these estates that they are, in fact, divinely ordered and established by God. They are not free to exceed their jurisdiction or neglect their duties.

Bonhoeffer explains that this proclamation by the Church cannot be aimed at a “Christianization” of the other estates into a theocracy of state or home. That itself would be to create an inter-estate disordering. Instead, the church calls on the government and home to act “in accordance with its own special task.”³⁷ Thus, when the institutions that occupy the governmental estate no longer uphold justice, preserve order, or protect the innocent, it is the duty of the ecclesial estate to remind it of its divine obligations through its proclamation. Likewise, the church cannot remain silent when the governmental estate impinges on the jurisdiction of either the estate of the church or home, but it must seek to shepherd it into its proper sphere through its proclamation. Here Luther’s treatise, *Temporal Authority*, stands as a venerable example of the church’s proclamation to the governmental estate.³⁸ In addition, there are innumerable examples of the ecclesial estate’s guidance to the proper ordering of the marriage estate including biblical examples such as Ephesians 5:21–6:9, the Small Catechism’s Table of Duties, and modern sermon series about raising godly children. In each instance the ecclesial estate addresses the many disorders of the home and government by fulfilling its own divinely mandated responsibilities through its faithful proclamation.

Correction by the Oeconomia

There is a disappointing lack of theological reflection on the role the estate of marriage may play in the correction of government and church. This is all the more unfortunate given how, in our industrial and post-industrial context, the *oeconomia* has experienced an unprecedented expansion of influence. The cottage industries and peasant farmers that were the backbone of the medieval economy have been replaced by an international network of businesses that steer a global supply chain of resource extraction, labor, and consumers. It is hard to deny that the *oeconomia* now wields global influence, and many have sought to leverage this influence to correct institutional abuses. Boycotts such as the film industry’s recent exodus from Georgia in the wake of a series of new laws is an example of this estate, within its proper sphere, pressuring the government to correct a perceived abuse. A similar pattern plays out in miniature again and again in congregations throughout the nation in which congregants, rightly or wrongly, withhold their contributions to punish a perceived erring pastor.

Although the *oeconomia* possesses a comparatively wider scope than its co-estates, in a capitalistic setting, its most powerful tool for inter-estate correction is the economy. Such was not always the case. During the West’s eighteenth-century transition from a preindustrial to an industrial society, many European countries saw the development of what was then and still is described as the *fourth* estate: the independent press.³⁹ The ability of the independent press to shape public opinion and so influence the wheels of power outside the established political and ecclesial channels rightly earned it a place alongside of the princes and bishops; however, as simply another avenue of man’s participation in creation, the press theologically falls under the *oeconomia*. Thus, the estate of the home, once barred from the

Dollar: A Disordered Estate: A Lutheran Approach to Institutional Evils

levers of power by the reality of medieval Europe, now made its influence felt powerfully through an independent press. Contemporary manifestations of the *oeconomia* correcting its partner estates through the independent press and investigative journalism are legendary. The Panama Papers, Wiki-Leaks, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the Boston Globe's work on the Roman Catholic Sex Scandal are all recent historical examples of the *oeconomia* addressing institutional evils of its partner estates. Unfortunately, much of the theological reflection stimulated by these revelations focused solely on the scandals themselves and not on the structures and methods that brought them to light. These scandals undoubtedly deserve every ounce of theological reflection offered, especially those that touch on institutional evils within the church, but this singular focus has left a rich well of theological possibilities untapped. What is the theological significance of exposing evil before the world? What transparency (if any) is owed by the *ecclesia* and the *politia* to the *oeconomia*? What shape might a theology of journalism take? Disappointingly, an investigation into these topics would greatly exceed the room allotted for this paper.

Intra-Estate Correction

We may now turn our attention to the challenge of institutional evils contained within a single estate. Unlike the previous examples, institutional disorders that do not impinge on the jurisdiction of the other estates are, to a certain degree, insulated from their correction. Should an institution of the ecclesial estate begin to execute murderers the governmental estate refuses to punish, then it has overstepped its own mandate. The ecclesial estate would have only created an inter-estate disordering without correcting the governmental estate's intra-estate disordering. Then is there no recourse for a disorder of an estate when its institutional authorities refuse to fulfill its obligations? Not at all. Luther provides a theologically responsible framework to address intra-estate disordering through what could be described as "emergency vocations."

Although the Three Estates are for Luther a divinely ordered pattern of creation, they are not immutable. In his 1529 treatise *On War Against the Turk*, Luther traces out the antitheses which threaten to destroy the estates:

As I said, lies destroy the spiritual estate; murder, the temporal; disregard of marriage, the estate of matrimony. Now if you take out of the world *veram religionem, veram politiam, veram oeconomiam*, that is, true spiritual life, true temporal government, and true home life, what is left in the world but flesh, world, and devil?⁴⁰

When an institution by its lies, murder, or disregard of marriage threatens the very existence of an estate, it triggers for Luther a special type of emergency. Luther employs numerous metaphors when he describes these emergency situations: a town fire; a mad dog; and,



17th century illustration of a fire in Tiverton, England in 1612. Public Domain.

for the Pope who undermines all three estates simultaneously, a werewolf (*Beerwolf*).⁴¹ In each metaphor Luther explains that the normal vocational boundaries do not apply. Nature itself demands immediate action. “Would it not be unnatural if a fire broke out in a city, and everybody were to stand by and let it burn on and on and consume everything that could burn because nobody had the authority of the mayor?” Rather, it is the duty of each citizen to raise the alarm and do what he can to extinguish the blaze.⁴² Because the Three Estates *are* the correct ordering of creation, their preservation is of paramount importance. Those who are equipped to do something may, in such emergencies, usurp the authority of the institutions of an estate by filling an “emergency vocation.”

Emergency Vocations

We may now return to Luther’s “To the Christian Nobility.” After tearing down the papal claims of the superiority of the spiritual estate over the temporal estate, Luther called on the princes *qua* princes to exercise their duty to punish the secular injustices perpetrated by the clergy. Luther then secures the right of every Christian to interpret scripture by tearing down the second wall. However, it is Luther’s attack on the third wall that is most relevant to our discussion of intra-estate disordering. Luther identified this third wall as the claim that the pope alone may call a council. By refusing to call a council to address papal abuses, the ecclesial authorities avoided reform. For Luther, this gridlock rose to the level of an emergency. Luther called on the princes to intervene; however, not in the same way he had before. In this second appeal Luther calls on the princes not as princes, but as fellow Christians who possess the Priesthood of all Believers. Drawing on the image of a town on fire, Luther explained that, when the spiritual authorities neglect their duty to call a church council and so leave abuses unchecked, it becomes the responsibility of “the first man who is able” to convene a council.⁴³ The Christian princes were the perfect individuals to accomplish this goal because they conveniently wielded enormous power and wealth.⁴⁴ They were not, however, to call a council in their role as a prince, but as baptized Christians.⁴⁵ Luther is even more explicit in his 1528 Saxon Visitation letter. In the letter Luther beseeches his elector, John the Steadfast, to reestablish episcopal oversight for the evangelical churches by appointing parish visitors. Again, Luther requests that Elector John appoint parish visitors not in his role as prince, but “out of Christian love (since he is not obligated to do so as a temporal sovereign) and by God’s will for the benefit of the gospel and the welfare of the wretched Christians in his territory.”⁴⁶ The Elector, as the Christian best equipped for the challenge, is to fill the office of “bishop,” not on the basis of a regular call, but out of necessity. Here and in his appeal “To the Christian Nobility,” Luther lays out a pattern for individuals to supersede both their vocations and the vocations of others during emergency situations.

The emergency sanctioning of vocational supersession and the allowance of “emergency vocations” may also be seen in Luther’s treatment of crises within the governmental estate. Commenting on the German Peasant Revolt, Luther again calls to mind the image of a destructive fire and the emergency vocations thrust upon all those within the estate. “For if a man is in open rebellion, everyone is both his judge and his executioner; just as when a fire starts, the first man who can put it out is the best man to do the job.”⁴⁷ This is not a sanctioning of vigilante justice. Such emergency vocations are only permissible in true

Dollar: A Disordered Estate: A Lutheran Approach to Institutional Evils

crisis that threaten the very estate. “For rebellion is not just simple murder; it is like a great fire, which attacks and devastates a whole land . . . and turns everything upside down, like the worst disaster.”⁴⁸ In the same way that any Christian who is able to call a council in an emergency situation should do so regardless of their office within the ecclesial estate, Luther sanctions the supersession of normal vocational boundaries within the governmental estate when it is threatened.⁴⁹

Finally, Luther provides a glimpse of what such “emergency vocations” may look like within the estate of marriage, albeit more implicitly and without the apocalyptic flavor he gives the previous examples. Luther describes the abusive father who forces his child into celibacy or otherwise denies the child the necessities of life as “no father at all.”⁵⁰ While the temporal authorities are under obligations to correct such injustice, the child himself is able to supersede his vocational responsibilities towards his father within the home estate and treat his parents “as if they were not parents at all, or were dead.”⁵¹ In doing so the child takes on the responsibilities the parents had towards the child to care for himself and find a mate.⁵² Luther does not root such drastic action in the freedom of the child to marry whomever they please. Instead, the child is only permitted to supersede their vocational responsibility because such parental actions undermine the entire estate of marriage.⁵³ The case of the abused child is a “micro-emergency” that sanctions vocational supersession.

The Necessity of the Three Estates

If an inter-estate evil is corrected by the proper functioning of institutions from the other two estates, and intra-estate evil is corrected by “emergency vocations” within the respective estate, what essential function does the doctrine of the Three Estates provide in correcting institutional evils? To put the question more simply, “What use is the doctrine of the Three Estates if institutional evils are ultimately corrected by vocations of one kind or another?” From the outset, it must be noted that the doctrine of the Three Estates is not designed to replace another doctrine. Without the doctrine of vocation, the Three Estates are as equally inept at addressing institutional evils as vocation is without the doctrine of the Three Estates. Rather, the Three Estates function as a doctrinal supplement. It provides a more wholistic theological view of the challenges institutional evils pose.

First, the Three Estates serves as a counterbalance to the powerful limiting force inherent in the doctrine of vocation. It has long been recognized that the doctrine of vocation often nurtures an atomistic understanding of one’s responsibilities. According to this understanding, a Christian’s responsibility extends only as far as their vocation. A Christian father is responsible for the wellbeing of his own children but not the children of his neighbor. Whether this limiting force is inherent in vocation, or if the doctrine is simply susceptible to this misreading, several theologians have recognized this weakness and have attempted to counteract this limiting impulse by supplementation. Gustaf Wingren suggests “The Sovereignty of Love” as a creative force that would open vocation to “fresh and unsuspected perspectives for life’s activities.”⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, recommends a “free responsibility” to Christ that would equip one to distinguish between correct and incorrect extensions and restrictions of responsibility.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, such suggestions undercut what is perhaps the greatest ethical strength of vocation: its ability to direct the care

of neighbor into concrete relationships. Vocation conforms Christ's general command to "love one's neighbor" to the realities of one's life. To smear the edges of the doctrine to make it more widely applicable undermines this great strength. The Three Estates, however, provide a powerful expansive counterforce without diluting the focusing force of vocation. It simply opens a wider field in which this focusing force may operate. The Three Estates encompass the entirety of human life as well as each person individually. When paired with vocation, the doctrine of the Three Estates is able to orient an individual not only to his own vocation, but also to the entirety of human society.

Second, the estates frame and guide vocation and help clarify conflicting vocational responsibilities. The estates are the field in which an individual's vocations are operative, and so they establish a vocation's roles and limits. An individual must ensure the temporal wellbeing of his neighbor so long as he is operating within the governmental estate. However, once he begins to operate within the ecclesial estate, every action must be driven towards the proclamation of the word. The estates inform an individual which of their vocational responsibilities take precedence in a particular situation. This is all the more important in an emergency. How would one determine which of the myriad of potential "emergency vocations" a crisis requires? One must identify in which estate the emergency is occurring and employ an "emergency vocation" appropriate to that estate. An "emergency general" who preaches or an "emergency priest" who executes only further confuses the doctrine of vocation. The Three Estates provide clarity.

Finally, and perhaps most relevant to our contemporary challenges, the Three Estates provide a grammar for speaking theologically about moral evils that extend beyond the actions of a single individual. Once one fights through the ambiguous and varied terminology, Luther's treatment of the Three Estates provides a way to evaluate human structures beyond the humans that operate them. An estate is more than the sum of its parts. God established the three estates at creation, and they continue to possess a reality distinct from the institutions that fill it. In this way they are as equally creatures of God as man is. The estates certainly exist differently than man, but they nevertheless exist as creatures with particular characteristics. Likewise, as a manifestation of an estate, an institution possesses a "being" that is more than a legal fiction or an abstract way to describe the organization of individuals. They are the eco-systems of human life through which God orients, propagates, and protects his creation. Where their divine mandates are neglected or disordered, a true evil occurs. Christians must be able to respond appropriately to these evils, and the Three Estates provide a framework from which to operate.

Endnotes

1 Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 188.

2 Michael Richard Laffin, *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther from the Modern Political Narrative* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 160.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 256-257.

4 Martin Luther, "Disputation on the Three Hierarchies," trans. Wilhelm Linss, *Lutheran Forum* 51, no. 2 (2017), 37.

5 LW 37:364

6 LW 13:369.

7 Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 324-25.

Dollar: A Disordered Estate: A Lutheran Approach to Institutional Evils

8 LW 1:103.

9 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 208.

10 Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 122–123.

11 Perhaps an English word that more closely captures the scope of the estate of the church in the modern context would be religion. In medieval Europe, in which the doctrine of the Three Estates was developed, the Christian church was functionally synonymous with the estate of the church.

12 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 388, hereafter Kolb-Wengert.

13 LW 21:110.

14 LW 45:322.

15 Bonhoeffer divides *oeconomia* into two different estates—marriage and labor—and treats both as equal co-estates of church and government. For our purposes both estates of marriage and labor will be treated as the single estate of *oeconomia*, *Ethics*, 206.

16 LW 1:104.

17 Risto Saarinen, “Ethics in Luther’s Theology: The Three Orders,” in *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity*, ed. Jill Kraye and Risto Saarinen, vol. 57 (Norwell, MA: Springer, 2005), 197.

18 LW 1:104.

19 The first reference Luther makes to a concrete instance of civil government is the city Cain built (LW 1:294); however, the administration of the government was in some way given to Adam before the fall (LW 1:94) and possessed by him consciously even if not exercised (LW 1:246). In the Large Catechism Luther roots the authority of the government in “Fatherhood,” although he does not explain when or how this derivation occurred (LC I, 141–150).

20 James M Estes, “Luther on the Role of Secular Authority in the Reformation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (2003), 199.

21 LW 44:126.

22 Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 3.

23 LW 44:127.

24 LW 44:131.

25 Estes, “Luther on the Role of Secular Authority,” 202.

26 Luther, “Three Hierarchies,” 40.

27 Lewis W. Spitz, “Luther’s Ecclesiology and His Concept of the Prince as Notbischof,” *Church History* 22, no. 2 (1953), 127.

28 LW 44:157.

29 LW 45:389.

30 LW 45:357.

31 LW 45:368.

32 LW 45:356.

33 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 196–197.

34 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 342.

35 LW 45:328.

36 LW 45:331.

37 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 342.

38 LW 45:75–129

39 Julianne Schultz, *Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, Accountability and the Media*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.

40 LW 46:182.

41 LW 44:137; LW 46:50; Luther, “Disputation on the Three Hierarchies,” 41.

42 LW 44:137.

43 LW 44:137.

44 Robert Rosin argues that Luther called on the princes to fulfill the role of “emergency bishops” to the exclusion of those who did not possess temporal authority. Only the governmental authorities could fill the emergency vocation by virtue of their role as the “patrons of a kind of social family” “Bringing Forth Fruit: Luther on Social Welfare,” in *A Cup of Cold Water: A Look at Biblical Charity*, ed. Robert Rosin and Charles P Arand, (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1996), 120. While it is true that Luther views the temporal authorities as *patres patriae* (LC 142), Luther does not single out the princes on this basis. Rather, Luther is motivated by practicality. Speaking about the need to call a council, Luther states, “No one can do this so well as the temporal authorities,” implying that, in different circumstances, others may be better equipped. Additionally, Luther later encourages both the temporal authorities and the “ordinary people” to take up conciliar matters if the ecclesial authorities are unwilling, LW 44:137, 139.

45 LW 44:137.

46 Later in the letter Luther argues that the Elector may be obligated to force the compliance of those who resist the parish visitors. However, this is done to prevent “strife, rioting, and rebellion” and so is within the jurisdiction of the Elector’s duties as prince and not as an “emergency bishop,” LW 40:271–73.

47 LW 46:50.

48 LW 46:50.

49 Charles P. Arand sets forth a vision of how the institutions of the church may address intra-estate disordering within the governmental sphere in an analogous way to the princes acting as “emergency bishop.” He suggests that when within the governmental estate “the established orders have simply broken down or are not-existent as in the case of large-scale disasters like typhoons, famines, and earthquakes or smaller scale crises where the infrastructure has broken down such as in the inner city,” the church may step in as an “emergency prince.” There are several historical examples of this happening. Perhaps most dramatic of them is Pope Leo’s negotiations with Attila for the safety of the city of Rome. The Confessions do allow for the possibility of a single institution operating within multiple estates as long as the authorities are not confused and the Two Kingdoms are kept distinct (AC XVIII, 21–29). Arand’s warning that “this work will more or less be a temporary measure” should be heeded if the emergency measures of Pope Leo do not eventually transform through time and tradition into the abuses the Reformation sought to correct, “Considering Biblical Charity within a Creedal Framework,” in *A Cup of Cold Water*, 195.

50 LW 45:391.

51 LW 45:390.

52 It is difficult to consider this particular instance of vocational supersession an “emergency vocation,” for it does not establish the child in vocational relationship to a neighbor except, perhaps, to a future spouse, LW 45:391–392.

53 LW 45:390–391.

54 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 147.

55 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 252–58.