

Reappropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms

by CRAIG L. NESSAN

In the Lutheran tradition the usual villain lurking behind apparent failures to oppose political tyranny has been Martin Luther's teaching on the "two kingdoms." The failure of the German Lutheran churches adequately to resist the Nazi regime and the quietism of the Lutheran church in the United States in relationship to political questions are but two examples of the apparent insufficiency of Luther's two kingdoms teaching. Moreover, questions can be raised about the adequacy of this political ethic for Luther himself, especially in light of his stance during the rebellion of the peasants and his writings against the Jews. Is it possible to re-appropriate Luther's two kingdoms teaching as a viable political ethic for the church in its ministry and mission at the beginning of the twenty-first century?¹

Walter Altmann has sketched four models that in various ways distort the relationship of church and state.² First, there can be a separation of church and state with a demonization of politics. This occurs especially in theologies that focus on salvation as an escape from this evil world. Second, there can be separation of church and state whereby politics is understood to be autonomous from religious influence. This approach usually functions with a very positive estimation of the political order as an instrument of God's creative and ordering power. Altmann cites not only Nazi Germany but also the prevailing view in the United States as examples of this model. In both examples, religious faith becomes spiritualized and privatized. Third, there can be an alliance of church and state in which the church dominates the state. Medieval Catholicism periodically operated according to this model as did Calvin's Geneva. Finally, there can be an alliance of church and state whereby the state dominates the church. Colonial Christianity in Latin America is a specific example and Constantinian Christendom a general example (Caesaropapism). Altmann offers Luther's two kingdoms teaching as an

alternative and more complex model, providing it is interpreted correctly. This has rarely been the case.

Misinterpreting the Two Kingdoms

Lutherans continue to struggle to understand the significance of Luther's two kingdoms teaching in relationship to Christian responsibility for the sake of the world.³ This teaching only became a major theological theme in Luther studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ Whether two kingdoms was articulated by confessional theologians with focus on political authority as an "order of creation," or by liberal theologians with focus on the autonomy of political institutions within the natural order, the consequence was the same: the subservience of the church to the established political order.⁵ Increasingly the nineteenth-century dualism between an autonomous public order and a privatized religious devotion came to be superimposed upon Luther's two kingdoms categories.⁶ It was only in the crucible of the use of Luther's two kingdoms teaching by theologians defending National Socialism that the elements of Luther's thought coalesced into the technical designation, "the *doctrine* of the two kingdoms."⁷ Due to the consequences of employing this "doctrine" as an ideological justification for acquiescence of the church to the Nazi movement, it has been subjected to severe criticism for leading the church into political quietism.⁸ One contemporary commentator argues forcefully that Luther's thinking must be radically reinterpreted if it is to be rendered serviceable in the cause of justice.⁹

In the United States one of the most insidious misunderstandings of Luther's thought involves identifying the two kingdoms with a wrongly construed notion of separation of church and state.¹⁰ Whereas separation of church and state was designed to guarantee that the state impose no mandatory religion upon its citizens, it has been misunderstood to mean that the church should have nothing to do with political engagement.¹¹ According to this view, the two kingdoms are to remain two separate realms of activity, with the church relegated to "spiritual" matters while the state is responsible for all things political.¹² One of the most troubling challenges for

those committed to the church's political responsibility and engagement in social ministry is the prevailing notion among many church members that the church should stay out of politics. Separation of church and state means the church should stick to things religious as its exclusive task. How often pastors in the United States face the charge that any advocacy by the church regarding legislation or political decisions is out of bounds! The conceptualization of Luther's thought according to "two" kingdoms lends itself all too easily to this kind of distortion.

One Kingdom, Two Strategies

Given the host of problems obstructing a constructive interpretation, how might we retrieve the significance of Luther's two kingdoms as an ethical framework supporting the political responsibility of the church at the start of the twenty-first century? It is crucial that we begin with the clear assertion that *finally there is only one kingdom of God*. In his teachings, Jesus spoke extensively about the dawning of God's kingdom. In doing so, Jesus appealed to this venerable Jewish metaphor deeply grounded in the Old Testament, as is evidenced in the Psalms.¹³ The kingdom of God broke into the world in Jesus' sayings, parables, miracles of healing, and casting out demons.¹⁴ The kingdom became present when Jesus forgave sins. The kingdom was present in Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners. At his last supper, Jesus instituted a meal of the kingdom for his disciples to share as often as they ate the bread and drank from the cup (Lk 22:14–20). With this meal Jesus anticipated the eschatological fulfillment of God's kingdom. According to Paul, the kingdom is the destiny of the whole creation (1 Cor 15:24–25).

The claim that there is finally only one kingdom of God is to be distinguished from the Reformed tradition insofar as the Lutheran view entertains a complexity about the interaction of church and state that is muted in Reformed theology. Whereas Reformed theology seeks conformity to the one kingdom of God as its end in both political and ecclesial matters without making clear the peculiar means of engagement appropriate to these distinct arenas, the Lutheran approach is more subtle and realistic about the types of ar-

gumentation that are useful when one is operating within the church in contrast to when one is engaging those outside the church in the realm of politics. While it would be constructive for Lutheran theology to recognize the confusion caused by speaking of "two" kingdoms and appropriate the wisdom of the Reformed tradition in talking about a single kingdom of God, it would be constructive for the Reformed tradition to consider how to incorporate the complexity of the Lutheran construct by appropriating the essence of what here will be described as two "strategies."

If there are two kingdoms in the New Testament, they are not the kingdoms of church and state. They are instead the kingdoms of God and Satan.¹⁵ In his ministry, Jesus is portrayed as engaging in a cosmic battle, appealing to the power of God versus the rule of Satan (Mk 1:12-13, 1:32-34, 3:22-27, 5:1-13). This is consistent with the cosmic battle between God and the "principalities and powers" in the Pauline corpus (as in Eph 6:12). If we are to re-appropriate Luther's two kingdoms teaching as significant for theological ethics and the social ministry of the church in our time, we must begin with this fundamental polarity between God and Satan as the framework that underlies Luther's own thought as well.¹⁶ An understanding of the cosmic battle between God and Satan is prerequisite for the proper interpretation of what Luther meant by the two kingdoms.

According to Luther's worldview, God employs the angelic powers that inhabit the universe in this battle, while Satan calls upon demonic forces, the principalities and powers. The kingdom of God in this contest would usher in a community of justice, truth, hope, love, and freedom, while the kingdom of Satan would bring forth injustice, lies, despair, exploitation, and oppression. In short, the kingdom of God is a kingdom of life, while the kingdom of Satan is one of death. The destiny of the world hangs in the balance as God seeks to subdue Satan's influence over the creation. The eschatological hope of Christians, based on the reality of Christ's resurrection, is that ultimately God's kingdom will prevail. In the meantime, however, the outcome is unclear, as we witness much empirical evidence that Satan has the upper hand.¹⁷

Given the fundamental contest between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom in Luther's conceptuality, trying to distinguish between church and state as two additional "kingdoms" adds a layer of

complexity that generally leads to confusion and misunderstanding.¹⁸ For this reason some theologians have tried to make subtle distinctions between two “kingdoms” and two “regiments” or “realms,” but such attempts have not sufficiently clarified the discussion.¹⁹ Moreover, in the case of Luther’s two kingdoms teaching, the *spatial* metaphor of kingdom does not adequately convey the substance of Luther’s thought. Luther’s two kingdoms teaching is not about two separate and unrelated *realms*, but rather about two different types of divine *activity*. The one God—who is the bringer of the one kingdom—engages in two types of activity to oppose the kingdom of Satan. For this reason, when interpreting Luther’s two kingdoms teaching I have found it extremely valuable to refer not to two kingdoms but to two *strategies*.²⁰ In God’s contest with the kingdom of Satan, God employs two distinct strategies to thwart Satan’s influence and bring forth the kingdom of God.

God uses two hands in the battle against Satan: 1) a right hand strategy that involves the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the administration of the Holy Sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper and 2) a left hand strategy that involves the establishment of just order in society through the institutions of the state, economy, law, education, family, and church.²¹ Always these two strategies complement one another. Never are they in competition with each other. God is ambidextrous and very coordinated in the use of both hands to save and preserve the world. Both strategies serve God’s purpose in establishing the one kingdom of God in the world. God is not divided against God, pitting one divine kingdom against another. Rather, God employs two strategies in order to defeat the cause of Satan and usher in the kingdom when God will be all in all.

Both of these strategies have vital implications for the church’s ethical responsibility as expressed in its social ministry. According to *God’s right hand strategy*, sinners are convicted by the law (in its theological use) and condemned as sinners who are in need to redemption. The law in its theological use drives sinners to repentance and convicts them in their need for Christ. The gospel is proclaimed to these convicted sinners as the good news that their sins have been forgiven by the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²² The work of Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament is to forgive our

sins, deliver us from Satan's power, and bring us to everlasting salvation. The Holy Spirit is alive through the gospel as it comes to us through the means of grace. The Holy Spirit is the power of God to set Christians free—free from sin, death, and the devil—and free for the love of one's neighbor.²³ The *ethical import* of God's right hand strategy is that Christ sets the sinner *free from* preoccupation with one's own self and salvation and *free for* doing good works solely for the sake others.²⁴ The gospel sets Christians free to use their spiritual gifts in service toward the neighbor and even to choose suffering on behalf of neighbors in need. Herein we discover the ethical significance of Luther's theology of the cross.²⁵ The gospel frees Christians to take up the cross on behalf of the suffering neighbor, risking solidarity by suffering themselves for the sake of the neighbor. The freedom of the gospel is *the* central theological concept for articulating the significance of the Lutheran tradition for ethics.

According to *God's left hand strategy*, it is God's purpose to provide just structures that promote life in the face of Satan's attempts to distort and manipulate them in the service of death. In this strategy, God also employs the law, this time not in its theological use of convicting sinners, but rather in its *political use* for ordering the world justly.²⁶ Although others may not recognize God as a key factor, Christians would see God's hand at work wherever fair and equitable civil or criminal statutes are enacted and enforced. When operating according to this left hand strategy—although Christians are motivated by the gospel to be involved out of their genuine concern for the neighbors' welfare—the primary arguments used to persuade non-Christians about particular laws or courses of action must be through appeals to reason and enlightened self-interest that are persuasive apart from extraordinary pleading based on God's revelation. While Christians remain centered in their faith in Jesus Christ, they employ common sense and reasoned arguments when operating according to God's left-hand strategy.

God's left hand strategy has placed Christians in a variety of life *stations*—as citizens, members of a family (child, parent, sibling, spouse), persons engaged in particular kinds of work, and members of the institution of church.²⁷ In each of these stations Christians are called to responsibility as they live out their central vocation as bap-

tized persons. Furthermore, Christians are called to responsibility in the shaping of *institutions* (political, economic, legal, military, educational, religious, etc.) that are just and equitable. To be effective in the enterprise of institution building requires more than winning the personal influence of those working within a particular institution. What is also necessary is involvement by Christians in advocacy efforts to exert influence and apply pressure upon the very structure of particular institutions.²⁸ This includes vigilance regarding the shape of the very structures that order public life. It is not only Christians who are engaged in God's left-hand strategy of living out stations responsibly or constructing just institutions. All people who live out their stations in life with responsibility are employed by God in ordering and preserving the world against the corrosive and destructive powers of Satan, even when they do not realize they are doing so.²⁹ Whereas in God's right-hand strategy there is explicit reference to God and Christ and the gospel, in God's left-hand strategy there are many who do not acknowledge how it is finally God who is sustaining the world through what Luther called "temporal governance."

Christian Political Responsibility

The foundation for Christian political responsibility can be clearly established through this reinterpretation of Luther's two kingdoms teaching. By making explicit that God employs *two distinct strategies* in God's mission of establishing the *one kingdom of God*, a framework is constructed that avoids the prevalent dangers and misunderstandings that have plagued modern interpreters of Luther's thought.

Furthermore, the core elements of Luther's theology each take a vital part in this reinterpretation. Law and Gospel, including especially the two particular uses of the law, each have their proper moment within the scope of God's work through the two strategies.³⁰ The first or civil use of the law belongs to God's left-hand strategy for guaranteeing just order in society through a rule of law. The second or theological use of the law belongs to God's right-hand strategy of convicting sinners of their sinfulness and preparing them to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ declares

the forgiveness of the sinner at the heart of the right-hand strategy, who is set free from bondage to sin and for genuine interest in the welfare of the neighbor. Christian freedom propels the forgiven sinner into service through both the left and right hand strategies; on the left hand through, among other activities, political engagement and on the right hand through evangelism.³¹ The baptismal vocation of the Christian is to be lived out via the several stations afforded to each by God: through relationships with members of the family, through work, in fulfilling the duties of citizenship, and at church.

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone, central to the Lutheran tradition, is preserved as the central focus for a proper understanding of what generates the energy leading to Christian political responsibility.³² Justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ gives the believer the core identity out of which flow both the left and the right hand strategies. By the proclamation of Christ's justifying act on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, believers come to faith in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the saving work of the gospel, Christians are set free from their sins, including the primal sin of self-absorption, and are set free for paying attention to the needs of their neighbor. Concern for the neighbor takes the form both of left-handed political engagement and right-handed evangelical outreach. Political responsibility is one indispensable expression of the basic obligation to take seriously the needs of my neighbor, by working for societal structures that best guarantee that the basic needs of the neighbor will be addressed.

Reclaiming the connection between justification by grace through faith and Christian political responsibility is one of the most urgent theological tasks bequeathed to the present by the twentieth century. Reinterpreting Luther's two kingdoms teaching as God's work of bringing forth the *one kingdom of God through two distinct but complementary strategies* reintegrates what tragically has been separated. Particularly in the Lutheran tradition, the tendency toward political quietism has led to disastrous consequences. We must confess our sins and repent, recognizing the inseparable connection between the freedom of the gospel and engagement in political advocacy. God employs two strategies in ruling the world and inaugurating the kingdom. Christians serve God by living responsibly not only by testifying

to the Gospel of Jesus Christ but at the same time by active political engagement.

NOTES

1. For an introduction to some of the critical problems, see W.D.J. Cargill Thompson, *The Political Thought of Martin Luther* (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1984), 36f.
2. Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 71–75.
3. See Craig L. Nesson, “Liberation Theologies Critique of Luther’s Two Kingdoms Doctrine,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 16 (1989): 257–266.
4. Compare Ulrich Duchrow, Wolfgang Huber, and Louis Reith, eds, *Umdeutungen der Zweireichelehre Luthers im 19. Jahrhundert: Texte zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte* (Guetersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1976).
5. A summary of Duchrow’s argument is found in Karl H. Hertz, ed., *Two Kingdoms and One World: A Sourcebook in Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 70–75.
6. Ulrich Duchrow, *Global Economy. A Confessional Issue for the Churches?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987), 9–15.
7. Hertz, *Two Kingdoms and One World*, 157. Vitor Westhelle points out that the two kingdoms teaching first was named a “doctrine” in the essays of Franz Lau in 1933 and Harald Diem in 1938. Vitor Westhelle, “God and Justice: The Word and the Mask,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 3, No. 1 (January 2003): #3 at <http://www.elca.org/jle/articles/biblical_theological/article.westhelle_vitor.asp>.
8. Karl Barth offered early and strenuous criticism. See Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin—God’s Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 112.
9. See Westhelle, #24–28.
10. For a description of the origins of disestablishment of religion, see Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 35–45.
11. See the analysis of Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment. The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 134–142.
12. See Altmann, 72f.
13. Bruce Chilton, *Pure Kingdom: Jesus’ Vision of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 23–44.
14. See the analysis and conclusions of Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 40–56 and 194–204.
15. See Cargill Thompson, 38f. and 53–56.
16. See the model of Ulrich Duchrow, *Lutheran Churches—Salt or Mirror of Society* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977), 6–7.
17. See the discussion of the battle between God and Satan in Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 23–37.
18. See the excellent discussion of problems and proper interpretation of Luther’s *Zwei-Reiche- and Zwei-Regimente-Lehre* in Cargill Thompson, 36–61.

19 See the bibliography that informs the discussion of these distinctions in Gerhard Sauter, ed., *Zur Zwei-Reiche-Lehre Luthers* (Munich Chr Kaiser, 1973), 225–227, especially the references to Joest and Schrey. For an example in Luther's own work, see "Temporal Authority To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. Eds Pelikan and Lehmann (St Louis and Philadelphia Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff) 45:92f (Hereafter cited as LW)

20 "Strategy" is a constructive and dynamic translation of the German word, *Regimente*, just as the English term "regimen" suggests a strategy

21 See Cargill Thompson, 43f

22 Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," LW 31:361

23 LW 31:366

24 See the central argument in LW 31:344

25 Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1976), 117–123. Compare Mary Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany State University of New York, 1997)

26 Gary M Simpson, "Toward a Lutheran 'Delight in the Law of the Lord' Church and State in the Context of Civil Society," in John R. Stumme and Robert W Tuttle, eds., *Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives* (Minneapolis Fortress, 2003), 32f

27 While God places all human beings in stations, Christians are called to live out those stations according to their baptismal identity. Compare Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 4–10

28 See Susan Kosche Vallem, "Promoting the General Welfare: Lutheran Social Ministry," in Stumme and Tuttle, *Church and State*, 88–91

29 Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law* (Philadelphia Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 48f

30 Compare Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1999), 267–273

31 Richard H Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 135f

32 Compare Lohse, 258–266



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