

The One God's Two Ways of Ruling

“Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10), and so the proper setting for the discussion of Christian obedience to governing authorities is in the middle of Paul’s appeal to love as the fruit of faith: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8 translation altered). Once Christians are freed from thinking that love is fulfilled by good works, then love actually begins in earnest—by the Spirit not the free will. But love, and therefore worldly authority, are set within the larger eschatological reality of God destroying this old world, and establishing Christ’s new kingdom: “Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed ...” (Romans 13:11 NRS). Temporal authority rules in this old world, but precisely because this old world is quickly coming to an end—it is temporal—there is a definite limit to this authority. This larger setting marks the two aspects of Lutheran teaching on earthly authority. One is the *refusal to use force* that is so often confused with “Lutheran quietism” (the charge made by Ernst Troeltsch and repeated endlessly). The other marks the origin of the teaching of Christian *resistance* to authority. Lutherans hold both since Scripture teaches both, and they do so without confusion because they distinguish God’s two ways of ruling in opposite, overlapping kingdoms.

Historically, most Lutherans abandoned their own best teaching on secular authority following the loss of the Smalcald War. The allegorical episode of Lutheran teaching in the seventeenth century became too comfortable with the rejection of papal authority in the church by means of a *territorial church* overseen by the state. This resulted from the assumption that the law was the one, eternal holistic background of God’s work. The state and the church were then fit allegorically into a broader plan by which salvation was being won in this old Aeon, and church and state became too cozy. The moral episode of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not improve this mistake by Lutherans, but turned the gospel into a “social gospel” project progressively creating the kingdom of God on earth; they substituted a teleological belief in the progress of society for Christ’s eschatological new kingdom. That dream of social progress of church and society did not end until the First World War in Europe, and as Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, never really ended at all in the United States.

The eschatological episode of Lutheranism in the twentieth century recognized that Paul was not presenting a formula for creating the kingdom of God on earth (vs. the moralists), but was describing what Schweitzer called “an interim ethic” that would hold between the time of Paul’s arrival with the Gospel, and the end when Christ and the new kingdom would be seen “coming again.” But Schweitzer abandoned this hope and ethic because Paul appeared to be wrong about the imminent timing of Christ’s arrival in glory; Paul appeared to be an eschatological prophet who simply got it wrong like all such prophets with their sandwich boards predicting the immanent end of “temporal” society. The rediscovery of eschatology then fizzled into the existential emphasis on the present as the only real time for God’s kingdom.

Before we can understand what Paul meant by “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1) it is important to understand “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and *put on the armor of light*” (Romans 13:12 NRS), which is Paul’s reference to the use of baptism. How does one use a baptism as “armor of light” in the struggle of faith? One must distinguish between the two worlds and the two persons “I” am—who reside in both kingdoms. There is the greatest possible difference between “this old, evil world” and Christ’s new kingdom. The Christian resides in both worlds as long as the old Adam remains. The work of the devil is to confuse these two worlds by synthesizing them into one. He uses utopian hope in bringing peace on earth as easily as despair that peace will never come. Lutherans are even willing to call Satan a “Lord” of his own kingdom—though it is a shadowy kingdom of smoke and mirrors, dependent upon confusion between the law and the

gospel so that the law is held up as the way of righteousness and the gospel is reduced to a content whose form is the law of love. The temptation of Christ in the wilderness reveals how the devil operates as if he had full rights over the world, and indeed claims unfaith as his kingdom's power. But Christ reveals that Satan is deposed with a mere word that promises Christ who justifies through the cross. Were there no "night," and no cosmic battle in which Christ is soon to crush Satan "under your feet" (Romans 16:20), or no eschatology of a new kingdom in these words of Paul, then Paul would indeed have set up the formula for tyranny on earth: "Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed" (13:2 NRS).

However, with this cosmic distinction of the battle between Satan and Christ, we learn that God fights the powers of Satan with two hands, not one. One is the right hand, which Paul has largely dealt with to this point in his letter, by which Christ is placed against Satan, and the old Adam is put to death with a new creature raised up in a world beyond the law; that is the kingdom of the preached word and faith that begins in baptism. But there is another left-hand work that is the alien work of God, by which God establishes the law in the form of the civil government to limit the chaos and destruction wrought by the demonic confusion of law and gospel. The shorthand in Lutheran theology for this teaching is "two kingdoms," but it really is a "three" kingdom eschatology by which God is opposing the lent power of Satan as ruler of this old world by establishing his own way of ruling by law in the world—and by creating a new kingdom by preaching where Christ rules without the law.

This means that Lutherans make a key adjustment to Augustine's picture of "Two Cities." For Augustine the temporal and eternal Cities were made up utterly of different individuals, and so the Cities were composed of *two different groups*—the damned and the saved—living in two opposite geographical locations. For Luther, every *Christian lives life in both* of God's kingdoms—the temporal and eternal—until the old world is utterly destroyed.

Without understanding this, Reformed theologians have depicted Lutheran theology as separating two kingdoms into static realms—one the inner, spiritual kingdom of faith that has no public voice; the other the outer, temporal world that is left to make up its own laws (or worse, simply equates state laws directly with divine law). Lutherans encountered this perception in the Barmen Declaration (1934) with the idea that both the temporal and the spiritual kingdoms are under the one and only rule of Jesus Christ—so that state governments are not given over to other—therefore ungodly—lords like Hitler. According to that teaching, if a government does not comport with the form of the Gospel of Jesus Christ's rule over everything, then it must be resisted.

To the contrary, Lutherans distinguish the law and the gospel and in doing so have held that Romans 13 rightly calls for *submission* and *resistance* to governing authority. To understand this we can consider two formative historical events. The first when Duke George of Saxony attempted to suppress the Reformation by prohibiting sales of Luther's German Bible, and demanding that sold copies be handed over (with a refund!). Luther responded with a foundational treatise *On Temporal Authority* (1523). The second was the defeat of the Lutheran princes in the Smalcald War, and a gathering of Gnesio-Lutheran pastors and teachers (von Amsdorf, Gallus, Flacius) who held out for the evangelical cause and produced the *Magdeburg Confession* (1550) that established the basis for forceful resistance to the Emperor's assault.

When Duke George demanded that German Bibles be handed over, Luther had to consider the two basic Christian teachings on worldly power to determine how they fit together. The first is the Sermon on the Mount in which Christ gives the call to Christians to refrain from force: "But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 5:39). The second is the call for all to obey the power of the sword in Romans 13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." The Medieval solution to the tension between renunciation and use of force was to separate Christians into two levels with two different ethical demands: The *commandments* (including obedience to authority) were required by all at a basic level, but the *evangelical counsels* of

the Sermon on the Mount were a special ethics reserved for mature, committed saints who renounced any use of force.

Instead, Luther spoke of two ways in which God rules everyone: one form of ruling is by means of the *promise* that makes faith and whose kingdom is new and eternal. The second is the way God uses the *law* to establish external peace by means of the sword in the temporal, old kingdom. Neither of these ways of ruling was sufficient without the other. Instead of the scholastic distinction between levels of Christians, Luther then distinguished between *Christians* who do not need the temporal government at all since they live beyond the law, and *the rest of the world* who require the force of the sword to resist evil and preserve some peace. To Christians alone (all of them) belongs the renunciation of force.

Then Luther made a second alteration of the old teaching. Because of the *Simul* in which the old Adam clings for now to the new creature, the Christian sacrifices the body to the neighbor by means of earthly vocations. So, though Christians renounce force for their own sake, for the sake of the protection of the weak neighbor they will even volunteer (in Luther's striking illustration) to be the hangman if none other will fill such a divine office. There is an important distinction between person and office, in which the person of the Christian rejects force even if martyred; nevertheless, the Christian person is always called into an office—in fact a series of offices which are meant for the protection of the neighbor. Force is used as the office requires it, so for example, court judges do not give death penalties as a personal choice, but the office may require it. The problem, as Luther saw more clearly over time, is that the Christian person is *always* in an office in this old world, and so rejecting force even in the case of personal attack cannot be without abdication of an office as Mother, Husband, preacher or soldier at the same time. Nevertheless the distinction of person and office is not without purpose; indeed it is of the highest significance, so that there is not the inevitable pull of the old world into linking justification with the renunciation of force, or taking up force as if this could produce good works. Fanatics want to make renunciation into justification; secularists want to make the distinction irrelevant so that the life of faith is private—and eventually meaningless. Even if the distinction does not lead to martyrdom for a Christian, it preserves freedom from the confusion of love and faith, works and justification, and makes for a better, living, non-cultic sacrifice of one's earthly life.¹

INTRODUCTION TO The Christian in Society

“Good Heavens! Spalatin, how excited you are! More than I or anyone else. I wrote you before not to assume that this affair was begun or is carried on by your judgment or mine or that of any man. If it [the Reformation] is of God, it will be completed contrary to, outside of, above, and below, either your or my understanding.... Let God see to it, for he acts through me, since I am certain that none of these things have been sought by me, but they were all drawn from me, one and all, by a fury not my own.”

“All that I have done is to further, preach and teach God's Word; otherwise I have done nothing. So it happened that while I slept or while I drank a glass of Wittenberg beer with my friend Philip [Melanchthon] and with Amsdorf, the papacy was weakened as it never was before by the action of any prince or emperor. I have done

¹ Paulson, S. D. (2011). [Lutheran Theology](#) (pp. 247–252). London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury.

nothing; the Word has done and accomplished everything.... I let the Word do its work!"

These statements reflect the confident spirit that distinguishes Luther's ethic: "He acts through me.... I let the Word do its work!" How men live, like what they believe, depends wholly on their response to the unceasing activity of the living God in their midst. Whether as revealed in his Word or as hidden in his world, it is ultimately God alone who reigns over the whole creation.

For Luther, this means that Christian ethics, like Christian dogmatics, must be at once eschatological, existential and evangelical. It must be eschatological because the eternal God and the Evil One are ultimately the chief actors at work in human history. It must be existential because it is decision-making men and women whom God and the Adversary employ as the willing instruments of their rule. Finally it must be evangelical because only the gospel of Jesus Christ can truly reveal the nature of God and the meaning of human existence.

Luther's social and political thought has often been attacked by critics who have either rejected or misunderstood these biblical and theological presuppositions. For example, some sociologists of religion (Max Weber, R. H. Tawney) have shown no appreciation for the demonic dimension of Luther's eschatological ethic. Other moral philosophers (Jacques Maritain, Eduard Heimann) have been alienated by the contextual flexibility of Luther's existential ethic. Following the abortive attempt of some German Lutheran theologians (Paul Althaus, Friedrich Gogarten, Emmanuel Hirsch) to baptize the ideology of Nazism in the name of Luther's political thought, other contemporary Reformed theologians (Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr) have likewise objected strongly to the dialectical opposition between the realms of law and gospel in Luther's evangelical ethic.

Our limited task here is to demonstrate the unity, not argue the validity, of Luther's ethic. We shall first outline the theological foundations of his Christian ethic of "faith active in love" and his closely interrelated social ethic of "love seeking justice" in God's interacting "two kingdoms" of redemption and creation. Then we will illustrate the important role of Christian social action in Luther's own life and thought.

For Luther the biblical message of salvation is a tension-filled unity which can be viewed from the perspective of any of its constitutive elements. He can speak of "grace alone," "Christ alone," "Scripture alone," or "faith alone," and mean thereby the same saving Event in terms of its eternal source, historical expression, apostolic witness, or personal appropriation. In fidelity to this Christ-centered faith, Luther roundly condemns the moral and rational work-righteousness inherent in the philosophical theology of Rome in his day. Reason must submit to Scripture and works must bow to faith. In an evangelical "theology of the cross," man humbly confesses that "the righteous shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17).

With their salvation thus assured in the unmerited forgiveness of Christ, grateful Christians are free to redirect their reason and good works toward serving their neighbors' welfare. Luther grounds his ethic in the paradoxical nature of Christian freedom which accepts liberation from satanic bondage as God's invitation for human service. All men act as their brother's keeper: willingly in faith, begrudgingly in rebellion. Since the Christian is at once righteous and sinful, his enforced service aids his self-discipline while his voluntary service meets his neighbors' needs. Against the presumption of Roman clericalism, Luther insists that all baptized Christians be permitted the beneficial exercise of their royal priesthood in loving service to their God-given neighbors.

In opposition to all unevangelical ethics of principles, "blue laws," ideals, or rules and regulations, Luther portrays the biblical pattern of a life of "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). A Christian ethic based on the "divine indicative" of God's grace (rather than the "divine imperative" of God's law) preserves the freedom of the believer under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the Bible, the church, and prayer, to discover anew in each concrete situation what the will of God permits or requires of him then and there.

For the biblical foundation of his social ethic, Luther rooted his doctrine of the “two kingdoms” of creation and redemption in the Pauline eschatology of the “two ages” (*aeons*), in Adam and in Christ (Romans 5). In the kingdom of God, the Redeemer rules all regenerate believers through Christ and the gospel in personal faith and love. In the kingdom of men, the Creator rules all sinful but rational creatures through Caesar and the law in civil justice and order. As both Redeemer and Creator, God is at once the Lord of both kingdoms; as both righteous and sinful, the Christian is at once a subject of both kingdoms. Hence for an evangelical theology of society, the two kingdoms must always be properly distinguished, but never separated in secularism or equated in clericalism.

By this doctrine of the “two kingdoms” of creation and redemption, Luther reaffirmed the “sacred secularity” of the ordinary tasks of the common life as those which best serve our neighbors’ needs to God’s glory. Whether empowered by Christ in faith-activated love (Christian righteousness) or compelled by Caesar in law-abiding reason (civil righteousness), the Christian citizen lives not for himself but for the benefit of others.

Christian social action was clearly a major concern in Luther’s life and thought. It is therefore highly appropriate that Volumes 44 to 47 of the American Edition of Luther’s Works should be devoted to sermons and treatises dealing with the general theme of “The Christian in Society.” The profound effects of the Reformation in the area of religion is common knowledge to all. What is not so well known—or, at least, not so commonly acknowledged—is the impressive social reformation which Luther’s theology envisioned and partially brought about in the broad and inclusive expanse of the common life.

Luther’s emancipation of the common life was not so popular a crusade as it might at first appear. His understanding of the Christian life compelled him to combat both unevangelical extremes of clericalism and secularism (*To the Christian Nobility*). Opposing the enthusiasts, he had to fight for the preservation of music, art, and sculpture in the worship life of the church (*Against the Heavenly Prophets*). Against Roman Catholics, he had to struggle for the opening of the monasteries and the freedom of all Christians to marry and to engage in secular pursuits without endangering their salvation (*The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, 1521; *The Estate of Marriage*, 1522; *Whether Soldiers, too, Can Be Saved*, 1526).

Against selfish parents and lax public officials, he also fought for educational reforms and the establishment of community chests to replace the illiteracy and begging so prevalent in his day (*A Sermon on Keeping Children in School*, 1530; *Ordinance of a Common Chest, Preface*, 1523). Against irresponsible merchants, he attacked economic injustice and proposed government controls to halt unfair commercial and labor practices (*Trade and Usury*, 1524). Against both the reckless mobs which confused their Christian freedom with their civil rights, and the cruel rulers who disregarded their responsibility to God for their subjects’ economic and social welfare, Luther appealed for both civil obedience and—less strongly!—political justice in a community of law and order (*Psalms 82*, 1530).

It is true, however, that Luther did not normally conceive of the Christian’s social responsibility as transforming the existing structures of society. While persons can be transformed by the gospel in the kingdom of God, institutions can only be reformed by the law in the kingdom of men. As long as men are not required to sin against God and conscience, they care to accept the social structures for what they are (the Creator’s dikes against sin), and try to act like responsible Christian citizens within these structures (as the Redeemer’s channels of serving love). When our secular occupations among men are faithfully acknowledged to be part of our religious vocation under God, then love provides law with its ethical content and law provides love with its social form.

For example, against those who would spiritualize marriage into a Christian sacrament, Luther protests that marriage belongs essentially to the realm of creation and not redemption. It is therefore

ruled by God's law and not his gospel, and, as such, is one of God's temporal remedies against sin and not a sanctifying means of grace.

On the other hand, against those who might misinterpret this liberating message as justification for carnal lust and license, Luther is equally insistent that marriage is rooted firmly in the creative will of God as one of his own divine ordinances. Although it is not a sacrament of the church, there is nevertheless no higher social calling in which a Christian can exercise his faith in deeds of serving love for his family and neighbors. Hence, the ex-monk Luther eventually married an ex-nun as a public testimony of faith in witness to his restoration of the evangelical view of marriage and home life under God.

For Luther's social ethic, all offices and stations of life—ecclesiastical, domestic, economic, political—embody in institutional form a particular command of God's law. They are all integrated within the earthly kingdom of men as the Creator's divinely-ordained bulwarks in his ongoing struggles against Satan. There is no particularly "Christian" form of these nonredemptive "orders." Though corrupted by sin themselves, the natural "orders" are still the means by which the Creator graciously preserves his fallen world from even greater chaos, injustice, and suffering.

This is why the church can "Christianize" politicians and economists but not politics and economics. These "orders" are ordained by God to remain secular, enjoying a relative (never absolute) autonomy of their own under the sovereign law of the Creator. Hence not faith and love but reason and justice are regulative for the temporal realm of life. At the same time, however, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that faith can illumine reason and love—can temper justice whenever Christians meet their civil responsibilities as part of their religious discipleship. We need to learn anew from Luther that it is only through both the priestly service of Christian citizens and the prophetic judgment of Christian churches that society's "sacred secularity" is saved from godless secularism.

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² Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 44, pp. xi–xvi). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.