



The Ambidextrous God: Luther on Faith and Politics

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AT THE CENTER OF ALL OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGY STANDS A SIMPLE BUT STALWART faith in a God who *acts* in and through all the various dimensions of our life for the health and well-being of humanity. The central question for Luther regarding the relationship between faith and politics, therefore, is not *whether* God is involved in the political realm, but *how*. For although Luther confessed that God works in and through all the arenas of life, he perceived that God works in different arenas in distinct—although also related—ways.

Perhaps because of this subtlety, Luther's political theology has at times engendered great confusion and at others been subject to tremendous abuse. Some regard Luther's theory of government as either an unfortunate appendage to his central reformation insights or a regrettable outcome of his historical and social location. Yet, to dismiss Luther's convictions on these grounds is not only to underestimate the profound consistency among the varied elements of his theology, but also and more important to deprive ourselves of an opportunity to deepen our ap-

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Luther confessed that God works in and through all arenas of life. God governs the spiritual dimensions with his right hand through the church's proclamation of law and gospel; God rules temporal affairs with his left hand through civil law and worldly institutions.

preciation for the sacredness of our calling to perceive and join in God's ongoing work in the world.

The task of this essay, therefore, is to describe the major contours of Luther's conception of the relation between faith and politics so that we might reclaim his dynamic view of God's diverse yet commensurate activity in both the "spiritual" and "worldly" institutions of our life. In order to do this, we will first need to consider Luther's distinction between law and gospel and the relation that distinction bears to his understanding of Christian vocation. Only then might we appropriate Luther's confidence that God is "ambidextrous," working through both church and state for the good of the whole creation, and in this way discern more clearly and faithfully our own day-to-day roles and responsibilities as followers of Jesus Christ.

I. LAW AND GOSPEL

According to Luther the law has two functions. He designated the first as the civil use to describe the law's work to compel civility through legal restraint and the threat of punishment. Acting like a leash on a ravenous animal, civil law restrains the basic urge to "look out for number one" at the expense of all others. The second use of the law, by comparison, Luther described as theological, as the law not only sets up and enforces standards of civility but also accuses those who disobey it and thereby makes offenders aware of their sin and consequent need for forgiveness. The gospel, most simply, is God's promise of forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation. It necessarily follows the second use of the law's work to make persons aware of their need and hunger for grace.¹

It is difficult to underestimate the importance this distinction occupied in Luther's life and theology. In the gospel of Jesus Christ, Luther encountered the true character of God's gracious regard for humanity made manifest. For while God executes the alien work of compelling civility and accusing the conscience through the law, God carries out God's proper work of showing mercy through the gospel.² In this light, even the harsh work of God through the law proves to be for the good of humanity and reveals the Creator's gracious intentions. Luther's discovery forced him to relinquish his former conception of God as primarily vengeful.³ In its place he asserted a compassionate God who responds through law *and* gospel to the whole range of humanity's needs, a catalogue which he divided into two parts, spiritual and temporal.

¹See Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles*, in *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 303. On the development of Luther's sense of the uses of the law, see Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 125-140.

²Martin Luther, *Sermon on St. Thomas' Day* (1516), *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955-1986) 51:19-21.

³See Luther's description of his "tower experience" in *LW* 34:336-338.

In short, by “spiritual” Luther referred to the life of faith and our relationship to God. God relates to this dimension of life through the law’s theological function to agitate the conscience and the gospel’s function to announce grace and mercy, both of which occur in and through the proclamation of the church. This, of course, was the usual province of theologians. By “temporal,” however, Luther referred both to the finite elements of the human condition—including property, wealth, and the physical life—and our relationship with our neighbors. God oversees this dimension through the civil use of the law as it works in the social institutions of family and government to restrain wickedness and punish evil so that human community might flourish.⁴

By including temporal affairs in the purview of his theology, Luther shifted the focus of the Christian life from churchly activity to the mundane aspects of everyday affairs. Take, for example, his re-definition of what constitutes good works. Though previously reserved to denote specific acts of spiritual discipline or charity by which one earned or completed God’s grace, “good works” in Luther’s hands came to mean anything which a person did in response to God’s gracious act of love and forgiveness in Christ. Good works, that is, encompassed everything done in faith—whether in the church or out of it.⁵

Such a definition not only nullified the ancient distinction between sacred and secular—as all things were now equally sacred⁶—but also oriented the believer to life in the world and, particularly, to the needs of one’s neighbor. Hence, the ordinary tasks of life that fulfill our obligations to those we encounter around us as parent, spouse, child, citizen, and employee or employer take on a holy significance, as both religious and secular stereotypes of what constitutes good works fall away. As Luther writes in a treatise on marriage, “When a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other common task for his child, [even though] someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool...God with all his angels and creatures is smiling.”⁷

For Luther, the gospel freed the individual both from a state of perpetual anxiety over spiritual matters and for a life offered in worldly service to the neighbor. This in turn prompted his belief that Christians serve God best by serving others in their secular vocations (from the Latin *vocatio*, “calling”). In this way, Luther elevates tremendously the importance of the everyday tasks of the household, marketplace, and town hall and consequently enlists all Christians as God’s partners and helpers in accomplishing God’s work in the world.⁸

Pious and faithful believers are therefore led by baptism into the world to live out their Christian calling in service to neighbor, and one of the chief arenas for

⁴Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:343-377.

⁵Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), LW 44:15-114.

⁶Cf. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 117-123.

⁷Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), LW 45:40.

⁸*The Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:343-377.

such service, according to Luther, is our corporate political life. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that early in his career Luther extended his law/gospel distinction to take up questions about the Christian's relationship to civil authority.

II. GOD'S "LEFT HAND"

Within three years of his 1517 protest against the sale of indulgences, the once obscure Augustinian friar of Wittenberg found himself catapulted into controversy with the chief religious and secular powers of his day. Through a peculiar and advantageous mix of circumstances—including the advent of the printing press, the support of a powerful German sovereign, and an emperor distracted by war—Luther not only escaped the capital fate of previous reformers, but also became the most (in)famous person in Christendom. Variousy regarded as either the next Apostle Paul or the devil incarnate, and at the height of the reformation fray, Luther directed his considerable ability and energy to matters political out of a sense of urgency and necessity.

In the spring of 1520, he addressed an open letter to the governing nobility of Germany enlisting their help in his cause.⁹ Arguing against a longstanding precedent granting the church exemption from civil authority—a status originally based on a forged document purporting to come from Emperor Constantine—Luther urged the secular leaders to order the reform of the legal and fiscal abuses of the papacy. In 1522, however, when few of his calls for reform had been heeded by either secular or religious officials, and murmurs of revolt emanated from commoners and reformist priests, he urged restraint, arguing against insurrection and advocating further prayer and protest.¹⁰ By 1523, matters had improved little and Luther was urged by Prince John of Saxony—the brother of Luther's protector, Frederick the Wise—to clarify his position on the nature and role of government. The resultant *On Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* cogently asserted the divine separation of church and state.¹¹

At the core of Luther's understanding of government rests his belief that the God who created heaven and earth also instituted, maintains, and continues to work through civil authority for the health of all creation. Driving the publication of his treatise, in fact, was his primary concern to "provide a sound basis for the civil law and the sword so no one will doubt that it is in the world by God's will and ordinance."¹² This tremendous affirmation of the importance, even sacredness, of government stems from his conviction that all areas of life are not only created, but also actively sustained, by the living God. That is, if Luther were today to pick up a

⁹Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), LW 44:115-217.

¹⁰Martin Luther, *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion* (1522), LW 45:51-74.

¹¹LW 45:75-129.

¹²*Ibid.*, 85.

copy of the Sunday *New York Times*, he would insist that no section of it escaped either God's attention or involvement. Therefore, and to some surprisingly, Luther contended that God remains as interested and involved in our political life as in our spiritual life.

While affirming God's complete immersion in all areas of human affairs, however, Luther also differentiated between two distinct arenas for God's activity and two corresponding modes or dimensions of divine involvement peculiar to each. While his designation of these two arenas as God's two "kingdoms" or "governments" (*zwei Reichen*) is most familiar to academic theologians, it may be more helpful for us to speak instead of God's two "hands" and thereby better capture Luther's more vivid sense of God's involvement in the world.¹³

Most simply, Luther spoke of God's right hand to describe God's regard for the spiritual dimension of humanity through the church's proclamation of law and gospel. Luther referred to God's left hand to designate God's care for the temporal aspects of human life through civil law and the worldly institutions it created, including chiefly the government and heads of households.

His choice of adjectives is important, reflecting a long theological tradition that identified "right" with the divine church and "left" with inferior secular authority.¹⁴ (The pejorative linguistic association persists into our own period in our words "gauche" from the French and "sinister" from the Latin, both stemming from words for "left".) In Luther's hands, however, the distinction between "right" and "left" was not about superiority, but clarity.

Far from asserting the church's supremacy over the state, he envisioned God at work in and through both arenas equally, but distinctly.¹⁵ God's activity appears most unmistakably in the forgiveness, acceptance, and love that characterize the Christian gospel; hence, through its preaching and teaching the church acts as God's right hand. But God also works, albeit more ambiguously, through the laws, institutions, and even social customs that help us order our lives and foster civilization. By placing government under God's left hand, therefore, Luther affirmed the divine status of secular authority while also highlighting the more problematic nature of perceiving God's presence in temporal institutions. Two such issues in particular deserve brief mention.

¹³More often than not, Luther's distinction between God's *zwei Reichen* has been rendered as God's "two kingdoms." Such a translation, however, can be misleading on two fronts. First, when Luther at other places speaks of "two kingdoms," he refers to the warring kingdoms of Christ and Satan. Second, "kingdom" connotes a fairly static domain, whereas Luther had in mind the means by which God acted in the world. For this reason, "government" is a more apt choice, as God works through two distinct types of institutions—spiritual and temporal—to effect God's will in the world, while "hands" metaphorically captures Luther's sense of God's dynamic activity perhaps even better.

¹⁴Longstanding tradition stood behind such a correlation. In his *The City of God*, for instance, St. Augustine traced the lineage of secular authority back to Abel's murderous brother Cain. By Luther's day, the primacy of the church in matters both spiritual and temporal was regularly assumed, especially by the professional clergy.

¹⁵*On Temporal Authority*, LW 45:91-93.

The first involves the ambiguous nature of temporal authority. For, while governments do establish and maintain the peace necessary for human community and commerce, because they are operated by sinful persons, no government is fully just, and many are painfully corrupt. Christians in such circumstances are not without recourse. Confronted by a government that fails to execute its God-ordained responsibilities, Christians are first to confess their own part in the failure and ask for forgiveness; second, to pray to God for justice; and third, to protest the abuses of the authorities, whether temporal or religious.¹⁶ According to Luther, however, they must also trust God's work through law and gospel and therefore acknowledge the divine establishment of civil authority and refuse insurrection.

The second issue revolves around the sometimes difficult task of discerning God at work in temporal authority. For while one easily perceives God in the church's proclamation of forgiveness, it is more difficult to detect God in the government's at times violent enforcement of law and order. Nevertheless, Luther asserted, such alien work is of commensurate value and use to God as is the proper work of preaching the gospel. Taking the extreme example of soldiers at war, in fact, Luther writes pointedly, "When I think of a soldier fulfilling his office by punishing the wicked, killing the wicked, and creating so much misery, it seems an un-Christian work completely contrary to Christian love. But when I think of how it protects the good and keeps and preserves wife and child, house and farm, property, and honor and peace, then I see how precious and godly this work is."¹⁷ Despite outward appearances sometimes to the contrary, Luther maintained, government functioned in the world as the left hand of God.

III. SACRED AND SECULAR

Luther's treatment of temporal authority leads to a simultaneous divination and secularization of government that ultimately distinguishes between, rather than merely separates, church and state. Because government is ordained by God, civic responsibilities share equal status with religious duties; hence the sacredness of government. At the same time, because Luther believed God established both civil and religious authority to govern a particular sphere of human life—temporal or spiritual—he insisted on distinguishing between the two at all times; hence the secularization of government. One can look neither to the church to order civil life nor to the government for assurance of salvation. Only great harm results when the two distinct sets of duties are confused or neglected. "The world," Luther predicted, "would be reduced to chaos."¹⁸

Beyond executing their distinct responsibilities, however, each also exists with the other in a relationship of mutual reciprocity to fulfill God's will. The tem-

¹⁶A *Sincere Admonition*, LW 44:66-67.

¹⁷Martin Luther, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526), LW 46:96.

¹⁸*Temporal Authority*, LW 45:91.

poral authorities maintain the peace necessary for human community and freedom of belief, and the spiritual authorities raise up faithful persons who perceive God's work in government and therefore both honor government and participate in it. Further, and as Luther demonstrated in his earlier treatise, the state may be called to reform church interference in secular affairs, while the church is called to act as the conscience of civic leaders and remind them by whose authority they govern.

Each institution is therefore necessarily independent of the other and simultaneously insufficient apart from the other. According to Luther, in fact, one without the other leads to turmoil: "When the temporal government or law alone prevails, there sheer hypocrisy is inevitable....On the other hand, when the spiritual government alone prevails over land and people, there wickedness is given free rein and the door is open for all manner of rascality."¹⁹

In his theological work on the nature of government, Luther placed the domestic and civic roles of human life on the same par as the religious. For according to Luther, God was ambidextrous, working through both temporal and spiritual hands for the good of humanity. Each governed in a distinct arena of human existence; each relied on the other for mutual support and counsel. No longer, therefore, could ordained priests present themselves as spiritually higher than common parents and citizens, or monks and bishops place themselves religiously ahead of city magistrates and jurists. All occupied equally necessary and God-ordained stations in the world and hence equally fulfilled God's will for humanity.²⁰

At a time when the church claimed divine authority over secular rulers and controlled the means of grace by which all Christians—peasant to emperor—gained or were denied access to heaven, Luther's stance on the nature of government expanded his challenge of the pope's authority into a battle waged on all fronts, secular as well as religious, and irrevocably altered the European understanding of the relationship between church and state. In the process, and perhaps more importantly, he also bequeathed to his theological heirs a dynamic view of God's distinct yet equally important work in all arenas of life, spiritual and temporal.

Such a view may have difficulty gaining much purchase in a culture and climate like ours where, by and large, either God stands against worldly institutions in a battle between the "sacred" and the "profane" or God's work in the church and in secular institutions are regularly confused. But to those who not simply embrace it, but also struggle to apply it to situations and circumstances far removed from the reformer's own, Luther's theology offers a means by which to negotiate issues of faith and politics eagerly and confidently.²¹ For according to Luther, God is both

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 117.

²¹Cf. Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 137-152.

ambidextrous and indefatigable, working in many and various ways for the good of humanity.

This steadfast confidence in God not only elevates significantly the everyday tasks of life stemming from our roles as parent, spouse, employer, employee, and so forth, but also lends a measure of dignity to the duties of citizen and governmental official that has been sadly lacking in our own day. Further, Luther's theology invites us to imagine more fully how our life in the church enables and sustains our life in the world as believers who live simultaneously in both of God's realms, spiritual and temporal. Luther therefore calls Christians not only to perceive God's work in the political institutions of life, but also to join God in such work by, for instance, voting conscientiously, paying taxes diligently, holding officials accountable regularly, protesting the abuses of government readily, and taking up the responsibilities of juror and elected office as they may come to us earnestly, all for the good of neighbor and the world. In short, Luther expects that we ask, not whether God is at work in the political institutions of our world, but rather, and always, how. ⊕