

Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in the Context of His Theology

by Heinrich Bornkamm

Introduction

In this essay, the distinguished church historian of Heidelberg University gives us a guided tour through one of the most complex and controversial problems in the interpretation of Christian ethics. Luther's "two kingdoms" doctrine has been variously praised and damned in recent theology. Thinkers such as Nygren, Althaus, and Ebeling have defended the doctrine as the source of a salutary political realism (since it reminds us that no social order as such will ever be identical with the kingdom of Christ), combined with a definite sense of Christian social responsibility (since the "kingdom on the left" is also God's kingdom, in which his will-to-justice is to be enacted). On the other hand, theologians such as Barth and Bonhoeffer have condemned the doctrine as the source of a hopeless dualism and defeatism.¹

It is evident that the first task is to determine what Luther actually meant by speaking of "two kingdoms," and to distinguish this from what later Lutherans may have meant by it. Here Professor Bornkamm's essay makes a contribution in taking us step by step through one of the basic documents in which Luther sets forth his views, the treatise *On Secular Authority*, dating from 1523. Furthermore, as a historian

Endnote

1. For opinions pro and con, see the extensive German literature cited below by Professor Bornkamm, together with the English materials listed under "For Further Reading" at the end of the volume.

Professor Bornkamm is able to place this treatise against the background of the actual social situation of that time, thus clarifying Luther's intentions. It is noteworthy, for example, that the primary thrust of the treatise is a protest against what we today would call the totalitarian claims of the state, as is evident in the full title of the work *On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*.

Professor Bornkamm then proceeds to place Luther's thought against an even broader historical background, by comparing his doctrine of the two kingdoms with St. Augustine's views on the "two cities," as set forth in his great work *The City of God*. It becomes evident that although Luther's position is distinctive, the terms of the problem with which he was grappling had originated long before, and indeed can never be escaped so long as Christian theology still concerns itself with the church *and* the world, time *and* eternity, the challenge of the Sermon on the Mount *and* the realities of social-institutional, political, and economic life.

In the course of the discussion, the author has occasion to characterize and evaluate the views of many of the German and Scandinavian scholars who have contributed to the recent debate on this topic. He takes into account the proposal, supported especially by the Scandinavians, that one should not speak of two "kingdoms" (*Reiche*), but rather of two "governments" (*Regimente*), i.e., God's two ways of ruling the world. He concludes, however, that both concepts are necessary. "They serve to indicate the two inseparably intertwined aspects of the whole, the realm of

lordship ('kingdom') and the mode of lordship ('government')" (see page 17 below). What is important is the affirmation that God's sovereignty does extend over the whole of life.

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The translation has been made by Karl H. Hertz, professor of sociology at Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio, in consultation with the undersigned. A terminological note is in order concerning the translation of *weltlich*, which here has been rendered as "secular." Until recently, Luther's treatise *Von weltlicher Obrigkeit* has been known in English as *On Secular Authority*, but in Volume 45 of *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), the translation of the adjective was changed from "secular" to "temporal," both in the title and in the body of the treatise. The word "temporal," however, would be more appropriate as a translation of *zeitlich*, which, as the present essay shows, belongs more to Augustine's vocabulary than to Luther's. Furthermore, the recent upsurge of interest in the notion of the secular ("the secular city," "the secular meaning of the gospel," etc.) makes it useful to show that Luther, too, had an articulated view of the significance of this dimension of existence and a positive appreciation of it. He always, however, held it in tension with the trans-secular dimension; for him there are two kingdoms, not just one.

For all these reasons, the term *weltlich* is here rendered as "secular," except in direct quotations from Luther, where the usage of the American Edition of *Luther's Works* is followed.

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RECENT DISCUSSION OF THE DOCTRINE

For the last two or three decades, the “doctrine of the two kingdoms” has been one of the most debated aspects of Luther’s theology. In this doctrine problems present themselves which previously had been discussed in terms of Luther’s concept of the state¹ or as his position vis-a-vis the idea of a *corpus christianum*.² Both of these previous formulations had certain shortcomings. Whether one could really speak of a concept of “the state” in Luther in the meaning customary among us was as much disputed as whether one could attribute to him any notion of a *corpus christianum*. Consequently, and quite naturally, a more appropriate way of formulating the question was sought.³ This was found in the distinction — of course long familiar — which Luther made between two “kingdoms.”⁴ This had the advantage of avoiding concepts strange to Luther, but it had the disadvantage of creating the impression of a dualistic separation of a Christian-ecclesiastical domain from all secular affairs.

Taken as implying a surrender of the world to its own laws and a withdrawal of Christians from the world, this easily remembered catch phrase penetrated far beyond the realm of theological discussion into the general historical, and indeed political, consciousness. It was therefore a correction which developed almost of necessity when Luther’s distinction of the two “governments” came to be preferred to the concept of two “kingdoms.” The term “governments” denotes the two ways in which God effects his will in the secular and spiritual realms of the world.⁵ Both duality and unity thus seemed to be preserved. But the question soon arose whether the concept of kingdom could be completely replaced by that of government.⁶ At the same time scholars became aware of another problem in the two kingdom doctrine in addition to its apparent dualism, namely, whether in this matter one was concerned with a definable doctrine at all and not just with pastoral counsel for consciences, or indeed only with preaching the Word to the people in the two kingdoms, the secular-political and the spiritual-ecclesiastical.⁷ These issues, particularly the danger of a dualistic misunderstanding of this “doctrine,” clearly stand behind the most recent controversies which it has aroused.⁸

This lively debate, which has already produced an almost unmanageable quantity of literature, is rooted not only in the difficulty of the problem of a Christian political ethic or in the multileveled character of Luther’s own exposition of it, or just in the fact that modern theological convictions and formulations of the problem inevitably work their way into the discussion. The complications have arisen also, in part, because the problem has been conceived primarily in an abstract and systematic fashion (whether in terms of theology or jurisprudence), and because the historical question of the concrete problems with which Luther was grappling as he made this distinction receded into the background. The fact that isolated utterances have been set against one another without taking into account the context out of which they emerged can explain many a disagreement and misunderstanding. But as is always the case in Luther’s unacademic, living theology, his utterances on this many-sided and highly complex problem always have a function in a larger context, from which they cannot simply be separated. This applies in particular to single utterances from Luther’s early lectures, which did not as yet concern themselves with the problem of the two kingdoms as Luther had to cope with it historically.⁹ The concrete historical

question which demanded an answer from Luther, and which he answered with the distinction between the two kingdoms, is most clearly evident in his treatise, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523). I believe it will not be without value to search out once more the particular point of departure and the inner unity in this mature presentation of his doctrine, in order that from this vantage point we may, even if only briefly, sketch its historical significance and its relationship to his theology as a whole.

2

LUTHER'S VIEW OF SECULAR AUTHORITY

Two motives impelled Luther to go beyond what he had said on particular occasions, especially in the *Address to the Christian Nobility*, and to take up the project of writing a fundamental work on the question of secular authority. The outstanding jurist of the period, the Bamberg Counsellor Baron Johann von Schwarzenberg (author of the celebrated Bamberg Criminal Code of 1507), had sent him a book on various questions of doctrine, with which Luther declared himself completely in agreement — except for one point: “How secular authority is to be harmonized with the gospel I wish to discuss in a separate little book, since in this matter I do not agree at all with Your Grace.” We would give quite a bit still to possess this “mighty book” of Schwarzenberg’s, both because it was the first document to reveal his attitude toward the Reformation and because Luther’s own viewpoint would be more clearly delineated by virtue of this contrast.¹⁰

There was another, quite different way in which Luther encountered the problem of the state, namely, the situation in the Duchy of Saxony and other territories where his translation of the New Testament was banned and its surrender demanded.¹¹ Whence did the territorial rulers derive this right? With this question, Luther’s basic inquiry into the nature of governmental power became at the same time an inquiry into its limits. Both of these concerns are still clearly recognizable in the title of the treatise, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* — a further development of the themes of two sermons preached in Weimar on October 24 and 25, 1522.¹² (He started the writing of the treatise itself at the end of December and published it in March, 1523.) This twofold question also determines the content of the first two parts of the work; the third is a Christian “mirror for magistrates,” such as had been produced in great numbers since the time of Augustine.¹³

Overarching all three parts, however, is the fundamental distinction between “two kingdoms” in mankind. Luther turns against a twofold perversion of governmental power. The bishops, instead of governing souls with the Word, “rule castles, cities, lands, and people outwardly.” And the secular authorities, instead of truly governing their territories (not merely exploiting them), wish “to exercise a spiritual rule over souls,” prescribing the papist faith and trying to root out the Lutheran heresy by force.¹⁴ Thus “they neatly put the shoe on the wrong foot: they rule the souls with iron and the bodies with letters.”¹⁵ Between the realm of faith, which demands freedom, and the external order, which rests on law and on coercion, real boundaries exist — just as real as the physical border between Leipzig and Wittenberg.¹⁶ Consequently the princes should remain

princes, and the bishops, bishops. “Their government is not a matter of authority or power, but a service and an office.”¹⁷

This visible boundary separating the spiritual and secular estates must also be respected by each individual Christian who in any way has to deal with spiritual or secular affairs. But there is also a hidden boundary running through the middle of his own life. There are no external indicators that would enable the Christian to discern this boundary; he discovers it ever and again as he makes new, free decisions. Wherever his own person and his own affairs are concerned, as a Christian he must forego law and coercion; here nothing counts except the command of Jesus to do good and to endure injustice. But on the other hand, when the cause of the neighbor or of the community is at stake, he must fight against injustice with all the appropriate means available.¹⁸

If the world consisted only of true Christians, neither law nor justice would be needed. True Christians are “in their very nature” such that they are taught better by the Spirit than by any law. One no more need prescribe to them than one needs to instruct an apple tree that it should bear apples and not thorns. But “the world and the masses are and always will be un-Christian, even if they are all baptized and Christian in name.” True Christians “are few and far between.” Thus it is necessary, in order that evil may not triumph, to have law and enforceable order.¹⁹ The Christian must therefore, in his own life, “satisfy” both realms. You “suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian. . . and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor.”²⁰ This is particularly true when the Christian himself holds governmental office. In sharp contrast to the Zwickau enthusiasts and later to the Anabaptists, Luther insists that the Christian must make himself available for such service; it “belongs more appropriately to Christians than to any other men on earth.” It is also service to God, just as are the married estate, agriculture, or any handicraft; indeed government is a particularly necessary work, for it is the most difficult, and without it the world would become unhinged.²¹

In speaking of two “kingdoms” Luther is describing not only the two realms of church and state, proclamation and lawmaking, but also at the same time the two sets of relationships within which the Christian lives. On the one hand, there is his own existence, his personal attitude to his fellow men, his witness for the gospel — in this realm the unconditional commandment of forgiveness, endurance, and sacrifice prevails. On the other hand, there is the common “life together” of mankind in general, in which law must of necessity set firm limits against evil; here the Christian must help to see that no one suffers injustice or becomes the victim of another. For the two complexes of relationships there exist corresponding means according to which one must act in each. These means are, in Luther’s words, the two “governments,” the two types of rule — the uncoercive Word of God and the legal, coercive power of government. To the latter God has given the sword — i.e., law grounded on the power of punishment, for internal order, and the right of collective self-defense against external dangers.

Both governments are God’s. “For this reason God has ordained two governments; the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and; the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that — no thanks to them — they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace.”²² Luther distinguishes the respective

“kingdoms” or “governments” in a meaningful but not pedantic way.²³ For they belong together inseparably. Luther always had to assert two things: (a) that there are for the Christian two real and clearly separated sets of life-relationships; but (b) that these “kingdoms” are not rigidly fixed provinces into which the Christian’s existence is divided. He cannot live only in one or the other. He must live in both, and whether he will or not, he must continually act in both. As a Christian he is to use the means of the one or the other “government” in order to carry out the will of God, which holds the world together. This demands of him a continually new decision of conscience, for which there is only one norm: the question, “What is the form of love applicable in this situation — to endure injustice or to demand justice?”

Thus the two kingdoms in which the Christian finds himself, in a world split apart by sin, are separated from one another by a clear boundary which must not be violated lest chaos result. But the one identical will of God is at work in them, although with different means. In this way the two forms of service are inseparably bound to one another. Among all the contrasts between the two kingdoms which Luther lists — kingdom of God/worldly kingdom, gospel/law, the faithful/the infidels, spiritual/secular, for one’s self/for others, the Word of God/the sword, and so forth — he never says “kingdom of love/kingdom without love.” Love encompasses both. About the compulsory order of the law he can say, “There you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor,” just as he says of the personal life of true Christians “that they do injustice to no one, love everyone, and suffer injustice. . . willingly and cheerfully at the hands of anyone.”²⁴ Because love comprehends both of God’s orders and God realizes his administration of justice also through non-Christians, it follows that for Luther the love commandment is not just a Christian but a universal, “natural” commandment. A person who places himself outside the jurisdiction of the Word of Christ can still be apprehended by the “natural law.” “For nature teaches as love does, that I should do as I would be done by.” There is no better basis for judicial decisions than the aspiration that “love and natural law may always prevail.”²⁵ Love and natural law, which speaks to man through his reason, are the two clamps that hold the world together; fundamentally, according to the will of God, they are not two but one.

Because the law of reason is, by God’s determination, covertly the law of love, all secular justice also includes an element of freedom. Freedom not only rules the domain of spiritual relationships but also is indispensable in the world of law. Statute law is not sufficient. Reason shall be “the highest law and the master of all administration of law.”²⁶ Alongside the rigidity of the letter, it gives spirit and life. Thereby it reveals its origin in the creative hands of God, while all statute law is changeable human work. “A good and just decision must not and cannot be pronounced out of books, but must come from a free mind, as though there were no books. Such a free decision is given, however, by love and by natural law, with which all reason is filled.”²⁷

Luther developed his opinion on the life of the Christian in the orders of the world not only in theory but also in the portrait of the Christian prince which he draws in the third part of the treatise. This is just as helpful for an understanding of his doctrine as is a knowledge of the historical situation in which the work originated. The office of government, says Luther, demands a discouragingly high measure of wisdom and of strength to make free decisions. How should he presume to offer advice in this matter? “For this reason I know of no law to prescribe

for a prince; instead, I will simply instruct his heart.”²⁸ He does so with a mixture of Christian admonition and prudent appeals to experience, a mixture which corresponds to the unity of the two divine governments. He offers four specific directives, which he summarizes at the end. The prince should conduct himself as follows: “First, toward God there must be true confidence and earnest prayer; second, toward his subjects there must be love and Christian service; third, with respect to his counselors and officials he must maintain an untrammelled reason and unfettered judgment [he dare not, Luther had said earlier, blindly trust them but must take his chances with them despite their faults]; fourth, with respect to evildoers he must manifest a restrained severity and firmness” (rather punishing too little than too much, and in any case, not in such a way that a greater injustice ensues).²⁹ Luther, in passing, also briefly touches on the question of war, which would occupy him more fully at a later date. He admonishes the princes to be peaceful and exhorts the Christians to give faithful service in a necessary war but to refuse obedience in a manifestly unjust war.³⁰

3

THE CHRISTIAN’S SITUATION IN THE WORLD

The treatise on authority contains the essence of Luther’s political ethics. He did not later modify it in its fundamentals. More was achieved here than a clarification of the pressing questions of the moment, for which it was easy to draw the proper conclusions. The Protestants in Catholic lands should not surrender their New Testaments, because with such demands their overlords were overstepping the limits of their “kingdom.” The evangelicals should not turn in “a single page, not even a letter, on pain of losing their salvation.”³¹ But they should not resist if the New Testaments were taken from their homes by force. At the same time, over against the enthusiasts who had begun to seduce Christians into a complete withdrawal from the world of politics, Luther showed clearly why and how a Christian should perform the duties of a public office.

But the significance of the treatise was even broader than this. It embodied a fundamental separation of the secular and the spiritual power, as contrasted with the territorial sovereignty of the bishops and the spiritual duties of the princes in the Middle Ages. Luther had long since seen through the spiritual-secular unity of the Middle Ages; he perceived its self-contradictory features. It contained an inevitable rivalry which was kept under control only so long as the superiority of the spiritual law was recognized. Century after century of conflicts both large and small had made evident how quickly the tension could be released. Now Luther developed a counter-formula which gave each element, church and state, its own life and confronted them with the responsibility, as independent partners, of working out their relationship to each other. No matter how many problems were still to arise and to occupy Luther and his church, the formula arrived at here would always determine their orientation to the problem. This was true to no small extent precisely because Luther did not formulate the question of the relation of the church to the world as that of one institution to another (the state). This he could not do either in the medieval sense, since he did not acknowledge the church to be a separate, hierarchical legal body, or in the modern sense, for he was not acquainted with the distinction between the civil and ecclesiastical communities based on their differing constituencies. His placement between these

two epochs helped Luther to go to the root of the question: *the relation of the Christian to the world*.

What he said on this matter contained his solution for the root problem of Christian ethics, the one which always troubles Christianity anew — the problem of the relationship between the reality of life and the radicality of the commands of Jesus, e.g., in the Sermon on the Mount. Although Luther later was to occupy himself more thoroughly with this question and its medieval answer, the outcome is already apparent in the present treatise. Luther diminishes none of the unconditional quality of the commands of the Sermon on the Mount, and does not limit them to particular estates (such as the monastic order) or to particular times (such as the end of history). Instead he points out clearly the sphere of relationships within which they alone are meaningful and have binding validity for every Christian. He brings into one purview the command of Jesus and the continuing preservation of the world by its Creator. The doctrine of the two kingdoms is nothing other than a description of the Christian's situation in the world; the corresponding doctrine of the two modes of divine government provides the guidelines by which, in faith, the Christian can always make a new determination of his action. Admittedly the concepts Luther utilizes, which at that time were an aid to understanding since they took up (even if in a modified form) the Augustinian two kingdom doctrine, are today more apt to make understanding difficult. Everything depends on grasping that we are not dealing with a tearing asunder of the world into two rigidly separated realms, but with a question of perspectives; it is one and the same world, but seen from two different viewpoints, "for me-for others," which the Christian must always choose between in making fresh and living decisions.

The fundamental tenet of Luther's political ethics grew out of the center of his theology. It rests upon faith in the unchangeable *relation of God to the world*, which has not suffered alteration in will or purpose because of the abyss that sin has opened up between them, but has only changed in means. Because of sin, the free community of love which God had wanted humanity to be, and which gleams again in the life together of true Christians, has changed into an order of law and coercion. The distinction is similar to that between God's "strange work" and his "proper work" about which the young Luther liked to speak. Just as God's judicial rigor is a form his loving kindness takes in seeking out men, so the office of the magistrate is at the same time a terror to evildoers and a manifestation of God's preserving love. This love is universal; it prevails in the whole world. Necessarily, therefore, Luther also had to hold the knowledge of this love to be universal. It was his conviction that one could expect reason to affirm a reciprocal duty to love. "Reason" means, of course, not only the calculating intelligence, which may see advantages in reciprocal relationships. It probes deeper. In the three-term equation "love-reason-natural law," each concept has its full weight, and they are to be interpreted with reference to one another. In their unity they are marks of that insight into justice and law, still preserved even if dimly, with which God has provided his creation in order to preserve it. This harmony of reason and love is one of the repeatedly proclaimed, elemental convictions of Luther. Those who have noted this concurrence at all have often questioned its propriety. But one must consider what one thereby severs from Luther's scheme of thought. To the deeply hidden unity in God's activity, with which he preserves the world through his two governments, there corresponds a deeply hidden unity of perception among believers and nonbelievers, both of whom God uses in his work of

preserving the world. Luther is of the opinion that the appeal to this original understanding of the love commandment can and must be addressed to mankind generally. For him it is identical with the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12) and the biblical command of love for neighbor. (There are, of course, differences in ability to comprehend and above all to undertake the action which must follow.) Thus Christians and non-Christians are bound together in the same responsibility, from which neither can withdraw. But because through the Holy Spirit Christians are enlightened and renewed and can understand, from the experience of grace, that the severity of God is nothing other than his love, they are called and qualified above all others for service in secular government. Luther's political ethic for the Christian thus embodies the basic outlines of a general political ethic. For the order of the world is a treasure to be protected in common. But he charges Christians, as those who have received more, with the higher obligation.

4

TWO KINGDOMS AND TWO GOVERNMENTS

This interpretation of the situation, as the treatise *Temporal Authority* presents it both concretely with reference to the given historical situation and at the same time in terms of the whole complex of questions, suggests certain conclusions and theses, though these cannot here be given a fully integrated or completed form. In part commonly accepted, in part debatable, they can perhaps help us find our way through the labyrinth of the problem. First, three comments on methodology and frame of reference:

1. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms is three-dimensional. It refers to (a) the relationship between church and state as it had evolved in the Middle Ages, namely, the territorial authority of the bishops and other political activities of the church and the duty of the secular power to guard against unbelief and heresy; (b) the relationship, in general, between the spiritual and the secular, the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world; and (c) the activity of the Christian in his own behalf and in behalf of others. But these three dimensions are only aspects of one and the same problem: that of the basic relationship between the gospel and the order of this world. One must take care, however, to note the dimension in which a particular question appears. Certain distinctions immediately follow. Only in the relation between church and state is there a discernible boundary between their respective offices and duties; there is no such 'boundary in the relation of the Christian to life in the world. The line of demarcation in his activity is drawn no less sharply, but it is hidden, and must be sought in repeated decisions of conscience. The mistaken transfer to the Christian life of the model of church and state as clearly distinguished realms has often given the impression of a dualistic sundering of life.

2. "Kingdom" and "government" are concepts which must not be separated from one another or played off against each other. Following the usage of his day,³² in which they appeared as twin formulations, Luther draws no sharp distinction between them. If a sharper definition is sought, as is the case today, then neither of the two concepts in itself proves to be adequate. The concept regnum in any case includes both. Nevertheless, they do serve to indicate the two inseparably intertwined aspects of the whole, the realm of lordship ("kingdom") and the mode of lordship

(“government”), and they may be used to distinguish these aspects. It is even worthwhile to pay attention to those places in Luther where the two meanings seem to interpenetrate one another. One thus gets an impression of how flexible and rich in nuances his usage is.³³ But it is quite clear that observation of the linguistic usage alone does not further our understanding. Even in the places where one meaning is emphasized, the other is always contained in it.

3. It follows that one cannot deal with Luther solely in terms either of the perspective of the “two kingdoms,” or of the “two governments.” Luther’s originality lies in his combining them. Luther thought that the solution of the problem as he confronted it required, on the one hand, the ruthless separation of the world and the kingdom of Christ as well as, on the other hand, the governance of both of them by the will of God according to the two modes of his love. The historically and theologically unique element in his posing of the question and in his answer becomes most clearly evident if we compare his views with those of Augustine — from whom, indeed, he took over the doctrine of the two kingdoms. Luther acknowledges Augustine as his sole predecessor in the solution of this problem.³⁴ The relationship between them on this question is a theme which has often been broached by scholars and which plays a key role also in the most recent discussion,³⁵ although it has never been thoroughly developed, and in fact has hardly been made the object of a real investigation. This cannot be done here either with the necessary breadth; we must limit ourselves to indicating the essential outlines.

5

COMPARISON WITH AUGUSTINE’S VIEWS

In contrast to the three-dimensional character of Luther’s doctrine, Augustine’s formulation of the problem of the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas Dei* is almost purely one-dimensional. Augustine is concerned only with the fundamental relationship between the secular and the spiritual, or, to use his own terms, the earthly and the heavenly. The question of the relationship of church and state is not for him, as it is for Luther, a paradigmatic instance of the relationship of the two cities. It lies outside this relationship and really shows up only on the horizon, since the medieval tension between princely and priestly rule still lay in the future. Augustine’s remarks on the problem of church and state are purely situational utterances, to which he does not apply his great scheme and indeed could not as yet have done so. Similarly, the third dimension is missing — that of the activity of the individual Christian in his own behalf or in behalf of others. He does not think of this either as an instance of the relationship of the two cities.

Augustine’s two cities themselves do, to a considerable extent, provide the model for Luther’s two kingdoms. Luther clearly belongs in the tradition of this imagery (that it is imagery Augustine had expressly emphasized). The boundary between the two cities is sharp and unconditional, just as in Luther; but at the same time it is invisible and can never be fixed by definition. The two cities are not two sociological associations (state and church), but intangible communities of persons. The question of the degree to which they can assume a sociological embodiment is secondary, and it is worth noting that in both instances, state and church, the

question cannot be answered unequivocally, but only with qualifications. For these cities are in principle two kinds of persons, who cannot be “fenced in together”: the one, those who live “according to man” (*secundum hominem*), the other, those who live “according to God” (*secundum Deum*). They are two societies, one of which is destined to rule with God, the other to perish with Satan at the last judgment.³⁶

These groups are made up of two opposing forms of love, self-love and love of God, and are characterized by a long chain of antitheses:

self-glory or glory from men the glory of God
 lust for domination serving in love
 loving one’s own strength loving God as one’s strength
 pride humility
 a wisdom that praises itself “no human wisdom but only godliness”³⁷

These are purely personal concepts, not at all institutional in character. Here is the root and soil of Luther’s two kingdom doctrine. The bitter conflict of these two societies or cities begins with Cain, the founder of the earthly city, and extends to the millenium. It is significant that Cain, the citizen of this world, is the older. Good assumes the existence of evil; it arises out of the conquest over evil. A true city of God does not yet exist; it is still “above” and its citizens are in truth still pilgrims until its time comes and those who are the resurrected gather in it.³⁸ The city of God can only be defined eschatologically — just as is the case with Luther’s spiritual kingdom.

The distinction within what is common to the views of Luther and Augustine — and this common element could easily be developed further — does not lie only in a changed historical situation. The fact of this change is self-evident, but in itself would only shift the emphasis. For Augustine the antagonist is the classical embodiment of the earthly city, the pagan Roman state; for Luther, on the other hand, it is the medieval confusion of the two cities, resulting in an earthly city of God in the form of a church that is a legal and coercive institution and a state that is obliged to serve her and to persecute heretics. Luther consequently devotes himself to establishing the purity of the true and noncoercive kingdom of God as well as the correct basis and limits for the exercise of political power by Christians. But this represents only an alteration in subject matter, not a change in viewpoint.

The inner distinctions appear to me rather to be three in number.

1. Augustine, like Luther, praises the state as the guardian of peace — and peace is a substantial help in the extension of the kingdom of God. Despite this, he does not really include the state in God’s salvatory will. That which Luther describes as God’s activity in the secular government has almost no counter- part in Augustine. Of course, the freedom and justice which the state protects are also, for him, gifts of God. But he does not depict how God uses the weapons of law and political order in every age to wage his battle against the chaos which threatens to destroy his creation. The gifts of God are, as it were, implanted in nature from the beginning; the power of the state has its source in God’s providence. Thus Augustine speaks of these matters ontologically, rather than theologically. The state arises out of man’s instinct for association.

Every order is an order of freedom, even that of a conqueror. Man has been made in such a manner that, in one way or another, he always desires peace, even if it be by striving to subject others through war. “Man cannot help loving peace of one kind or another. For there is no vice so clean contrary to nature that it obliterates even the faintest traces of nature.”³⁹ This is a simple consequence of Augustine’s understanding of being: “There cannot be a nature in which there is no good.”⁴⁰ Consequently Augustine does not have to reflect explicitly on human reason in order to explain man’s ardent desire for order and peace. It is something quite elemental. “If there is no man who does not wish to be joyful, neither is there anyone who does not wish to have peace.”⁴¹ This Platonic ontology is alien to Luther. He must, therefore, link the political order directly with the present activity of God and tell the Christian plainly that in a political office he is at the same time in the service of God, who wishes thereby to preserve his world. By deriving from the concept of kingdom the concept of government, of sovereignty, Luther brings into balance the preservation of the world and its impending end — a balance in the portrait of God himself. As long as the end has not yet come, the Christian stands at this point of convergence between preservation and dissolution. He must therefore think through this situation in the light of his faith. Luther’s decisive step beyond Augustine’s two kingdom doctrine is his expansion of it by means of the idea of the living activity of God in both governments.

2. Augustine’s thought is more ascetically oriented than Luther’s. He draws a distinction between the perfect and the imperfect which Luther’s ethics does not recognize. For Augustine this distinction solves the problem of the Sermon on the Mount, which was to become for Luther the decisive impetus for the reformulation of the two kingdom doctrine. Augustine, to be sure, requires that every Christian should be inwardly prepared to fulfill the radical requirements of the Sermon on the Mount if some day it should prove necessary — to love one’s enemy, to endure injustice, not to strike back, and so on. But only the perfect Christian will be able to carry out these injunctions. Luther was not satisfied with this inward readiness. Against Augustine and others he says, “They do not take notice of the fact that opportunities continually present themselves to put this disposition into practice.”⁴² And if in the Middle Ages the commands of Christ were changed into mere “counsels” for those seeking to lead an especially perfect life, this Luther opposes in the sharpest terms. Nothing to this effect can be found in the Sermon on the Mount,⁴³ he says. We have no right to take it upon ourselves to soften the demands of Christ. They are valid in their entirety, and for every one. We dare not say that a lesser love than Christ demanded is not sin. Only God can forgive us the shortcomings which we will always find in ourselves.⁴⁴ We must consider carefully, however, for what sort of situation these commands of love for one’s enemy and nonresistance to injustice are given. They apply, says Luther, to private life. In contrast, “public persons must take care that no one is injured.” But all of us are *publicae personae*, office-holders, insofar as we participate in the life of the community. We must therefore share in this constant vigilance lest the order of justice be destroyed and the world be surrendered to brute force. It is for the Christian, therefore, a continually new and vital problem of conscience to determine where he is a “private” person and where he is a “public” one, when he must suffer injustice to himself and when he must protect the rights of others and act in their behalf. Since Augustine has a different understanding of the Sermon on the Mount, he omits this third, individual-ethical dimension, “for me — for others,” which is included in Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms.

This difference is linked with the first distinction we drew between Augustine and Luther relating to their ideas of government. For the only reason Luther regards the Sermon on the Mount as not valid in the kingdom of the world is that in this kingdom the sovereign power of God is at work, seeking, through law and justice, to preserve the world from chaos.

3. Just as this dialectic of public person and private person is lacking in Augustine, so also in another way he thinks less dialectically than Luther. Cautious as one must be in attempting to derive a concept of the state from his fragmentary utterances, which were not at all theoretical in character, it is not completely wrong to find in him an embryonic form of the idea of a Christian state.⁴⁵ It is not only that Augustine believes Christians would be the best rulers, no matter how rare they unfortunately are, and that he extols in extravagant words as an ideal state one in which the precepts of the Christian religion are observed and the wholesome austerity of the Christian virtues prevails.⁴⁶ But in addition, he is not far from the notion that if a Christian should come to hold a high civil office, he should rouse the citizens — ‘by example, favor, or intimidation — to faith in the true God. For the secular and eternal fortunes of both the individual and the community rest on this foundation.⁴⁷ Despite the sobriety of his views on the difficulties of putting into effect the Christian commandments and on the impermanence of all earthly forms, Augustine would have found it difficult to object to basing the laws of the state on these commandments, if that were possible. Thus he was able without hesitation to call the civil power into the lists against heretics. Not as if the existence of the church, much less of the city of God, depends on the protection of the state. It can also obtain its crown through suffering. But it has a claim to the help of the state. This is a right granted by God, and eschatologically grounded in the eventual subordination of all secular powers to the kingdom of God. Here we see signposts pointing to the Middle Ages — no more than signposts, as yet. Nevertheless, we see clearly from this the way in which the historical situation had changed for Luther as compared to Augustine. They stand, one at the beginning and one at the end of the great medieval epoch that intervened between them. Augustine cannot as yet visualize a state composed of Christians who are both rulers and citizens and thus he hardly sees the questions that were to emerge in this connection. The experiences of the intervening centuries taught Luther the problems connected with having a Christian state which the church has taken into its service, and he grapples with them by applying his flexible distinctions of the two kingdoms and the two governments, thus clearing up many aspects of the matter. All these factors — the centuries separating the two men as well as the inner differences between them — inevitably made Luther’s two kingdom doctrine a much richer instrument than Augustine’s distinction between the two cities. Above all, in Luther’s hands an instrument of diagnosis became an instrument of healing.

In the diagnosis, to be sure — in the description of the two powers and communities that struggle with one another, the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God — Luther agrees with Augustine. This is the common element that precedes and overarches the differences between the two men. This Augustinian heritage helped Luther to uncover the distortion of the gospel which had occurred in the medieval confusion of the powers, and which went as far as a direct dependence of the secular on the spiritual authority. Even the extreme papalists felt themselves in agreement with Augustine at this point, and were convinced that their doctrine that the church possessed eminent domain over all worldly goods was only an interpretation of Augustine’s

statement, “True justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ.” But in this passage Augustine is simply citing the city of God as an example of true community life.⁴⁸

Everything which distinguished Luther’s view, in many particulars, from the medieval concepts of state and church is comprehended in the distinction between the two kingdoms which Augustine inspired. In the Middle Ages the two were related to one another in terms of a hierarchical system of ends and values, consummated in the supernatural order of the church. Augustine’s distinction put into Luther’s hands the instrument with which to separate these heterogeneous elements and to restore to the community of the gospel its true otherworldly significance. But he went beyond Augustine. Since he found the idea of the sovereignty of God in secular law as well as in the affairs of state, he was able to show the Christian how he could assume a meaningful responsibility in the human community without contradicting the categorical commands of Jesus. In doing so, he took up in quite a different manner a medieval concern which was hardly developed in Augustine. Overarching the deep abyss which the Middle Ages had sought to bridge by means of a church controlling both spiritual and secular power, Luther discovered a completely different form of unity — the unity of the Christian person as obligated in both sets of relationships.

The consequence is that one cannot gain an impression of Luther’s position in its full development and its complete richness by examining those places where he uses the Augustinian distinction of the two kingdoms as a critical tool for breaking up the medieval ideology. One must turn instead to those points where he has learned to place both kingdoms simultaneously within God’s activity in the world, in which the Christian as Christian, as well as citizen, participates. Quite understandably, this view of the two kingdoms is not present in Luther’s early lectures; rather, it unfolds slowly only as the problems of a correct orientation of Christians in the world press upon him. In the lectures on Romans (1515-16), we see the state as a minister of God come within Luther’s purview, without his setting it into the context of his customary contrast of secular kingdom and kingdom of God.⁴⁹ But his growing appreciation of governmental office and, on the other hand, his spiritualization of the concept of the church and his radicalization of the ethical demands on the Christian, lead him from both sides to the question which in 1519 he discusses in public for the first time (though there had been hints of it ever since the lectures on Romans).⁵⁰ Is the Christian not obligated to serve as a guardian of righteousness in the world? Luther answers this with his distinction between public and private men.⁵¹ In his office a man is a representative of God (*vicarius Dei*); he may not use his office to defend his own rights, however, but only those of others. To the question whether one may seek one’s own rights through the mediation of other judges, Luther gives a discriminating answer. According to Paul, one may tolerate ‘but not approve such behavior (I Cor. 6:7-12).⁵² One won’t get into heaven that way, however; a fundamental inner change is necessary for that. Christians rather waive their rights and desire no recompense, except at most in order to improve the other’s lot. But this is a very ticklish matter; one must have carried one’s readiness to give in to the ultimate degree in order justly to demand one’s own rights. Ostensible love of righteousness can hardly be distinguished from anger over injury suffered.

The problem of the role of the Christian in public office and that of the function of the magistracy in promoting order and guarding against the apostasy of the church (*Address to the Christian Nobility*, 1520), as well as against the threat of revolution (*Admonition against Insurrection and Rebellion*, 1522), finally are resolved in the doctrine of the two kingdoms. Luther had clung to it rigorously in Augustine's sense and in the beginnings of his dispute with the Roman church had received from it a powerful impetus toward his spiritual interpretation of the church (see especially his treatise *On the Papacy in Rome*, 1520). The result, uniting all these dimensions, is finally offered in the treatise *Temporal Government*, with its combination of the notion of the two kingdoms and that of the two governments, the double rulership of God over the world by coercive law and by the defenseless Word, both understood as forms of his love which sustains and saves.

6

THE CONTEXT OF THE TWO KINGDOM DOCTRINE

The historical significance of Luther's two kingdom doctrine itself poses the question of its place in the context of his theology. These problems have naturally been discussed by theologians with great animation and from a variety of standpoints, both among themselves and with a jurist as theologically sophisticated as Johannes Heckel. Without going into the disputed questions in detail, we may suggest a few general perspectives which merit consideration in the discussion.

Luther's two kingdom doctrine is so completely woven into his total theology that one can follow the threads in all directions: to his view of God, his doctrine of the creation and preservation of the world, his Christology, his eschatology, his concept of the church, of reason, of justice, and so forth. One is therefore well advised not to derive it from a single theologoumenon, even from one as comprehensive of the whole as the antithesis of law and gospel. Tornvall and Lau have raised well-founded objections to the contention — which is in itself appealing and to a large extent justified — that the relation of political and ecclesiastical authority (which is, as we have seen, a narrower problem than that of the two kingdom doctrine as a whole) is only “a special case of the relation of law and gospel.”⁵³ It seems to me highly significant that in Luther the law is oriented toward salvation, directed toward redemption, in quite a different way than is secular government. As we have seen, the latter does also have its place in God's salvatory will. But this refers to humanity as a whole, and only indirectly to the individual. God preserves the world for its own good health and to protect the coming kingdom of God against the powers of evil. The moral law, in contrast — the law under which man stands as both obligated and blameworthy — points directly toward grace. It has its hidden meaning in leading man to a recognition of his guilt and thus in making him receptive to the gospel and preparing him for the work of God which will create him anew. Along with all the correspondences between the function of the law and that of the secular kingdom, there is a unique element in the former which cannot be incorporated into the two kingdom scheme.

It seems necessary to me rather to link the two kingdom doctrine once again more closely with the problems posed by the Sermon on the Mount than is done, in particular, by Heckel — who, of

course, as we must remember, is concerned in the first instance with the narrower problem of law. We have here a question which the New Testament puts to Luther's doctrine, a question which quite rightly provides the starting point again and again, even today, not only for the historical discussion but also for a debate of the substance of the issue. Thus Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms cannot be understood without relating it to his understanding of the Sermon on the Mount.⁵⁴ In this way we shall also be most likely to keep in mind that for Luther the problem was not only one presented by the Augustinian-medieval tradition or by the historical situation, but was also an issue raised by the Bible itself. It is self-evident that all the other threads which link Luther's two kingdom doctrine with the whole of his theology call for an equally careful examination, not in order to protect the doctrine from criticism⁵⁵ but because it will be illuminated by each of these relationships. If, for example, Heckel has attempted to define Luther's concept of law as a "legal theory rooted in the theology of the cross,"⁵⁶ this same statement can be applied in a special sense to his ideas of kingdom and government. For they presuppose that the entire spiritual and Christian life, in sharp contrast to the order of this world, consists in defenseless love and suffering. But in the same way one can build a bridge in what appears to be the opposite direction — to Luther's concept of reason and of natural law.⁵⁷ And this is a particularly pressing task, for it is an aspect of Luther's theology that has been neglected for far too long.⁵⁸ There is perhaps no better way of grasping the scope of the problems encompassed in Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms and the two governments than by envisioning it as in tension between Luther's concept of reason and his theology of the cross.

Contrasting with the attempt to unlock Luther's two kingdom doctrine with a master key to his theology, such as the antithesis of law and gospel, is the effort to illuminate it from a single aspect of his faith. In the present-day debate the themes of the preservation of the world and eschatology are often played off against one another in an unfortunate way.⁵⁹ This is just as false as an interpretation derived only from the "kingdoms" or only from the "governments." Luther's view is not simply identical either with a "theology of the orders" or with an eschatological withdrawal from the world. It stands above this apparent contradiction and comprehends both views within itself. This is its dialectic — the dialectic of the Christian life. It is equally impossible to set a theocentric and a christocentric viewpoint over against one another.⁶⁰

Although there are significant distinctions involved here, which must be observed, Luther does not see the two as opposed. Every one-sided perspective distorts both the problem and Luther's solution to it. The issue is just this: how God continues to keep alive a world which has fallen prey to death, after the new aeon in Christ has already been inaugurated in its midst and has become a reality in the life of Christians through the Holy Spirit. The "eschatological struggle of the two kingdoms"⁶¹ and the action of God in his two governments to forestall chaos belong inseparably together. Just this is the sign of the eschatological situation, which is not yet the end itself.

The same necessity of avoiding a dissolution of Luther's comprehensive view into false antitheses applies to his unique understanding of love, the importance of which in his thought is seldom appreciated. For Luther, as we have seen, love is the clamp which holds together God's dealings with the world and the corresponding responsibility of the Christian in spiritual as in

secular affairs, which, to be sure, in secular affairs is a responsibility of man as such. This is nothing less than the foundation of Luther's political ethics. In the, two activities of love in the spiritual and secular governments, one and the same love is at work. The two activities do, of course, differ in content: protection and defense of justice on the one hand, sacrifice and suffering on the other. But one dare not ask, "Is not the love of Christ, in which faith becomes active, a different love?"⁶² Love is indivisible. It can indeed take on different forms and lead to different types of activity. And it can, naturally, be very weak and imperfect. But this is a question of human realization. From the perspective of God's command, there is only *one* love, whose form adjusts itself to the task it has before it. If in a given situation a different action of love than one employing secular means were possible for a Christian, then the use of such means would represent not a lesser love, but sin.

By noting the aspects discussed above, we can explain more clearly two controverted questions, those dealing with Luther's evaluation of the state and with the place of the Christian in the secular sphere. Whether Luther held that a state (*politia*) already existed in Paradise is in fact only a peripheral question, as Lau points out. Nevertheless it is not so unimportant that it does not deserve some comment, especially since research at present is divided along two rather unusual battle lines: Elert, Tornvall, Ernst Wolf, and Lau on the one side, who assume in Luther a kind of governmental order in the primitive state, against Diem, Althaus, and Heckel, who reject this assumption.⁶³ I wish to be counted in the second group. The passages which suggest a kind of rulership are not only very rare,⁶⁴ but they also relate, as Heckel emphasizes, to dominion over the animals and the whole creation.⁶⁵ In this sense law already originates in Paradise, just as do science, agriculture, and so on.⁶⁶ In the human sphere, polity and household economy (marriage) still belong together. Even if Luther shares the Aristotelian-medieval view of the origin of government in the family, for him the meaning of political order cannot be understood apart from the contrasting concept of disorder caused by sin.⁶⁷ Any other statements would be speculative. What is important is that in secular government there is an inherent and necessary element of coercion which contradicts the free order of love in the kingdom of God. The question, on the other hand, of whether a Christian can be a "citizen of both kingdoms" — a question which is likewise given contradictory answers — is finally a matter of definition.⁶⁸ The emphasis placed by so many Luther interpreters upon the point that the Christian as Christian is drawn out of the secular kingdom, and that his actions are governed by a completely different law, does provide a needed reminder of Luther's radical understanding of the Sermon on the Mount, and a safeguard against assimilating the Christian into citizenship in the world. Many passages to this effect could be cited. But one may not overlook, either, the just as fully documented fact that Luther sees the Christian in a double perspective — as a "Christian person" (in the sense indicated above) and as a "worldly person," related to other men; these are "the two persons which a Christian must be simultaneously on earth."⁶⁹

A Christian lives in the secular kingdom in a twofold sense: as the old man, which he has never ceased to be, he is subject to secular law; as a Christian, he must protect his neighbor with the instruments of the secular order. It is not without reason that Luther does not follow a uniform usage with respect to the term "Christian," but knows both a narrower sense and one which includes the double perspective. In this way he compels us constantly to see the existence of the

Christian on earth from its two sides, “so that at one and the same time you satisfy God’s kingdom. . . and the kingdom of the world.”⁷⁰ A one-sided emphasis would say only half of what is needed, and would call into question the connection of the two kingdoms with the two governments.

In the critical preoccupation with Luther’s political ethics that is the right and duty of every age, it seems to me that the acknowledgment of one point is of fundamental importance: namely, that what is called Luther’s conservative, patriarchal, authoritarian political thought is not identical with his two kingdom doctrine. Even a liberal state needs law and coercive justice. In this it differs in principle from the spiritual kingdom. But since for the Christian, political order always has the God-given task of protecting the world from destruction, he is constantly under the same obligation to serve the state within the legal forms of his own time. His guideline is his conscience, enlightened by the two kingdom doctrine and nerved by it for action in the world. The political responsibility which Luther places most particularly on the Christian includes in itself not merely the permission, but rather the requirement, to rethink Luther’s own political conceptions in terms of the possibilities and tasks of the present age. Only if one misunderstands the two kingdom doctrine in a Manichean, dualistic sense can one think oneself free, as a Christian, to leave the world to its own devices — exactly the opposite of what Luther intended. The two kingdom doctrine is not a social-ethical program, neither one to be left behind nor one to be retained. It is the indispensable means of orientation which the Christian must again and again employ when considering his role and action in the world. It makes it possible for him to live according to the command of Jesus in the midst of the orders of this existence, orders marked by signs of the end and yet still preserved by God.

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