



NIGHT STAND ARTICLES

Martin Luther

1483-1546

Now that God has today so graciously bestowed upon us an abundance of arts, scholars, and books, it is time to reap and gather in the best as well as we can, and lay up treasure in order to preserve for the future something from these years of jubilee, and not lose this bountiful harvest.

TO THE COUNCILMEN OF ALL CITIES IN GERMANY

Martin Luther was born in the small village of Eisleben, Saxony, the son of a peasant miner who wanted better things for his eldest child. Educated for a year by the Brethren of the Common Life and then for four years at a school in Eisenach, the talented scholar entered the University of Erfurt, quickly earning bachelor's and master's degrees. Heeding his father's wishes, he continued on at Erfurt to study law, but soon entered the city's Augustinian monastery to become a monk. He lived a life of extreme self-denial and devotion to his order, but was tormented by doubts about his soul's salvation. He continued to study theology and lectured at the recently founded University of Wittenberg and at Erfurt. His primary influences included Augustine, Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Jean Gerson.

In 1511 Luther was appointed full time to the University of Wittenberg, where he earned his Doctor of Theology degree, preached, and lectured, principally on the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians. At this point he began developing his theology of justification by faith alone. He also became close friends with the humanist professor of Greek, Philip Melancthon. Some humanists, like Melancthon, were won over by his theology; others, like Erasmus, remained loyal to the Catholic Church. Luther himself, however, was not a humanist. In 1517 he protested the abuse of the sale of indulgences and posted his *Ninty-five Theses*, unexpectedly opening the series of ever-widening attacks on Catholic practice, theology, and governance. After

several high-profile debates with leading theologians, he was excommunicated by Pope Leo X and tried by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at Worms.

Luther's sweeping reforms of church and society included a call for reform of Europe's universities. His theology focused on points of tension between the world's culture and the claims of Christ, including a radical division between ancient philosophy and the Bible. In particular, he angrily denounced Aristotle's grip on the university curriculum. Nevertheless, Luther was not among the radical educational reformers who rejected out-right all secular learning. For all of his bulldog polemics, Luther remained a defender of scholarship in the service of church, state, and community.

The Selection

Luther's three most important statements on education are included in addresses to the nobility, city councilmen, and parents: *An Appeal to the Christian Nobility* (1520); *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524); and *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530). Only part of the 1524 address to the councilmen of Germany is included here. In it, Luther reminds the community of its urgent duty to educate its children, a responsibility shared by parents and the government. Luther also offers a spirited defense of the study of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, ties education to leadership, and finally recommends the provision of well-stocked libraries.

from To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany

... It therefore behooves the council and the authorities to devote the greatest care and attention to the young. Since the property, honor, and life of the whole city have been committed to their faithful keeping, they would be remiss in their duty before God and man if they did not seek its welfare and improvement day and night with all the means at their command. Now the welfare of a city does not consist solely in accumulating vast treasures, building mighty walls and magnificent buildings, and producing a goodly supply of guns and armor. Indeed, where such things are plentiful, and reckless fools get control of them, it is so much the worse and the city suffers even greater loss. A city's best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consist rather in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well educated citizens. They can then readily gather, protect, and properly use treasure and all manner of property.

So it was done in ancient Rome. There boys were so taught that by the time they reached their fifteenth, eighteenth, or twentieth year they were well versed in Latin, Greek, and all the liberal arts (as they are called), and then immediately entered upon a political or military career. Their system produced intelligent, wise, and competent men, so skilled in every art and rich in experience that if all the bishops, priests, and monks in the whole of Germany today were rolled into one, you would not have the equal of a single Roman soldier. As a result their country prospered; they had capable and trained men for every position. So at all times throughout the world simple necessity has forced men, even among the heathen, to maintain pedagogues and schoolmasters if their nation was to be brought to a high standard. Hence, the word "schoolmaster" is used by Paul in Galatians 4 as a word taken from the common usage and practice of mankind, where he says, "The law was our schoolmaster."

Since a city should and must have [educated] people, and since there is a universal dearth of them and complaint that they are nowhere to be found, we dare not wait until they grow up of themselves; neither can we carve them out of stone nor hew them out of wood. Nor will God perform miracles as long as men can solve their problems by means of the other gifts he has already granted them. Therefore,

we must do our part and spare no labor or expense to produce and train such people ourselves. For whose fault is it that today our cities have so few capable people? Whose fault, if not that of authorities, who have left the young people to grow up like saplings in the forest, and have given no thought to their instruction and training? This is also why they have grown to maturity so misshapen that they cannot be used for building purposes, but are mere brushwood, fit only for kindling fires.

After all, temporal government has to continue. Are we then to permit none but louts and boors to rule, when we can do better than that? That would certainly be a crude and senseless policy. We might as well make lords out of swine and wolves, and set them to rule over those who refuse to give any thought to how they are ruled by men. Moreover, it is barbarous wickedness to think no further than this: We will rule now; what concern is it of ours how they will fare who come after us? Not over human beings, but over swine and dogs should such persons rule who in ruling seek only their own profit or glory. Even if we took the utmost pains to develop a group of able, learned, and skilled people for positions in government, there would still be plenty of labor and anxious care involved in seeing that things went well. What then is to happen if we take no pains at all?

"All right," you say again, "suppose we do have to have schools; what is the use of teaching Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and the other liberal arts? We could just as well use German for teaching the Bible and God's word, which is enough for our salvation." I reply: Alas! I am only too well aware that we Germans must always be and remain brutes and stupid beasts, as the neighboring nations call us, epithets which we richly deserve. But I wonder why we never ask, "What is the use of silks, wine, spices, and other strange foreign wares when we ourselves have in Germany wine, grain, wool, flax, wood, and stone not only in quantities sufficient for our needs, but also of the best and choicest quality for our glory and ornament?" Languages and the arts, which can do us no harm, but are actually a greater ornament, profit, glory, and benefit, both for the understanding of Holy Scripture and the conduct of temporal government—these we despise. But foreign wares, which are neither necessary nor

useful, and in addition strip us down to a mere skeleton—these we cannot do without. Are not we Catalans justly dubbed fools and beasts?

Truly, if there were no other benefit connected with the languages, this should be enough to delight and inspire us, namely, that they are so fine and noble a gift of God, with which he is now so richly visiting and blessing us Germans above all other lands. We do not see many instances where the devil has allowed them to flourish by means of the universities and monasteries; indeed, these have always raged against languages and are even now raging. For the devil smelled a rat, and perceived that if the languages were revived a hole would be knocked in his kingdom which he could not easily stop up again. Since he found he could not prevent their revival, he now aims to keep them on such slender rations that they will of themselves decline and pass away. They are not a welcome guest in his house, so he plans to offer them such meager entertainment that they will not prolong their stay. Very few of us, my dear sirs, see through this evil design of the devil.

Therefore, my beloved Germans, let us get our eyes open, thank God for this precious treasure, and guard it well, lest the devil vent his spite and it be taken away from us again. Although the gospel came and still comes to us through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it came through the medium of languages, was spread abroad by that means, and must be preserved by the same means. For just when God wanted to spread the gospel throughout the world by means of the apostles he gave the tongues for that purpose [Acts 2:1-11]. Even before that, by means of the Roman Empire he had spread the Latin and Greek languages widely in every land in order that his gospel might the more speedily bear fruit far and wide. He has done the same thing now as well. Formerly no one knew why God had the languages revived, but now for the first time we see that it was done for the sake of the gospel, which he intended to bring to light and use in exposing and destroying the kingdom of Antichrist. To this end he gave over Greece to the Turk in order that the Greeks, driven out and scattered, might disseminate their language and provide an incentive to the study of other languages as well.

In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not with-

out purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his word, then we too ought to honor them above all others. St. Paul declared it to be the peculiar glory and distinction of Hebrew that God's word was given in that language, when he said in Romans 3 [1-2], "What advantage or profit have those who are circumcised? Much indeed. To begin with, God's speech is entrusted to them." King David too boasts in Psalm 147[19-20], "He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation or revealed to them his ordinances." Hence, too, the Hebrew language is called sacred. And St. Paul, in Romans 1 [2], calls it "the holy scriptures," doubtless on account of the holy word of God which is comprehended [verfasst] therein. Similarly, the Greek language too may be called sacred, because it was chosen above all others as the language in which the New Testament was to be written, and because by it other languages too have been sanctified as it spilled over into them like a fountain through the medium of translation.

And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out [Matt. 14:20], they are the baskets in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall not only lose the gospel, but the time will come when we shall be unable either to speak or write a correct Latin or German. As proof and warning of this, let us take the deplorable and dreadful example of the universities and monasteries, in which men have not only unlearned the gospel, but have in addition so corrupted the Latin and German languages that the miserable folk have been fairly turned into beasts, unable to speak or write a correct German or Latin, and have well-nigh lost their natural reason to boot.

For this reason even the apostles themselves considered it necessary to set down the New Testament

and hold it fast in the Greek language, doubtless in order to preserve it for us there safe and sound as in a sacred ark. For they foresaw all that was to come, and now has come to pass; they knew that if it was left exclusively to men's memory, wild and fearful disorder and confusion and a host of varied interpretations, fancies, and doctrines would arise in the Christian church, and that this could not be prevented and the simple folk protected unless the New Testament were set down with certainty in written language. Hence, it is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish.

Experience too has proved this and still gives evidence of it. For as soon as the languages declined to the vanishing point, after the apostolic age, the gospel and faith and Christianity itself declined more and more until under the pope they disappeared entirely. After the decline of the languages Christianity witnessed little that was worth anything; instead, a great many dreadful abominations arose because of ignorance of the languages. On the other hand, now that the languages have been revived, they are bringing with them so bright a light and accomplishing such great things that the whole world stands amazed and has to acknowledge that we have the gospel just as pure and undefiled as the apostles had it, that it has been wholly restored to its original purity, far beyond what it was in the days of St. Jerome and St. Augustine. In short, the Holy Spirit is no fool. He does not busy himself with inconsequential or useless matters. He regarded the languages as so useful and necessary to Christianity that he oftentimes brought them down with him from heaven. This alone should be a sufficient motive for us to pursue them with diligence and reverence and not to despise them, for he himself has now revived them again upon the earth. . . .

It is not necessary to repeat here that the temporal government is a divinely ordained estate (I have elsewhere treated this subject so fully that I trust no one has any doubt about it). The question is rather: How are we to get good and capable men into it? Here we are excelled and put to shame by the pagans of old, especially the Romans and the Greeks. Although they had no idea of whether this estate were pleasing to God or not, they were so earnest and diligent in educating and training their young boys and girls to

fit them for the task, that when I call it to mind I am forced to blush for us Christians, and especially for us Germans. We are such utter blockheads and beasts that we dare to say, "Pray, why have schools for people who are not going to become spiritual?" Yet we know, or at least we ought to know, how essential and beneficial it is—and pleasing to God—that a prince, lord, councilman, or other person in a position of authority be educated and qualified to perform the functions of his office as a Christian should.

Now if (as we have assumed) there were no souls, and there were no need at all of schools and languages for the sake of the Scriptures and of God, this one consideration alone would be sufficient to justify the establishment everywhere of the very best schools for both boys and girls, namely, that in order to maintain its temporal estate outwardly the world must have good and capable men and women, men able to rule well over land and people, women able to manage the household and train children and servants aright. Now such men must come from our boys, and such women from our girls. Therefore, it is a matter of properly educating and training our boys and girls to that end. I have pointed out above that the common man is doing nothing about it; he is incapable of it, unwilling, and ignorant of what to do. Princes and lords ought to be doing it, but they must needs sleigh riding, drinking, and parading about in masquerades. They are burdened with high and important functions in cellar, kitchen, and bedroom. And the few who might want to do it must stand in fear of the rest lest they be taken for fools or heretics. Therefore, dear councilmen, it rests with you alone; you have a better authority and occasion to do it than princes and lords.

But, you say, everyone may teach his sons and daughters himself, or at least train them in proper discipline. Answer: Yes, we can readily see what such teaching and training amount to, even when the training is done to perfection and succeeds, the net result is little more than a certain enforced outward respectability; underneath, they are nothing but the same old blockheads, unable to converse intelligently on any subject, or to assist or counsel anyone. But if children were instructed and trained in schools, or wherever learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses were available to teach the languages, the

other arts, and history, 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 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.

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 *casualibus* and *temporalibus*, 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? For my part, if I had children and could manage it, I would have them study not only languages and history, but also singing and music together with the whole of mathematics. For what is all this but mere child's play? The ancient Greeks trained their children in these disciplines; yet they grew up to be people of wondrous ability, subsequently fit for everything. How I regret now that I did not read more poets and historians, and that no one taught me them! Instead, I was obliged to read at great cost, toil, and detriment to myself, that devil's dung, the philosophers and sophists, from which I have all I can do to purge myself.

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 Alexander 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 boys 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, ballplaying, racing, and tussling.

In like manner, a girl can surely find time enough to attend school for an hour a day, and still take care of her duties at home. She spends much more time than that anyway in sleeping, dancing, and playing. Only one thing is lacking, the earnest desire to train the young and to benefit and serve the world with able men and women. The devil very much prefers coarse blockheads and ne'er-do-wells, lest men get along too well on earth. The exceptional pupils, who give promise of becoming skilled teachers, preachers, or holders of other ecclesiastical positions, should be allowed to continue in school longer, or even be dedicated to a life of study, as we read of [those who trained] the holy martyrs SS. Agnes, Agatha, Lucy, and others. That is how the monasteries and foundations originated; they have since been wholly perverted to a different and damnable use. There is great need of such advanced study, for the tonsured crowd is fast dwindling. Besides, most of them are unfit to teach or to rule, for all they know is to care for their bellies, which is indeed all they have been taught. We must certainly have men to administer God's word and sacraments and to be shepherds of souls. But where shall we get them if we let our schools go by the board, and fail to replace them with others that are Christian? The schools that have been maintained hitherto, even though they do not die out entirely, can produce nothing but lost and pernicious deceivers. . . .

. . . [N]o effort or expense should be spared to provide good libraries or book repositories, especially

in the larger cities which can well afford it. For if the gospel and all the arts are to be preserved, they must be set down and held fast in books and writings (as was done by the prophets and apostles themselves, as I have said above). This is essential, not only that those who are to be our spiritual and temporal leaders may have books to read and study, but also that the good books may be preserved and not lost, together with the arts and languages which we now have by the grace of God. St. Paul too was concerned about this when he charged Timothy to give attention to reading [I Tim. 4:13], and bade him bringing with him the parchments from Troas [II Tim. 4:13].

Indeed, all the kingdoms which ever amounted to anything gave careful attention to this matter. This is especially true of the people of Israel, among whom Moses was the first to begin the practice when he had the book of the law kept in the ark of God [Deut. 31:25-26]. He put it in charge of the Levites so that whoever needed a copy might obtain one from them. He even commanded the king to procure from them a copy of this book [Deut. 17:18]. Thus, we see how God directed the Levitical priesthood, among its other duties, to watch over and care for the books. Later this library was added to and improved by Joshua, then by Samuel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, and by many other kings and prophets. Thence have come the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, which would never have been collected or preserved had God not required such care to be bestowed upon them.

Following this example, the monasteries and foundations of old also established libraries, although there were few good books among them. What a loss it was that they neglected to acquire books and good libraries at that time, when the books and men for it were available, became painfully evident later when, as time went on, unfortunately all the arts and languages declined. Instead of worthwhile books, the stupid, useless, and harmful books of the monks, such as *Catholicon*, *Florista*, *Grecista*, *Labyrinthus*, *Dormi secure*, and the like asses' dung were introduced by the devil. Because of such books the Latin language was ruined, and there remained nowhere a decent school, course of instruction, or method of study. This situation lasted until, as we have experienced and observed, the languages and arts were laboriously recovered—although imper-

fectly—from bits and fragments of old books hidden among dust and worms. Men are still painfully searching for them every day, just as people poke through the ashes of a ruined city seeking the treasures and jewels.

This served us right; God has properly repaid us for our ingratitude in not considering his kindness toward us and failing to provide for a constant supply of good books and learned men while we had the time and opportunity. When we neglected this, as though it were no concern of ours, he in turn did the same; instead of Holy Scripture and good books, he suffered Aristotle to come in, together with countless harmful books which drew us farther from the Bible. In addition to these he let in those devil's masks, the monks, and those phantoms which are the universities, which we endowed with vast properties. We have taken upon ourselves the support of a host of doctors, preaching friars, masters, priests, and monks; that is to say, great, coarse, fat asses decked out in red and brown birettas, looking like a sow bedecked with a gold chain and jewels. They taught us nothing good, but only made us all the more blind and stupid. In return, they devoured all our goods and filled every monastery, indeed every nook and cranny, with the filth and dung of their foul and poisonous books, until it is appalling to think of it.

Isn't it a crying shame that heretofore a boy was obliged to study for twenty years or even longer merely to learn enough bad Latin to become a priest and mumble through the mass? Whoever got that far was accounted blessed, and blessed was the mother who bore such a child! And yet he remained all his life a poor ignoramus, unable either to cackle or to lay an egg. Everywhere we were obliged to put up with teachers and masters who knew nothing themselves, and were incapable of teaching anything good or worthwhile. In fact, they did not even know how to study or teach. Where does the fault lie? There were no other books available than the stupid books of the monks and the sophists. What else could come out of them but pupils and teachers as stupid as the books they used? A jackdaw hatches no doves, and a fool cannot produce a sage. That is the reward of our ingratitude, that men fail to found libraries but let the good books perish and kept the poor ones.

My advice is not to heap together all manner of books indiscriminately and think only of the number and size of the collection. I would make a judicious selection, for it is not necessary to have all the commentaries of the jurists, all the sentences of the theologians, all the *quaestiones* of the philosophers, and all the sermons of the monks. Indeed, I would discard all such dung, and furnish my library with the right sort of books, consulting with scholars as to my choice.

First of all, there would be the Holy Scriptures, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and German, and any other language in which they might be found. Next, the best commentaries, and, if I could find them, the most ancient, in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. 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.

Among the foremost would be the chronicles and histories, in whatever languages they are to be had. For they are a wonderful help in understanding and guiding the course of events, and especially for observing the marvelous works of God. How many fine tales and sayings we should have today of things that took place and were current in German lands, not one of which is known to us, simply because there was no one to write them down, and no one to preserve the books had they been written. That is why nothing is known in other lands about us Germans, and we must be content to have the rest of the world refer to us as German beasts who know only how to fight, gorge, and guzzle. The Greeks and Latins, however, and even the Hebrews, wrote their things down, so accurately and diligently that if even a woman or a child said or did something out of the ordinary the whole world must read of it and know it. Meanwhile, we Germans are nothing but Germans, and will remain Germans.

Now that God has today so graciously bestowed upon us an abundance of arts, scholars, and books, it is time to reap and gather in the best as well as we can, and lay up treasure in order to preserve for the future something from these years of jubilee, and not lose

this bountiful harvest. For it is to be feared—and the beginning of it is already apparent—that men will go on writing new and different books until finally, because of the devil’s activity; we will come to the point where the good books which are now being produced and printed will again be suppressed, and the worthless and harmful books with their useless and senseless rubbish will swarm back and litter every nook and corner. The devil certainly intends that we shall again be burdened and plagued as before with nothing but *Catholicons*, *Floristae*, Modernists, and the accursed dung of monks and sophists, forever studying but never learning anything.

Therefore, I beseech you, my dear sirs, to let this sincere effort of mine bear fruit among you. Should there be any who think me too insignificant to profit by my advice, or who despise me as one condemned by the tyrants, I pray them to consider that I am not seeking my own advantage, but the welfare and salvation of all Germany. Even if I were a fool and had hit upon a good idea, surely no wise man would think it a disgrace to follow me. And if I were a very Turk or a heathen, and my plan were nevertheless seen to benefit not myself but the Christians, they ought not in fairness to spurn my offer. It has happened before that a fool gave better advice than a whole council of wise men. Moses was obliged to take advice from Jethro [Exod. 18:17-24].

Herewith I commend all of you to the grace of God. May he soften and kindle your hearts that they may be deeply concerned for the poor, miserable, and neglected youth, and with the help of God aid and assist them, to the end that there may be a blessed and Christian government in the German lands with respect to both body and soul, with all plenty and abundance, to the glory and honor of God the Father, through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Excerpt from *The Great Tradition*, edited by Richard M. Gamble, pages 371-381.