



# The Two Kingdoms Distinction: An Analysis with Suggestion

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AS ARDENTLY AS IT HAS BEEN ADVOCATED, AS SOUNDLY AS IT HAS BEEN CRITICIZED, Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms and its influence in Lutheranism is a fiction contrived in an intricate dance between advocates and critics. Approached historically, Luther's thinking in this and related issues turns out to be both much simpler and far more complex than either side allows. Just so, it may turn out to be very productive for the church as it enters the twenty-first century.

This essay is an attempt to anchor both Luther and Lutheranism historically on the matter of the two kingdoms, to locate both the advocacy and the criticism that have developed in relation to it, and finally, to offer some suggestions for continued reflection.

## I. LUTHER AND LUTHERANISM ON THE TWO KINGDOMS

Following the controversies that developed in relation to Lutheranism's alleged implication in World War II, Gerhard Ebeling wrote a programmatic essay

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*There is no doctrine of the two kingdoms in the Lutheran confessions. The distinction, when care is taken to avoid abuse, can help us understand what it is to be "in but not of the world."*

that laid the foundation for subsequent discussion of Luther's two kingdoms thinking.<sup>1</sup>

In the essay, Ebeling uses the term "doctrine" in a commonly accepted way, to describe a body of teaching on a particular topic. It is when the term is pressed beyond such a definition that it becomes fictional. As is well known, Luther was not a systematic theologian but an exegete whose academic life was taken up in offering courses in scriptural literature, sometimes and famously New Testament books like Romans or Galatians, more often books of the Old Testament. Beyond his vocation in the classroom, he was after 1521 an excommunicant and an outlaw who was also a translator, a preacher, a polemicist, and—in his own thinking, accidentally—a reformer, a title about which he was restive.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, as is commonly accepted in Luther scholarship, Luther did not see himself as establishing a theological system, cohesively structured, with all the implications spelled out fully and consistently, as a whole and in all of their parts, to be taken over and carried on by his followers.<sup>3</sup> Rather, he thought dialectically, working out of distinctions that he found to be demanded for the relationship between the biblical message and the particular situation in which he was implicated. As often noted, Luther was an occasional theologian—when the occasion varied, the distinctions with which he worked could produce different, even contradictory conclusions. He acknowledged this directly when, for example, he described the change in the situation of the reform prior to 1530, when the difficulty was legalism, and after, when it was license.<sup>4</sup>

Because of this way of proceeding, there is no *locus* in Luther's works called "the doctrine of the two kingdoms," nor even a treatise by that title. Instead there are some occasional writings from the 1520s, like *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* and *Temporal Authority: To What Extent They Should Be Obeyed*, in which Luther makes the distinctions in relation to specific problems. And littered through various commentaries (for example on Psalm 118), or sermons, there are similar discussions. What is generally called "the doctrine of the two kingdoms" has thus been constructed from these sources by later scholars for their particular purposes.

Proceeding in this way, the two kingdoms distinction, as opposed to doctrine, is an extension of the distinction of law and gospel. By the very assertion of its promise—Christ's gifts of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation—the gospel puts the law in another perspective. The shift can be summarized in a question: If

<sup>1</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, "The Necessity of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," in *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 386-406.

<sup>2</sup>See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in Luther's Reformation* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964) 11ff.

<sup>3</sup>Though it hasn't been available here, Per Frostin develops this argument fully in *Luther's Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Critical Study* (Lund: Lund University, 1994).

<sup>4</sup>WA 39/1, 571-574.

Christ justifies the godless, what is the law for?<sup>5</sup> Clearly, given Christ's death and resurrection, the law cannot do the gospel's work. It must, then, of necessity, have some other purpose or purposes. And what might those be? Working analytically and descriptively, Luther answers by speaking of what the law actually does in everyday life, its uses: the law restrains evil and in a more qualified way promotes the good, and it has a genius for threatening, accusing, or exposing.

Making the distinction is as critical as it is problematic. Left undistinguished, the law overpowers the gospel, asserting obedience to itself as a condition of salvation. Or the gospel undermines the law, reducing the specific promise, "Your sin is forgiven for Jesus' sake," to a generic endorsement, "That's okay, don't let it bother you." Confused, law and gospel destroy one another. At the same time, the gospel is an alien word that comes from outside of human experience; the law is one of the ineluctable powers of everyday life that constantly subverts the gospel for its own functions. Truly distinguishing law and gospel is not the stereotypical separation of imperatives from indicatives, the former to be thrown away, but, as Luther described it, like writing in the water.

When the promise expands beyond the individual to the larger relations of creaturely life, then the law/gospel distinction expands into a distinction of two kingdoms. As Christ claims each one, he is at the same time laying claim to all, bringing in a new relation, a new age in which death and its allied powers have lost their dominion. Just as the gospel challenges the claims of the law, this promise puts all other relationships of authority in another perspective. This shift can also be put into a question: If Christ is bringing in the new world, what is the purpose of these other authorities? By the same token, the apparent limits of the various institutions of this world—which can be observed in the repeated but always unfulfilled claims to provide a "generation of peace," "a new era," or even "a chicken in every pot"—demand recognition of the possibility of something beyond them that really, and in the final sense, delivers.

Thus, to the everlasting frustration of those who want to create a new age—politically, ecclesiastically, or otherwise—the two kingdoms are not two institutions or organizations but two different relations, correlated to law and gospel. "God's kingdom comes when by his grace, he gives us his Holy Spirit so that we might believe his holy word and live godly lives on earth now and in heaven forever," as Luther says in his explanation of the second petition of the Lord's prayer. The new age, the kingdom of Christ Jesus, is present now, hidden with faith amidst all the contention brought about by the attempts of institutions and their leaders to transcend themselves. In the meantime, visibly, through earthly powers like the

<sup>5</sup>As short as it is, the word law is as complex and fraught with overtones as another three-letter beauty, sex. Basically, Luther uses "law" in a wide sense and a narrow one, the first to speak of a force in human experience that sets limits or confronts the self, the second to speak of various codes, such as the ten commandments. The classical study is Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric and Ruth Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969). It cannot be assumed that when Luther uses the term law, he has Old Testament concepts in mind unless it is so specified.

state, the church, schools, and social customs, the law continues to exercise its force until such a time as the gospel ends it by taking the heart in its grip.

Working with these distinctions, Luther can make further ones, as the occasion demands. For example, though the two kingdoms is not a distinction of church and state, Luther can make such within it. Whereas the state, like the family and other social structures, is an authority in the realm of law, Luther can speak of the church as the point where the kingdoms overlap. As the people of God gathered together to hear the word and receive the sacraments, the church is the earthly institution where the Spirit of the risen Christ takes hold through the means of grace. At the same time, the church collects money, elects officers, calls meetings, demands police and fire protection, and gets plumbing fixed. In such relations, there is no difference between it and the VFW or, for that matter, the NRA.

At the same time, in the church as in the larger public life, a more shadowy kingdom also makes itself felt—the power of the demonic—which contends against faith and the earthly institutions God uses to provide for justice and peace. In fact, the presence of this third force in some sense clarifies the unity of the first two: in both, God is acting against the powers of death and the devil, either ultimately, as in the gospel, or penultimately, in the earthly realm.

As with law and gospel, the distinction of the two kingdoms is made for the sake of both. By their very nature, earthly institutions are tempted to claim ultimacy for themselves, be they families, social organizations, churches, or governments. The ultimacy of Christ's kingdom reduces such claims to their proper penultimate order. By the same token, when the pious claim religious entitlements to transcend the legal order, the rule of law is undermined. The distinction cuts both ways, against those who in the name of the gospel wish to dominate and those who in the name of Christ would seek to withdraw from earthly relations.

Luther himself worked these distinctions critically, as the occasion demanded. For example, in a lesser known writing published just before the outbreak of violence in the peasant's war, Luther sounded a word of judgment against both the peasants and the lords.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the legitimacy of their claims, he wrote to the peasants, asserting the ultimate by the use of violence would set back their cause inevitably. To the lords, who were putting the squeeze on their renters to get cash for the growing late medieval economy, he wrote that if they did not recognize their limits, they would get what they deserve.

But one of Luther's most interesting uses of the distinction has been traced in his changing attitude toward armed resistance by W. D. G. Cargill-Thompson, an English scholar.<sup>7</sup> Beginning with Luther's well-known admonitions to passive resistance in essays of the 1520s, Cargill-Thompson notes Luther's reluctant but nev-

<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther, *Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-1986) 46:19, 23.

<sup>7</sup>W. D. J. Cargill-Thompson, "Luther and Resistance to the Emperor," in *Studies in the Reformation*, ed. C. W. Dugmore (London: Athlone, 1980) 6.

ertheless clear acceptance of more forceful resistance as possibilities of the emperor's own attempts to enforce a settlement of the reformation loomed large. In the 1540s, Luther argued that such a circumstance demanded military resistance.<sup>8</sup>

Luther's own steadfast insistence on the priority of the biblical word, along with other historical factors, limited the authority he exercised in the emergence of the Luther tradition during the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The slogan "the word alone" did not exclude tradition altogether, as it did among various Protestant groups, but as Ebeling has pointed out in another important essay, it did subordinate tradition by making it subject to a double test: its witness to Christ and its reasonableness.<sup>10</sup> Luther's *Large* and *Small Catechisms* and his *Schmalkald Articles* are the only ones of his writings that have a prescribed standing. If implicit, the two kingdoms distinction is not explicitly considered in any of the three. Neither is it taken over for explicit development in any of the other four confessions.

So there is no doctrine of the two kingdoms in the Lutheran confessions. The distinctions may be at work in some of the arguments. The eschatological limit stated in Acts 5 is carried over into *Augustana* 16, "We must obey God rather than men"; there is some clear though recently controversial evidence of a functional definition of institutions and offices such as the church and the ministry in articles 7 and 5. But there is no developed systematic treatment. In fact, some of the dynamic of Luther's dialectic has clearly been lost. Given Eck's attempt to portray the Lutherans to the emperor as seditious, Melancthon is at some pains in the *Augustana* to present the movement as upstanding and loyal, muting prior criticism particularly in relation to the papacy in the process.

There is, however, a significant development in article 10 of the *Formula of Concord*. Luther's fear that Charles V would use force to impose a settlement of the reform turned out to be prescient. In 1547, a year after Luther died, the emperor divided the forces of the Schmalkald League and defeated them. In the Augsburg Interim, he demanded that the Lutherans concede everything except communion in both kinds and the marriage of the clergy. Melancthon urged compliance, arguing that the concessions were all in matters of *adiaphora* and thus, lacking biblical mandate, could be yielded.<sup>11</sup>

Melancthon's submission brought howls of outrage from his secretary, the Croat Matthias Flacius Illyricus, and one of Luther's old companions, Nicholas von Amsdorf. They followed Luther's argument from the later 1530s and early '40s, insisting on the necessity of resistance. When an *adiaphoron* is mandated by governmental authorities, Flacius held, it loses its optional character and must be disobeyed. The adiaphorist controversy, as the larger exchange came to be called,

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>9</sup>See Luther's comments about himself in the *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* (1545), *LW* 34:327-338.

<sup>10</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, "The Word of God and Tradition," in *The Word of God and Tradition: Historical Studies Interpreting the Divisions of Christianity*, trans. S. H. Hooke (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 30.

<sup>11</sup>*The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University, 1996) 1:5.

revealed a deeper division in the Luther community, being followed by several other vituperous conflicts throughout the 1550s.

As a result, the *Formula of Concord* of 1577 formally addressed the issue of resistance, seeking to provide an authoritative resolution for the heirs of the Lutheran reform. Characteristically, the authors of the *Formula* represent a later form of the Lutheran tradition, one that adopts Melanchthon's Aristotelian revisions of Luther's apocalyptic, relational way of thinking. But even with that noted, the *Formula* does not set a doctrine, either of the two kingdoms or of resistance, even though Flacius and his colleagues had thought out the issue more thoroughly.<sup>12</sup> The *Formula* does not, for example, identify the location of resistance or define the means. Instead, it focuses on the occasion in which resistance is demanded, citing three criteria: when idolatry is demanded, Christian freedom compromised, or the truth of the gospel denied. At such points, appropriate resistance is not an alternative but is *in statu confessionis*, on the order of confession itself, a definitive act of Christian faithfulness.<sup>13</sup>

## II. ADVOCATES AND CRITICS

A fundamental difference between Roman Catholics, Calvinists and their descendants, and Lutherans appears in their origins. Catholicism emerged with the office of the papacy, which is definitive. Jean Calvin, called back to the city of Geneva, after an earlier less fortunate experience, for the express purpose of reform, set out his plans in a classic statement, *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances of the City of Geneva*. Wittingly or unwittingly, Luther fell into reform and for a variety of reasons, some of them principled, others circumstantial, but neither he nor his Wittenberg colleagues got around to setting up structures, theological or institutional.

Given such origins, Lutheranism has historically retained what organizational theorists call a "charismatic" form in which there is a person of reference at the center and then a lot of loose ends being gathered up by those who stand in some relation to that person. The difference is that Luther repeatedly deferred the center, insisting on the prior authority of Christ Jesus, thereby further complicating an already messy form of organizational life.

The result of this confusion appears in distinctions like the two kingdoms. In the place of a thoroughly defined doctrine, measured by the implications from the first premisses to the final conclusions, we find some floating distinctions that come to rest in different ways in various occasions. Even the *Formula of Concord*, to which Lutherans have given an authority prior to most all of Luther's writings, doesn't nail it down. This is all the more remarkable, given the common urge of subsequent generations to codify and fill in the missing links.

<sup>12</sup>Cynthia Grant Shoenburger, "The Confessions of Magdeburg and the Lutheran Doctrine of Resistance" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1972).

<sup>13</sup>*FC, SD 10* in *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 612-613.

Discussion of the use of the two kingdoms distinction, both in advocacy and criticism, has to begin with this historical observation, because Luther and the *Formula of Concord*, if it is known or mentioned, are always secondary in the later discussions. The distinctions in Luther or the *Formula* only become a doctrine when they are assembled and developed by the advocate or critic, who thereby asserts a claim to the authority of the original, but who is, by collation and analysis, the real source.

An excellent example of the way this reconstruction has worked is provided by Reinhold Niebuhr, who had a shaping force in the critique of two kingdoms thinking among the theologians trained in the 1950s and '60s. Wilhelm Pauck, a colleague on the Union Seminary faculty in New York, used his own meticulous historical training in Luther research to analyze Niebuhr's portrayal, noting a strange crossover.<sup>14</sup> The thinking Niebuhr ascribes to Luther is generally what Luther himself rejected; Niebuhr's proposed correction is, in point of historical fact, much closer to Luther. The influence of Niebuhr's reading, the old problem intact, can be seen in a work like Douglas John Hall's *Lighten Our Darkness*.<sup>15</sup> Detached from his own historical setting, Luther has become a symbol of a problem that both he and his critics are attempting to address.

Given this characteristic of two kingdoms thinking in Luther and the Lutheran confessions, the history of its interpretation becomes particularly important. Use is determinative. Here two works are very valuable: Ulrich Duchrow, *Lutheran Churches: Salt or Mirror of Society?*<sup>16</sup> and Karl H. Hertz, *Two Kingdoms and One World: A Sourcebook in Christian Ethics*.<sup>17</sup> Duchrow's study, as the subtitle states, is an assembly of case studies in the "theory and practice of the two kingdoms doctrine." Hertz offers a rich variety of excerpts from the works of both advocates and critics, surveying—like Duchrow—the use of this thinking in Lutheran churches throughout the world.

The concluding chapter in Duchrow's study offers some particularly helpful insights into problems that have arisen for Lutherans in their use of the two kingdoms distinction. There are two significant potential difficulties, what Duchrow calls, "undifferentiated adaptation to the existing power structures," a caesaropapism or nazism where the promises of the kingdom are attached to a particular earthly institution, and "a dualistic differentiated adaptation to the existing power structures," in which the various institutions of public life are all assumed to have their autonomy and to be, therefore, beyond any critical assessment or challenge.

This formulation of difficulties provides an open-ended but critical basis for further specifying the two kingdoms distinction. As Luther himself recognized, the

<sup>14</sup>Wilhelm Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1968) 12-15.

<sup>15</sup>Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 129ff.

<sup>16</sup>Ulrich Duchrow, ed., in collaboration with Dorteia Millwood, *Lutheran Churches—Salt or Mirror of Society?* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977).

<sup>17</sup>Karl H. Hertz, ed., *Two Kingdoms and One World: A Sourcebook in Christian Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976).

law runs on short legs, trying to keep up with all the complexities of life. In matters of law, dialectical distinctions offer a freedom that a fully developed doctrine, critically important as it may be in some instances, may in others take away. This said, Duchrow's formulations offer criteria for checking the way the distinction is working. A two kingdoms dialectic cut to fit the ultimate claims of the institutions of this life or to loosen them from critical perspective would have to be considered false.

### III. A SUGGESTION

The question of resistance has been at the cutting edge of two kingdoms thinking for a generation raised with memories of the second world war. It became important again in consideration of Vietnam. But there are wider dimensions, out of which an issue is emerging at the turn of the century: the matter of cultural placement.

Duchrow's use of the salt image in his title calls forward Jesus' references to salt, light, and leaven in the sermon on the mount. All three of them do their job by disappearing into the larger mix, salt to flavor, yeast to raise, light to show the way. They provide a helpful image of the original Lutheran vision of the place of the individual Christian and the church as a whole in the larger society. The model has been one of participation. In contrast to the dominance characteristically sought by Catholicism and Calvinism, Lutherans have generally seen themselves as participants, serving out God's callings in the family, at work, as citizens, and in their congregations.

This model has worked reasonably well in situations where the beneficence or at least the neutrality of the larger society could be assumed—in Scandinavia, for example. It was particularly well suited to immigrant churches, seeking to establish themselves in a new context.

Given its origins, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been more self-conscious about preserving its identity; the ELCA, like its antecedent bodies, has pretty much left the gate open, if it hasn't torn down the fence.

But the notion of participation becomes problematic when neither the support, however passive, nor the neutrality of the larger society can be taken for granted. That is what happened, most dramatically, in Germany in the late '30s. The drama was so hidden in the everyday vocational routine that Lutherans remaining there did not see what had happened to their participation.

Does the assumption hold for American Lutheranism? This is a question that needs a wide conversation. The culture of the melting pot has proven itself as corrosive religiously as it has linguistically or ethnically, cooking Protestantism down to a paste now becoming dreadfully familiar in Lutheran churches as well. Yet a Lutheranism faithful to its heritage can hardly circle the wagons, enclosing itself against a culture that also serves God's left hand in the ordering of the earthly realm. Perhaps the two kingdoms distinction, with Duchrow's guide as to its misuse, can serve some rethinking of what it is to be "in but not of the world." ⊕