

Martin Luther and the State

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One day in senior church history class, Prof. Edward Fredrich warned that the most challenging year in our ministries would not be our first year or our second year but our fortieth year—which for us would be 2017. That would be our most challenging year, he predicted, because that year would mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

Several times I wondered since 1977 whether I had heard Prof. Fredrich correctly. As it turns out, he explained himself in an unpublished essay in 1984. Commenting on the quadricentennial celebration of the Reformation in 1917, he wrote:

One could get pretty good mileage developing a thesis that everything happens to the Lutheran Church, much of it for the bad, in the anniversaries of the Reformation counted by the hundreds and even by the fifties. For evidence one has only to look to Prussia in 1817 or to Fort Wayne in 1867 or to the Twin Cities or New York in 1917 or to Denver in 1969. There is a two-year gap in the final item, one can assume, because the Missouri Synod simply does not fit the pattern of the others. . . .

Those readers who have expectations of joining in the grand semi-millenarian Reformation anniversary [in other words, 2017] are being put on notice to be prepared for difficulties. For a synod with a theological position like Wisconsin's it could be the worst of times. The writer is happy that he will have had to live through it only in the 1917 and 1967 anniversaries and will miss the one in 2017.¹

This last of four symposium essays in observance of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is devoted to "Luther and the State." One might suppose that this would not be the most difficult or controversial of the four assignments, but there is more here than meets the eye. In the recently published *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, Robert Kolb wrote that Luther's terms "two kingdoms" or "two realms" have "wrought confusion within and outside Lutheran circles because, unaware that he was formulating terminology to be used for centuries, he was not careful in his use of the phrase."² Both of Kolb's observations are accurate. Luther did not always employ his terminology

¹ Edward C. Fredrich II, "The Twentieth Century Shaping of American Lutheranism," (unpublished 1984 essay, <http://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/1560/FredrichShaping.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>), 11-12.

² Robert Kolb, "Two Realms," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wingert, et al (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 756.

consistently, and his usage developed over time. Further, his terms and their meanings have been put to use in ways he could never have anticipated.³

³ One can find much to read on Luther and the two kingdoms: Knut Alfsvag, "Christians in Society: Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms and the Three Estates Today," *Logia* 14 (Reformation 2005): 15-20; Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 43-82; Robert J. Bast, "From Two Kingdoms to Two Tablets: The Ten Commandments and the Christian Magistrate," *Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte* 89 (1998): 79-95; J. Mark Beach, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms: Some Critics of the Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 25 (2014): 35-73; Jonathon David Beeke, "Martin Luther's Two Kingdoms, Law and Gospel, and the Created Order: Was There a Time When the Two Kingdoms Were Not?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (Fall 2011): 191-214; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in the Context of His Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966); Carl E. Braaten, "The Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms Re-Examined," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15 (December 1988): 497-504; Thomas Brady, "Luther and Society: Two Kingdoms or Three Estates? Tradition and Experience in Luther's Social Teaching," *Lutherjahrbuch* 52 (1985): 197-224; Edgar M. Carlson, "Luther's Conception of Government," *Church History* 15 (December 1946): 257-70; Jarrett A. Carty, *Divided Kingdom, Holy Order: The Political Writings of Martin Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012); Daniel Deutschlander, *Civil Government: God's Other Kingdom* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1998), esp. 129-43; Mark Ellingsen, "The Two Kingdoms in America," *Dialog* 45 (Winter 2006): 366-75; Erwin R. Gane, "Luther's View of Church and State," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 8 (1970): 120-43; *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. and trans. Harro Hoepfl (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); William A. Johnson, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (August 1963): 239-49; Arnold J. Koelpin, "An American Application of Luther's Doctrine of the Two Realms: The Relationship of Government to the Institutional Church," *Logia* 12 (Epiphany 2003): 41-50; William H. Lazareth, *Christians and Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Cameron A. MacKenzie, "The Challenge of History: Luther's Two Kingdoms Theology as a Test Case," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71 (January 2007): 3-28; Paul T. McCain, "Receiving the Gifts of God in His Two Kingdoms: The Development of Luther's Understanding," *Logia* 8 (Trinity 1999): 29-30; Craig L. Nesson, "Liberation Theology's Critique of the Two Kingdoms," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 16 (August 1989): 257-266; Nesson, "Reappropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms," *Lutheran Quarterly* 20 (August 2005): 302-311; Anders Nygren, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," *The Ecumenical Review* 1 (Spring 1949): 301-310; Joel C. Otto, "Living Our Dual Citizenship: Luther's Principles, Lutheran Lessons, and American Applications of the Two Kingdoms Doctrine," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 113 (Fall 2016): 285-306; 114 (Winter 2017): 38-54; Ernest K. Pasiciel, "Martin Luther's Theology of the Civil Authority," *Didaskalia* 11 (Spring 1999): 19-50; Richard V. Pierard, "The Lutheran Two-Kingdoms Doctrine and Subservience to the State in Modern Germany," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (June 1986): 193-203; E.G. Schwiebert, "The Medieval Pattern in Luther's View of the State," *Church History* 12 (June 1943): 98-117; Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., "Impact of the Reformation on Church-State Issues," in *Church and State under God*, ed. Albert G. Huegli (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964): 59-112; David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2nd ed., 2002), 112-25; W.J.D. Cargill Thompson, "The 'Two Kingdoms' and the 'Two Regiments': Some Problems of Luther's Zwei-Reiche-Lehre," *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (April 1969): 164-185; Gene Edward Veith, "God's Presence in His Temporal Kingdom," *Logia* 25 (Holy Trinity 2016): 7-12; James P. Wind, "Two Kingdoms—in America?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 14 (June 1987): 165-176; William J. Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

Two Swords

Catholic Europe operated with the same principles and assumptions as did so many people and places before it: religion and the state must work together, each necessary to maintain the other. According to natural law doctrine, “the proper basis of civil authority is the natural law rather than special revelation,” although medieval societies enforced additional laws which forbade heresy, blasphemy, and apostasy, and punished religious crimes severely. The purpose of government in natural law theory is “to manage the common concerns of the community for the common good,” chief among them concerns for the safe survival of the community itself. It was generally believed that the community could not survive if its majority religion was not maintained,” and, conversely, the majority religion required governmental support to enforce moral laws and to maintain social adherence to those laws. “Heresy and other religious offenses were considered not just sins but also a danger to the community’s well-being, because they undermined the public’s adherence to the moral law on which civil law was based.”⁴

Others believed that government authority arose not from natural law but from the shared religion of the community, and government was then necessary to enforce religious laws to protect the source of their authority. Pope Innocent III (pope 1198-1216) maintained that God “appointed two great dignitaries [for the firmament of the universal Church]: the greater to bear rule over souls (these being, as it were, days,) the lesser to bear rule over bodies (these being, as it were, nights). These dignitaries are the pontifical authority and the royal authority.” More than that, “the moon derives her light from the sun and is in truth inferior to the sun . . . in the same way the royal power derives its dignity from the pontifical authority.” A century later Pope Boniface VIII (pope 1294-1303) added, “We learn from the words of the Gospel [Luke 22:38] that in this Church and in her power are two swords, the spiritual and the temporal.” The temporal sword was to be used *for the Church*, the spiritual power *by her*. “The one sword, then, should be under the other, and temporal authority subject to spiritual.”⁵

However, some historians find occasional yet convincing proofs that religion was to be regarded as a thing separate from the governing authority, with freedom of belief the ideal. Tertullian (ca. 155-ca. 240), in Book 24 of his *Apology*, demanded “freedom of religion” from the Roman magistrates, and in *To Scapula*, in 205, Tertullian wrote, “It is a fundamental human right, a power bestowed by nature, that each person should worship according to his own convictions, free from compulsion.”⁶ Robert Louis Wilken traces religious freedom to the fourth century.⁷ Roman emperors Licinius (ca. 265-325) and Constantine (ca. 272-337) resolved, in *On the Death of Persecutors*, in 315, to “grant to

⁴ Greg Forster, *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 98.

⁵ Martin E. Marty, *A Short History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress: 1987), 85.

⁶ Both Tertullian references are in Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 131-32.

⁷ Robert Louis Wilken *The Roots of Religious Freedom* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014).

Christians and to all men freedom to follow whatever religion each one wished,” with “free minds” and “without anxiety or interference.” Their ruling applied not only to Christians. “A similar open and free permission” was granted “to others to follow their own religion and worship as befits the peacefulness of our times, so that each may have a free opportunity to engage in whatever worship he has chosen.”⁸ Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604), responding to the forced conversion of Jews by a Christian bishop in France, warned that “when anyone is brought to the font of baptism, not by the sweetness of preaching, but by compulsion, he will return to his former superstition.” Gregory encouraged the bishop to “stir up such men by frequent preaching so that they may desire to change their life more by the sweetness of their teacher.”⁹

Two Cities

Augustine (354-430) wrote his *City of God* in response to allegations that Christianity was to blame for the decline of Rome. Augustine countered that Christianity was in fact responsible for the empire’s sake. He compared the heavenly and earthly cities especially in Book 19:

The peace of the heavenly City lies in a perfectly ordered and harmonious communion of those who find their joy in God. . . . Those who are unhappy, in so far as they are unhappy, are not in peace, since they lack the calm of that Order which is beyond every storm. . . . They do not share with the blessed in their tranquility, but this very separation is the result of the law of order.¹⁰

The families which live according to faith look ahead to the good things of heaven promised as imperishable, and use material and temporal goods in the spirit of pilgrims. . . . The earthly city which does not live by faith seeks only an earthly peace, and limits the goal of its peace . . . to the voluntary and collective attainment of objectives necessary to mortal existence. The heavenly City, meanwhile—or, rather, that part that is on pilgrimage in mortal life and lives by faith—must use this earthly peace until such time as our mortality which needs such peace has passed away.¹¹

⁸ Text of the letter of Licinius and Constantine can be found in Lactantius, *On the Death of Persecutors*, 48; Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, ed. and trans. J.L. Creed (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 52-53; in Wilken, *The Roots of Religious Freedom*, 13-14.

⁹ *Letters of Gregory the Great*, 1.45, trans. John R.C. Martyn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004), 171; in Wilken, *The Roots of Religious Freedom*, 18-19.

¹⁰ *City of God*, Book 19, chapter 13, in *Saint Augustine: The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, et al, (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1958), 456.

¹¹ *City of God*, Book 19, chapter 17, in *Saint Augustine: The City of God*, 463-64. Gerard O’Daly, *Augustine’s City of God: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 109-110, has explained:

Book 19 is perhaps the most studied of all books of the *City of God*. It is regularly included in discussions of the history of political theory. It comes as near as any work of Augustine’s to propounding his political views. But it is important to realize that it does not do so. It is not a discussion of the relations between church and state: rather it is an account of how Christians may, and why they must, be good citizens of the empire, by defining the limited but significant area where the aims and interests of the two cities, in their historical form, coincide. The book

In the view of many scholars, Luther's thinking early on was dependent on Augustine's *City of God*, but that dependence lessened over time. His understanding was not "a simplistic distinction between earth and heaven, or the world and church, or merely the difference between church and state." Although reflecting Augustine, Luther was not as willing to think in terms of a strict division between life in this world and life in the *City of God*.¹² Yet in his earlier writings Luther at times differentiated "so sharply between the temporal kingdom and the kingdom of God that 'secular men' and 'Christians' seem to be two distinct classes of [people] belonging either to the one kingdom or to the other." Such statements might lead to the assumption that "the Christian—who must also participate in the temporal kingdom as a father or mother, a citizen or soldier—surrenders, as it were, the identifying marks of his Christianity the moment he enters the worldly sphere."¹³

For example, in his *Scholia* on Romans (1515-1516), Luther wrote that "through faith the believer has subjected all these things [in the world, in life, or in death] to himself," and he is "not affected by them nor trusts in them," but "he compels them to serve him to his glory and salvation." By contrast, "the world is conquered and subjected in no better way than through contempt." Luther lamented "the impenetrable darkness" of his times. A person "may be guilty of pride, wantonness, avarice, contentions, wrath, and you may possess the whole catalog of vices [2 Timothy 3:2]," but that person may nonetheless regard himself as "a most pious Christian, if only [he] upholds the laws and liberties of the church."¹⁴

After completing the Leipzig Debate, Luther was attacked and condemned by various voices in the church. He had come to believe that the clergy were failing to fulfill their duty, and he appealed to lay people in authority who could force change.¹⁵ His appeal, in 1520, was his *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian State*. Luther argued that "there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work." Just as priests, bishops, or popes "are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the word of God and the sacraments," so it is with governing authorities. "They bear the sword and rod in their hand to punish the wicked and protect the good." The temporal power "is ordained of God to punish the wicked and to protect the good." Therefore, "the temporal Christian

discusses definitions of the state and accounts of justice, but no details of constitutional practice of theory: it accepts implicitly the Roman imperial *status quo*. . . . But Augustine offers no programme for the Christianization of Roman political institutions, and implies that, religious laws apart, the pre-Christian and the Christianized empire is the same kind of society. . . . All historical states exhibit violence and tensions, their justice carries a necessary punitive element, and they cannot realize peace perfectly.

¹² McCain, "Receiving the Gifts of God in His Two Kingdoms," 29-30.

¹³ Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Volume 1: Foundations*, ed. William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 362.

¹⁴ *Scholia* on Romans 13:1; AE 25:468-69.

¹⁵ Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New York: Yale University Press, 2015), 89-90.

authority ought to exercise its office without hindrance, regardless of whether it is pope, bishop, or priest whom it affects.”¹⁶

In 1521, the emperor condemned Luther and outlawed him, and he was placed under protective custody at the Wartburg. In his absence, riots broke out and church properties were destroyed in Wittenberg. In 1522, Luther wrote *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther To Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion*. He admitted, “I am not at all displeased to hear that the clergy are in such a state of fear and anxiety; perhaps they will come to their senses and moderate their mad tyranny,” yet he was convinced that “the papacy and the clerical state will not be destroyed by the hand of men, or by insurrection” but only by “the wrath of God itself.” Luther listed several reasons to abstain from “the words and even the passions which lead to insurrection.” Revolt “lacks discernment” and “generally harms the innocent more than the guilty.” It was “for this reason governing authority and the sword have been established to punish the wicked and protect the upright, that insurrection may be prevented,” citing Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. “Therefore, keep your eye on the authorities; so long as they make no move and issue no instructions, you just keep hand, mouth, and heart quiet, and assume no responsibility.”¹⁷

In 1523, Luther wrote *On Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*. This writing again reveals a debt to Augustine. “We must divide the children of Adam and all mankind into two classes, the first belonging to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world. Those who belong to the kingdom of God are all the true believers who are in Christ and under Christ.” Observe, Luther explained, that “these people need no temporal law or sword. If all the world were composed of real Christians, that is, true believers, there would be no need for or benefits from prince, king, lord, sword, or law,” because “Christians have in their hearts the Holy Spirit, who both teaches and makes them to do injustice to no one, to love everyone, and to suffer injustice and even death willingly and cheerfully.” But “all who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law,” and “for this reason God has provided for them a different government beyond the Christian estate.” God has “subjected them to the sword so that, even if they would like to, they would be unable to practice their wickedness, and if they do practice it they cannot do so without fear or with success and impunity.” Thus “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.” Again Luther cited Roman 13 and 1 Peter 2.¹⁸

Luther then came to “the main part of this treatise,” regarding “how far [the governing authority’s] arm extends and how widely its hand stretched, lest it extend too far and encroach upon God’s kingdom and government.” He answered, “The temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for

¹⁶ *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), AE 44:129-31.

¹⁷ *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther To All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion* (1522), AE 45:58-63.

¹⁸ *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), AE 45:88-91.

God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul." And so, "where the temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads souls and destroys them." Luther opposed the very possibility of compelling anyone to believe: "As nobody can go to heaven or hell for me, so nobody else can believe or disbelieve for me." How each person believes "is a matter for the conscience for each individual, and since this takes nothing away from the temporal authority, the latter should be content to attend to its own affairs and let men believe this or that as they are able and willing, and constrain no one by force." Faith is "a free act" and "a work of God in the spirit, not something that outward authority should compel or create." Luther then quotes Augustine: "No one can or ought to be forced to believe."¹⁹

What if the governing authority commands citizens to do wrong?

If your prince or temporal ruler commands you to side with the pope, to believe thus and so, or to get rid of certain books, you should say, "It is not fitting that Lucifer should sit at the side of God. Gracious sir, I owe you obedience in body and property; command me within the limits of your authority on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe or to get rid of certain books, I will not obey, for then you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, commanding where you have neither the right nor the authority."²⁰

Three years later, Luther reflected somewhat immodestly, "I might boast that not since the time of the apostles have the temporal sword and temporal government been so clearly described or so highly praised as by me."²¹ *Temporal Authority* demarcated the authority of the two kingdoms and the limits of secular authority. Paul McCain concludes also that *Temporal Authority* "marks both the culmination and the end of one stage of Luther's thinking on the two kingdoms." After 1523 he "no longer spoke of 'worldly government' to mean only that which is at odds with God's kingdom."²²

Response to revolt

Up to 1525, the Reformation was "a small but expanding evangelical movement that used the Bible and Augustine to modify medieval piety and to challenge the authority of popes and bishops." Yet even before that, other reformers were beginning to move away from Luther "because he was not radical enough."²³ The Peasants' War "was primarily a phenomenon of about twenty-four weeks from late January to mid-July 1525."²⁴ It began on a small scale when peasants in southwest Germany rebelled against landowners and incited uprisings in surrounding towns and villages. It is estimated that by May 1525 the

¹⁹ *Temporal Authority*, AE 45:104-108; the Augustine citation is from *Contra litteras Peyiliani*

²⁰ *Temporal Authority*, AE 45:111-12.

²¹ *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526), AE 46:95.

²² McCain, "Receiving the Gifts of God in His Two Kingdoms," 32.

²³ Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 155-56.

²⁴ James M. Strayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Good* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 21.

revolt “claimed perhaps 80,000 lives, about twice the number that died in the American Revolution.”²⁵

The peasants solidified their demands in the *Twelve Articles*, issued in late March or early April 1525.²⁶ They “claimed the Gospel as their own and sought to use the Bible as an arbiter of their grievances.” The *Articles* were filled with marginal references to Scripture, believed to support their cause. “The line between religious demands and political or economic demands is blurred almost completely.”²⁷ The *Schleitheim Confession* of 1527, perhaps the most representative statement of Anabaptist principles, called it “not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate” because “the government is according to the flesh, but the Christian’s is according to the Spirit” and “against the fortification of the devil, the worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christian is armed with the armor of God.”²⁸

Thomas Muentzer “concocted out of scripture a scenario that required him not only to preach a purified Christendom but also to cleanse it by annihilating the godless, false Christians who were corrupting the church.” Muentzer regarded the revolting peasants as the “elect people of God” who would wield their swords to usher in the 1000-year reign of Christ, foretold in Revelation 20.²⁹ Like Luther, Muentzer had a gift for dismissing his enemies with exaggerated, derogatory nicknames. Muentzer called Luther, among other things, “Flatterer of Princes,” “Father Pussyfoot,” “Brother Soft-Life,” “Doctor Liar,” “Ungodly Flesh at Wittenberg,” “Virgin Martin, the Chaste Babylonian Woman,” “Flattering Scoundrel,” “Cousin Steplightly,” “the Pope of Wittenberg,” “Dear Flesh,” and “Arch-Devil.”³⁰

At Alstedt, where he had formerly served as pastor, Muentzer spurred on the peasants:

Go to it, go to it, go to it, while the first is hot! Don’t let your sword grow cold, don’t let it hang down limply! Hammer away ding-dong on the anvils of Nimrod, cast down their tower to the ground! . . . Go to it, go to it, go to it, while it is day! God goes before you follow, follow.³¹

²⁵ Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 156.

²⁶ *The Twelve Articles of Upper Swabia* are reprinted in the introduction *Luther’s Admonition to Peace: A Reply to The Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, AE 46:8-16.

²⁷ David M. Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition*, St. Louis: Concordia, 2001), 40.

²⁸ The *Schleitheim Confessions*; quoted in Alistair E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 203.

²⁹ Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 158.

³⁰ Hans Hillerbrand, “Thomas Muentzer’s Last Tract against Martin Luther: A Translation and Commentary,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 38 (January 1946): 24-36. The full title of Muentzer’s tract was “Highly Provoked Defense and Answer Against the Spiritless, Soft-Living Flesh at Wittenberg, Which Has Befouled Pitiably Christianity in Perverted Fashion by its Theft of Holy Scripture.”

³¹ *The Collected Works of Thomas Muentzer*, ed. and trans. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 140ff.; cited by Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance*, 42-43.

It appears that when Luther saw the danger of such a rejection of secular authority, he no longer spoke of the distinction between the two kingdoms “as consisting only in a difference between the world of the evil unbeliever and the world of the Christian.” Luther moved away from the Augustinian contrast between the City of God and the Worldly City to a deeper understanding that “each kingdom demonstrates God’s love and care, though in different ways.”³²

In *Admonition to Peace*, written on April 15, 1525, Luther scolded the princes and lords: “We have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you princes and lords, and especially you blind bishops and mad priests and monks, whose hearts are hardened” and who “do nothing but cheat and rob the people so that you may lead a life of luxury and extravagance. The poor people cannot bear it any longer.” Luther assured the peasants that he agreed with their complaints but urged them to “be careful that you take up your cause justly and with a good conscience.” With patience, their cause could succeed, “but if you act unjustly and have a bad conscience, you will be defeated.” More forcefully, Luther reminded them of “God’s word, spoken through the mouth of Christ, ‘All who take the sword will perish by the sword’ [Matthew 26:52]. That means nothing else than that no one, by his own violence, shall arrogate authority to himself. . . . How can you get around these passages and laws of God when you boast that you are acting according to divine law, and yet take the sword in your own hands, and revolt against ‘the governing authorities that are instituted by God?’”³³

Later that same month Luther issued another tract, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. Luther charged the peasants with being guilty of violating their oaths to be obedient to their masters, provoking a rebellion by robbing and murder, and cloaking their actions with the freedom of the gospel. He urged the rulers to “press on and take action in this matter with a good heart,” charging that it was “plain that these peasants have deserved death many times over.” He concluded:

Dear lords. . . , let whoever can stab, smite, slay. If you die doing it, good for you! A more blessed death can never be yours, for you die while obeying the divine word and commandment in Romans 13, and on loving service to your neighbor, whom are rescuing from the bonds of hell and the devil.³⁴

Scott Hendrix has charged critics with condemning Luther “because he defended the social order and did not believe that God would use murderous insurrection to further the cause of the gospel.” But Luther “did not advocate killing his adversaries or the people he judged to be not earnest Christians.”³⁵

³² McCain, “Receiving the Gifts of God in His Two Kingdoms,” 32.

³³ *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to The Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, AE 46:21-15.

³⁴ *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, AE 46:49-55.

³⁵ Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 159. Forster, *The Contested Public Square*, 125, note 4, also commented on the negative reaction Luther has received for his role in the Peasants’ War: “Many historians scratch their heads in wonder that Luther condemned the radicals so harshly, given that the radicals claimed to follow Luther’s ideas. . . . Why did Luther not embrace them as

The later Luther

McCain and others see a “marked change” from *Temporal Authority* to Luther’s later comments on government. Luther now clearly explains that both kingdoms are God’s kingdoms. In an Advent sermon in 1532, Luther for the first time referred to God’s “left-hand” kingdom.³⁶ “Moses’s kingdom is also our Lord God’s kingdom,” and “the worldly government is also God’s kingdom. He demands that it remain and we be obedient. But it is the kingdom of the left hand. Here he delegates authority to father, mother, Caesar, ruler, hangman.” But over his “rightful” kingdom, God “himself rules, and he does not delegate to father, mother, government, jailer, but himself preaches to the poor.” The two kingdoms are thus to be distinguished: Christ’s kingdom “is a spiritual kingdom and yet exists in the midst of [the] kingdom of this world,” while “Caesar’s kingdom is a worldly kingdom which directs and sets things in order, governs with law, conducts war, rules with the sword, and so on.” Christ “did not come to earth in order to seize power from Caesar Augustus and teach him how to rule. But he uses the worldly government . . . until he has fulfilled the office for which he has been sent.”³⁷

potential allies? . . . Was he trying to flatter the German rulers and gain their favor? Was he terrified of the radical forces his ideas had unleashed and desperate to be reassured that order could be maintained? Was he simply a volatile and fickle man. . . ? Did his unhappy relationship with his father play some role? The one explanation that rarely seems to be considered is that Luther, like every other major Christian thinker before or since, really did think that rebellion against a lawful government was an abominable sin that deserved to be unequivocally condemned, and that lawful governments had not just a right but a duty to suppress rebellion by force. There is nothing surprising about a Christian writer condemning violent rebels and calling for their forcible suppression; what would have called for an explanation would be Luther not condemning them.”³⁶ McCain, “Receiving the Gifts of God in His Two Kingdoms,” 33, 39. Not all Luther scholars agree, however, that his understanding of the two kingdoms changed so markedly during his lifetime. For example, Helmar Junghans, “The Center of the Theology of Martin Luther,” in *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, eds. Gerald S. Krispin and Jon D. Vieker (Chelsea, Mich.: Bookcrafters, 1990), 180, wrote that Luther “often took up questions of the day and dealt with them. The manner in which the questions were formulated changed in the course of his life. Accordingly, he wrote repeatedly about the same subject, but not always with the same goal nor always with the same tone. Emphases were shifted. Taken out of context, some of his remarks appear to be contradictory and to signal great changes. Likewise Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms*, 15: “The basic two-kingdoms idea was already present in Luther’s earliest writing. . . . Our working principle in this regard is that established by several scholars before us in this matter; namely, that as time went on, Luther better explicated and refined ideas that were already present in his earliest writing. . . . As he faced various challenges, Luther refined his ideas of the two kingdoms. . . . From his explanation of the Lord’s Prayer to the subject of freedom of the will, on the creation in the Old Testament as on the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, the two kingdoms represented a basic assumption of the Reformer from which he understood and explained his subject.”

³⁷ Luther, “Sermon on the Third Sunday in Advent on Matthew 11 (December 15, 1532),” in SL 12, col. 1397; StL 13/2 1443; English translation in *Martin Luther’s Sermons: The House Postils*, ed. Eugene Klug, (Grand Rapids: Baker), 1:62-63, 102.

Heinrich Bornkamm concludes that we can see clearly “the way in which the historical situation had changed for Luther as compared to Augustine.” While Augustine could not visualize “a state composed of Christians who are both rulers and citizens,” circumstances in the centuries between Augustine and Luther and events in Luther’s own lifetime “taught Luther the problems connected with having a Christian state that the church has taken into its service” and he “grappled with them by applying his flexible distinctions of the two kingdoms and two governments, thus clearing [up] many aspects of the matter.”³⁸

In his Commentary on Psalm 101, Luther wrote: “Thank God it is now manifest enough to all the world how the two areas of authority need to be distinguished.” The spiritual government “should direct the people vertically toward God” so that they may be saved, “just [as] the worldly government should direct the people horizontally toward one another, seeing to it that the body, property, honor, wife, child, house, home, and all manner of goods remain in peace and security and are blessed on earth.”³⁹

In his lectures on Genesis, Luther made several comments on the two kingdoms. Regarding the establishment of the death penalty in Genesis 9. He said: “Here we have the source from which stem all civil law and the law of nations. If God grants to man power over life and death, surely He also grants power over what is less, such as property, the home, wife, children, servants, and fields. All these God wants to be subject to the power of certain human beings, in order that they may punish the guilty.”⁴⁰ On Jacob’s blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh, Luther observed: “The Law must not be cast aside because of the promise of grace; but it must be taught in order that discipline and the doctrine of good works be retained.” Here “we need government and parents, who uphold discipline by means of rewards and punishments and who keep the Law and govern and direct their conduct in a godly and prudent manner.”⁴¹

In Luther’s maturing thought, “each realm is part of God’s plan for ordering creation. The spiritual realm is eternal and everlasting; it is the realm of revelation and faith,” existing for the purpose of offering grace “to all through the preaching of the Word of God and celebrating the sacraments.”⁴² Government leader, king, or father “should devote himself to that calling and leave the proclamation of the Word and the disposition of souls to God and the church.” Similarly, “the church ought to leave the maintenance of public order to the state and the confutation of heresy to the Word.” While such conclusions may seem obvious to us today, Luther’s understanding was “revolutionary for his time.”⁴³

Yet we must also acknowledge that Luther “never systematically separated church and state.” This is evident in that he repeatedly admonished political authorities, judges, educators and soldiers “in the name of God to live up to their calling.” Luther “could not

³⁸ Bornkamm, *Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms*, 24.

³⁹ Luther, Commentary on Psalm 101 (1534), AE 13:193-96.

⁴⁰ Luther, Comments on Genesis 9:6, AE 2:139.

⁴¹ Luther, Comments on Genesis 48:16-17; AE 8:170.

⁴² Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, Vol. 1, 377.

⁴³ Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance*, 32-33.

begin to imagine a participatory form of government." A democracy "as a political alternative simply remained inconceivable to Luther."⁴⁴

Confessing the two kingdoms

Augsburg Confession XVI says that "lawful civil ordinances are good works of God" and that "it is right for Christians to bear civil office, to sit as judges, to judge matters by the Imperial and other existing laws, to award just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to make oath when required by the magistrates, to marry a wife, to be given in marriage."⁴⁵

Augsburg Confession XXVIII teaches that "the power of the Keys, or the power of the bishops, according to the Gospel, is a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the Sacraments." Civil government "deals with other things than does the Gospel. The civil rulers defend not minds, but bodies and bodily things against manifest injuries, and restrain men with the sword and bodily punishments in order to preserve civil justice and peace." These two powers are therefore not to be confused or confounded. The church should

not break into the office of another; let it not transfer to the kingdoms of this world; let it not abrogate the laws of civil rulers; let it not abolish lawful obedience; let it not interfere with judgments concerning civil ordinances or contracts; let it not prescribe laws to civil rulers concerning the form of the Commonwealth."⁴⁶

The church as church has no legitimate civil authority. "The long history of ecclesiastical misuses of authority by Roman pontiffs and bishops in the civil realm necessitated the Lutheran reformers to formulate this issue in an unambiguous manner."⁴⁷

The *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* XVIII concedes that the human will can "to a certain extent render civil righteousness or the righteousness of works and things which reason comprehends by itself."⁴⁸ But this civil righteousness is sadly lacking and can do nothing to improve our standing before God or reconcile us to him.⁴⁹ The reader of the *Apology* "cannot miss Philipp Melancthon's vigorous tenor in condemning, article by article, the erroneous teachings of the past concerning justification and ecclesiastical authority. It was the sheer misuse of ecclesiastical authority that had caused all the abominations in God's temple and in society—misuses that the Lutheran Reformation was vigorously opposing, condemning, and correcting." The Reformation not only restored the

⁴⁴ Nesson, "Liberation Theology's Critique of Luther's Two Kingdoms," 259-60, 262-63.

⁴⁵ *Augsburg Confession*, XVI, "Of Civil Affairs"; *Triglot*, 51.

⁴⁶ *Augsburg Confession*, XXVIII, 10-19, "Of Ecclesiastical Power"; *Triglot*, 83-85.

⁴⁷ Anssi Simojoki, "Potestas in Ecclesia, Potestas Episcoporum: Confessio Augustana XXVIII and the Life of the Church," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 69 (April 2005): 120.

⁴⁸ *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, XVIII, 70, "Of Free Will"; *Triglot*, 335.

⁴⁹ Johnston, "We Must Obey God Rather Than Men," 19.

chief article of justification by faith alone; “it likewise reinstated to worldly authorities and normal civil life their God-given glory.”⁵⁰

Two decades later, with Luther dead, the Turks momentarily at bay, the Smalcald League defeated at Muehlburg, and the Augsburg Interim failed, Charles V attempted to reinstitute Catholic ceremonies. Wittenberg theologians were asked to help implement a compromise. The most vocal opponent to the interims was Matthias Flacius Illyricus, who in 1549 at Magdeburg objected to the compromise of his Wittenberg colleagues and worked against the Adiaphorists.⁵¹ The resulting Magdeburg Confession said: “When the higher magistrate persecutes his subjects’ rights by force, whether natural or divine rights, or the true religion and worship of God, then the inferior magistrate ought to resist according to the command of God.”⁵² In taking this stand, Flacius also stood “almost alone in preserving Luther’s scriptural understanding of the relationship of church and state.” By contrast, Melancthon “bears more blame than any other theologian for the capitulation of Lutheranism to a state church mentality, which was not broken until the 19th century.”⁵³

Luther in modern Germany

Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms “had not been greatly politicized,” although “the concept had been absorbed into the state-church constitutions of the Germanic territorial and dynastic states.”⁵⁴ In 1867, Christian Eduard Luthardt, in *Die Ethik in ihren Grundzuegen*, wrote that the gospel “has absolutely nothing to do with outward existence but only with eternal life, not with external orders and institutions which could come into conflict with the secular orders but only with the heart the heart and its relationship to God.” It is “not the vocation of Jesus Christ or of the Gospel to change the orders of secular life and establish them anew.” Christ, Luthardt charged, “has nothing to do with this sphere but allows it to go its own way.” Luthardt thus introduced a dualism in regard to God’s governance, essentially restricting Christianity to a personal, inner sphere and denying the church any power to comment on political issues.⁵⁵ A half century later, Karl Barth accused Lutheranism of having to some degree “paved the way from German paganism, allotting it a sacral sphere by its separation of creation and the Law from the Gospel.” Thus “the German pagan can use the Lutheran doctrine of the authority of the state as a Christian justification of National Socialism.”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Simojoki, “*Confessio Augustana XXVIII and the Life of the Church*,” 122.

⁵¹ Wade Johnston, “We Must Obey God Rather Than Men: The Lutheran Legacy of Resistance,” *Logia* 25 (Holy Trinity 2016): 20-21.

⁵² *Confessio*, AIV, *Bekennntnis*, Ai, v; cited by Johnston, “We Must Obey God Rather Than Men,” 23.

⁵³ John F. Brug, review of *Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther’s Reform* by Oliver K. Olson, in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 100 (Winter 2003): 64.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms*, 20.

⁵⁵ Pierard, “The Lutheran Two-Kingdoms Doctrine and Subsistence to the State in Modern Germany,” 195-96.

⁵⁶ *Eine Schweitzer Stimme, 1938-1945* (Zollikon-Zurich, 1945) 113; cited by Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Volume 1*, 369. Simojoki, “*Confessio Augustana XXVIII and the Life of the Church*,” 120-21, offered this blistering critique:

In 1939 Nazi Minister of Church Affairs, Hanns Kerrl announced that “the Protestant Church has learned from Martin Luther to differentiate sharply between the sphere of reason and faith, of politics and religion, of the state and the church.”⁵⁷ Shortly after World War II, Anders Nygren charged that “no other aspect of Luther’s theology has been so fiercely attacked as this doctrine. Where Luther drew a clear line between spiritual and temporal authority, and expressly emphasized that under no circumstances should these two realms be confused,” his teaching had been interpreted “as if he had thereby opened the door to the secularization of society and given a completely free hand to the State.”⁵⁸

The most detestable accusation against Luther and his teaching was that of William L. Shirer, in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*:

The influence of this towering figure extended down the generations in Germany, especially among the Protestants. Among other results was the ease with which German Protestantism became the instrument of royal and princely absolutism. . . . In no country with the exception of Czarist Russia did the clergy become by tradition so completely servile to the political authority of the State. . . . During the Reichstag elections one could not help but notice that the Protestant clergy . . . quite openly supported the Nationalist and even the Nazi enemies of the Republic. . . . Most of the pastors welcomed the advent of Adolf Hitler to the chancellorship in 1933.⁵⁹

These criticisms ignore that Luther “provided his followers with precise definitions of the circumstances under which tyrants may be removed by force of arms.”⁶⁰ Luther “did

There is a Barthian legacy of which we should rid ourselves and all theological discussion. Barth, under the influence of Ernst Troeltsch, introduced a completely misleading term into theology, *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*, which has dominated theological and political discussion concerning Lutheranism and Lutheran social ethics. This misleading term revolves around his discussion of the two kingdoms in Lutheran theology. According to Barth and his successors, the doctrine of the two kingdoms, namely the confession that distinguishes between the worldly and the spiritual kingdom, was the main reason that Lutherans failed to react against the Nazi regime in Germany from 1933 to 1945. This term, *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*, which Barth introduced at a fairly early stage in 1922, grossly missed the point, however. The Lutheran Confessions nowhere speak about the kingdoms (*Reiche*) in this connection. Rather the term employed in respective connections is also *power* (*potestas, Gewalt*).”

⁵⁷ Quoted by Hans Tiefel, “Use and Misuse of Luther During the German Church Struggle,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (November 1973): 402.

⁵⁸ Nygren, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” 301.

⁵⁹ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1962), 236. Other examples of these charges against Luther include William Montgomery McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler: The History of Fascist-Nazi Political Philosophy* (London: George G. Harrap and Co., 1941); Peter F. Wiener, *Martin Luther: Hitler’s Spiritual Ancestor* (Cranford, N.J.: American Atheist Press, 1999); Hans Tiefel, “The German Lutheran Church and the Rise of National Socialism,” *Church History* 41 (September 1972): 326-36.

⁶⁰ Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Fabricated Luther: The Rise and Fall of the Shirer Myth* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 23-24.

have a doctrine of resistance,” which flowed from fundamental tenets of his teaching. “He taught no unconditional obedience to political authority. From early on, the seeds for his doctrine of resistance were evident.”⁶¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer “saw himself as a faithful follower of Luther” in his refusal to submit to Hitler. “Any reduction of Luther’s doctrine of the ‘Two Kingdoms’ to a notion that there are two spheres, ‘the one divine, holy, supernatural, and Christian, and the other worldly, profane, natural, and unchristian,’ Bonhoeffer held to be a vulgarization.”⁶² Herman Sasse wrote during the 1930s and 1940s “to oppose the attempted suppression of confessional Lutheranism by false unions styled after the Prussian Union of the 19th century, by efforts of the Nazis to create a ‘united’ German church, and by Karl Barth’s support for a united Evangelical church to oppose Nazi encroachment against the church.” Sasse’s heroic stand “provided the most important voice in the battle to revive confessional Lutheranism in the territorial churches in Germany.”⁶³

The land churches of Bavaria, Hanover, and Wuerttemberg did not fall to the Nazis. Within the confessing church movement, *Brueder-Raete* were established to oppose Nazi influence in the churches. Theologians such as Werner Elert and Paul Althaus “offered a pretense of support to the Nazis largely with the intent of mitigating further evil.” Confessional Lutherans refused to accept the Barmen declaration because it “confused law and gospel” and “undermined the two-governances.” Lutheran opposition “was anything but passive with respect to Hitler. Courageous leaders prevented the Nazis from absorbing Lutheran churches into the Reich Church.”⁶⁴

Norwegian Lutherans “believed that Christianity and Nazism were incompatible because racism and anti-Semitism defied the Christian doctrine” of the worth of all human beings. In addition, the Norwegian church “had a tradition of activism that resisted state servility and provided an important basis for opposition.” Bishop Eivind Berggrav led the

⁶¹ Johnston, “We Must Obey God Rather Than Men,” 19.

⁶² Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Bonhoeffer and the Sovereign State,” *First Things* 65 (August/September 1996): 27; see also John F. Brug, review of *Till the Night Be Past: The Life and Times of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, by Theodore J. Kleinhaus; in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 100 (Winter 2003): 67-68; Klemens von Klemperer, “Beyond Luther? Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Resistance against National Socialism,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (Spring 1997): 184-98; von Klemperer, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Confession and Resistance,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 53 (January 1, 1999): 47-59.

⁶³ John F. Brug, review of *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters, vol. 1 (1927-1939)*, by Hermann Sasse, trans. Matthew Harrison; in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 100 (Summer 2003): 237; see also Brug, review of *Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times?*, ed. John R. Stephenson and Thomas M. Winger; in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 96 (Summer 1999): 233-34; John R. Wilch, “Herrmann Sasse and Third Reich Threats to the Church,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 73 (Winter 2000): 212-45.

⁶⁴ Mark Mattes, review of *Lutherans Against Hitler: The Untold Story*, by Lowell C. Green; in *Logia* 17 (Epiphany 2008): 76-77. Mattes defends the actions of some German Lutheran pastors: “Not having to deal with the tyranny that these theologians faced on an hourly basis, we are self-righteous when we criticize such men in light of the agonizing decisions and inescapable compromises which anyone under these circumstances would have to make.”

Norwegian church in opposing the Nazi regime. At the heart of this opposition was the conviction Christians were accountable to God and their conscience, and “Christian duty to God and conscience could also include a duty to disobey the state that was demonic and tyrannical.”⁶⁵

Calvin comes to America

John Calvin devoted the final chapter of his *Institutes* to civil authority. He believed that the duty of magistrates extended “to both tables of the law.” No governmental authority may be successfully established without piety being its first concern. He considered it “folly” to think that God has appointed earthly rulers only to decide earthly matters while omitting “what was of far greater moment, his own pure worship as prescribed by his law” (*Institutes* 4.2.9). The purpose of government was to assure “that a public form of religion may exist among Christians, and humanity among men” (*Institutes* 4.20.3). Since God gave rulers the sword, rulers then must have the right to enforce obedience to God’s authority (*Institutes* 4.20.9). Government enforcement of religious laws had always been an integral part of natural-law thought. All written laws, Calvin wrote, arise from “the equity on which the enactment [of the law] is found and rests.” By nature, all human beings know this “equity,” which can also be called the moral law of God or the natural law: “As it is evident that the law of God which we call moral, is nothing other than the testimony of natural law, and of that conscience which God has engraved on the minds of men, the whole of this equity of which we now speak is prescribed in it” (*Institutes*, 4.20.16; see also *Institutes* 4.20.14).⁶⁶

But Calvin went farther than merely repeating what previous natural law thinkers had said before him. He insured that natural law would be incorporated into Protestant tradition by making a scriptural case for it, even as he voiced a clear distinction between the proper roles of church and state. The two were to work together: God exercises spiritual control directly through the Bible, but delegates the task of civil government to the state rather than exercising it directly (*Institutes* 4.20.1). Because both kinds of government come from God, they should cooperate and support each other’s authority.⁶⁷ Thus Calvin’s theory of political authority “bears much more resemblance to the *corpus christianum* of [Pope] Leo than it does to Luther.”⁶⁸

Church historians estimate that more than 80 percent of American Christians in the colonial period, including Anglicans, Congregationalists, Quakers, and growing numbers of Methodists and Baptists, were significantly influenced by Calvinistic teachings. Calvinists viewed the Bible “more as an instruction manual for worship, church government, and conduct than Lutherans did.” Whereas Lutherans hear in the Scriptures “the gracious voice

⁶⁵ Arne Hassing, *Church Resistance to Nazism in Norway, 1940-1945*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

⁶⁶ Forster, *The Contested Public Square*, 131-33.

⁶⁷ Forster, *The Contested Public Square*, 133-34.

⁶⁸ Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance*, 110, note 50.

of Christ,” Calvinists hear “the stern voice of the God of sovereignty.” This has led not only to differences in theology but also to differences in worldview.⁶⁹

New England Puritans were concerned that “every aspect of life should acknowledge God’s sovereignty.” Only through the union of church and state, Puritans believed, “could humans produce a Christian society that conformed to scriptural teaching.”⁷⁰ They were convinced that New England was the New Israel which brought together “the personal and the historical, the private and the public, the individual and the communal, in such a way as to demonstrate that all of these were bent toward one and the same end: the fulfillment of God’s errand in the New World.”⁷¹ Though separate entities, church and state were inextricably intertwined—by common understanding, “like Hippocrates twins, they were born together, grow up together, weep together, sicken and die together.”⁷²

Puritans were convinced by their belief in justification by faith that every Christian can communicate with God directly and be his own priest. “Following Martin Luther’s tenets,” they formed their own churches and saw salvation as “a personal spiritual pursuit.”⁷³ Their separatist impulse “sprang from the resurgence of the pietistic doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and of the gathered, voluntaristic church.”⁷⁴ Alister McGrath maintained that Luther’s doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers led to the Puritan belief that “every Christian [had] the right to interpret the Bible and to raise concerns about any aspect of the church’s teaching or practice” that appeared to contradict the Bible.⁷⁵

Luther and America’s founding fathers

Roger Williams has been called “an apostle of religious freedom to the religiously devout,” who expressed his views “in religious syllables to people who understood these symbols.” His worldview was “profoundly religious” and “specifically Christian.”⁷⁶ Luther’s writings were popular at Cambridge in the years Williams was at the university. In his *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, Williams quoted directly from Luther’s *On Temporal Authority*, and in another publication, *Queries*, Williams asked “Where is, or hath that

⁶⁹ F.E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1954), 131, note 12.

⁷⁰ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10, 13.

⁷¹ Amy Schrager Lang, *Prophetic Women: Anne Hutchinson and the Problem of Dissent in the Literature of New England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 47.

⁷² Timothy L. Hall, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 62-63; Hall cites Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent, of Persecution*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 7 vols., (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 4:333.

⁷³ Ning Kang, “Puritanism and Its Impact upon American Values,” *Review of European Studies* 1 (December 2009): 149.

⁷⁴ William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 232.

⁷⁵ Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Reformation—A History From the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 2, 52-53, 199-200.

⁷⁶ Hall, *Separating Church and State*, 147, 149.

precious man been found, who hath outshined Luther?" Williams also wrote that "the authority of the Civill Magistrate extended no further than over bodies and goods of the Subjects." Other purposes of the state in William's writing, particularly in preserving the peace, sound identical to the writings of Luther in *On Temporal Authority*.⁷⁷

The main sources for Williams' political theory, however, came from "Teutonic, Greek, and Roman paganism." His main view on natural rights "was developed by the Greeks, modified by the Romans, and later modified again by the thinkers to the time of the Renaissance." Williams accepted "the five ideas of the social contract doctrine"—man's conscious institution of government, civil equality, natural rights, government by the consent of the governed, and the right of rebellion—"which had its final form by the time of Augustine." Christianity as such "made no contribution to his political theory, other than confirming that the church and the civil estate are in essence distinct in their origin, nature, and purpose." While the thoughts of Williams and Luther on the nature of the state were similar, Williams never clearly distinguished between state and church, and he often used them interchangeably. Williams compared men to "fishes in the sea": unless they formed a civil state they would devour each other.⁷⁸

Thomas Jefferson "reduced religious experience to little more than a matter of morality." Although he labeled himself a Christian, his Christianity was very different from that of Calvin or Athanasius, whom he dismissed as "impious dogmatists."⁷⁹ Jefferson long believed that "pure Christianity" had been fundamentally corrupted by St. Paul, the early church, and a host of Protestant Reformers, including Luther.⁸⁰ He famously declared that "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods, or no gods. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."⁸¹

James Madison in an 1821 letter praised "the excellence of a system" of church and state which, "by a due distinction, to which the genius and courage of Luther led the way, between what is due Caesar and what is due God, best promotes the discharge of both obligations." The experience of the United States offered "a happy disproof of the error so long rooted in the unenlightened minds" of both Christians and non-Christians "that without a legal incorporation of religious and civil polity, neither could be supported. A

⁷⁷ Philip W. Bergstresser, "The Direct Influence of Martin Luther on the Political Thought of Roger Williams," (B.Div. thesis, Gettysburg Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, Pa., 1944), 87-89; Bergstresser cited *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, Publication of the Narragansett Club, (Providence: The Narragansett Club, 1867), vol. III: 36-38, 50-51, 249; *The Queries* (Providence: The Narragansett Club, 1867), vol. II:23; and *Master Cotton's Letter Answered* (Publication of the Narragansett Club, (Providence: The Narragansett Club, 1867), vol. II: n.p.

⁷⁸ Bergstresser, "The Direct Influence of Martin Luther on the Political Thought of Roger Williams," 8, 12-13.

⁷⁹ Hall, *Separating Church and State*, 130-131.

⁸⁰ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 73.

⁸¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, N.C.: 1955), 159-60; cited by Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 194.

mutual independence is found most friendly to practical Religion, to social harmony, and to political prosperity.”⁸²

It is difficult to believe that the founders in general and Jefferson in particular would have agreed with Luther on the source of governmental authority, since in the Declaration of Independence Jefferson wrote that “governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁸³

Calvinist activism

John Schaller wrote in 1915 that although many people easily recognize the confusion of church and state in Roman Catholicism, “right alongside it stands Calvinism as a tendency, which knows as little as Romanism about the clear distinction between church and state, but launches itself toward supremacy among the American people just as energetically.” Calvinism’s entire presentation of the kingdom of God on earth is only too willing to coerce people toward a particular religious or moral point of view. It looks for “a visible kingdom of Jesus Christ” on earth, since Jesus “has bequeathed to it many rules and laws, whose fulfillment makes the outward organization of the church necessary,” but in “a purely external way. Whoever gives obedience to the laws supposedly left behind by Christ belongs to the kingdom of God, whether or not he belongs to the invisible church.” The church’s mission is thus “not first and foremost to bring people to repentance and faith in Christ but in the task of promoting the morality and religiosity of outward observance over the earth.”⁸⁴

A decade later August Pieper wrote that in the Zwinglian and Calvinist view, “not only should the church directly rule and unite the hearts through the gospel, but the state as an institution must be made Christian.” Using the force of the state, the church should seek to enact laws “about keeping Sunday holy, church attendance, eating, drinking (Prohibition!), smoking, clothing, etc. It must keep the godless in line.” With or without a biblical text, the “good” sectarian pastor “preaches very little gospel, but more morals.” His audience “wants to hear about the political and social questions of the day, the improvement of the state and country organizations, and a hundred other things.” Faith is no longer the essence of Christianity; instead, love is.⁸⁵

⁸² James Madison to F.L. Schaeffer, December 3, 1821, *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison, in Four Volumes, Published by Order of Congress*, Vol. III (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1865), 242-43.

⁸³ *Declaration of Independence*; http://www.constitution.org/us_doi.pdf.

⁸⁴ John Schaller, “The Calvinist Streak in the American People,” (1915-1916 Seminary catalog, trans. John Weaver-Hudson, October 25, 2001; Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file), 1-3.

⁸⁵ August Pieper, “Worin bestand der ‘andere’ Geist’ den Luther den Zwinglianern vorwarf?” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 28 (January 1925): 1-25; trans. Souksamay K. Phetsanghane “What Makes Up the ‘Different Spirit’ of Which Luther Accused the Zwinglians?” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 107 (Summer 2010): 181.

Winfred Schaller wrote that of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, “John Calvin is the most influential of the three.” Despite repeated controversies, divisions, and further separations within and away from what might be called “strict Calvinism,” his main principles “are accepted by all Protestant churches, and in 1964 by most Lutheran Churches.” For Calvin “the establishment of the visible church is God’s ordinance, and the visible church is the means through which God speaks to the world.” Although externally Calvin “banned everything that looked or smelled Romish, he actually shares with Rome its legalism, its externalizing of the church, and its confusion of Church and State.”⁸⁶

Lutheran quietism?

It is undoubtedly true that “Reformed Protestantism and Roman Catholicism will [continue to] provide the main themes for religious involvement in American public life.” Mark Noll has noted that “the dominant pattern of political involvement in America has always been one of direct, aggressive action modeled on Reformed theories of life in the world,” and Americans “have moved in a straight line from personal belief to social reform, from private experience to political activity.”⁸⁷ What this has meant, according to Robert Benne, is that the political right has characteristically produced what they believe to be “direct biblical blueprints for what God wants in the world,” while the political left has concerned itself more with “reading God’s agenda in the world.” Both right and left have been “characterized by great confidence in discerning the will of God for public, institutional life” and both right and left “enthusiastically view their activities as cooperating with God in building his kingdom on earth.”⁸⁸

By contrast, Lutheranism “has a particular way of relating the church to the public order” but it “does not lead in a specific ideological direction, if that is taken to mean a rather detailed blueprint for public theology.” Instead, this “paradoxical vision” of Lutheranism provides a *framework* for public theology. Of greatest concern is that the church remain focused on its primary mission of proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments. “Undue entanglement in politics,” Benne warned, “can be the ruination of the church.”⁸⁹

Missouri and Wisconsin Synod Lutherans have historically exhibited immigrant conservatism regarding church and state. Frederick Luebke concluded that early Missourians believed they could preserve their religious identity only by maintaining their social conservatism and by distancing themselves from the surrounding culture.⁹⁰ August

⁸⁶ Winfred Schaller, “Who are the Followers of John Calvin?” *The Lutheran Spokesman* 7 (June 1964): 2-3.

⁸⁷ Mark Noll, “The Lutheran Difference,” *First Things* 20 (February 1992): 31-40.

⁸⁸ Robert Benne, “The Paradoxical Vision: A Lutheran Nudge for Public Theology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (Spring 1995): 213. Benne’s essay is a revision of the elements in his book, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

⁸⁹ Benne, “The Paradoxical Vision,” 214.

⁹⁰ Frederick C. Luebke, “The Immigrant Condition as a Factor Contributing to the Conservatism of the Lutheran Church,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 38 (April 1965): 27.

Graebner, briefly a Wisconsin Synod professor in Watertown, compared the Christian in the world to a passenger on a train car unwillingly thrust into an unexpected race with another car traveling a parallel track. Though unavoidably involved, the passenger is not responsible for the outcome of the race or for the catastrophe that may ensue. In the same way, a Christian is present but not accountable for injustices that occur in the world.⁹¹

It was perhaps this concern for maintaining its identity that led Wisconsin Synod writers in the early 20th century to discuss “separation of church and state” more readily than the “two kingdoms.”⁹² Writers in the 1940s warned against accepting any government aid for parochial schools as a “very cunning” attempt to bring about a union of church and state, fearful of “effacing entirely the thin line of demarcation between the sphere of the state and that of the church.”⁹³ Such laws were not only seen as the government’s effort “to impose religious practices upon the people” but also as efforts by some to “give their peculiar religious beliefs and practices the force of law or use the powers and funds of the civil government for the benefit of their sect.” Since “we believe in complete separation of Church and State,” we should “be satisfied with nothing less than complete separation.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ A[ugust] L. Graebner, “In der Welt, nicht von der Welt,” *Der Lutheraner* 50 (August 14, 1894): 135; cited by Alan Graebner, *Uncertain Saints: The Laity in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1900–1970* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 111.

⁹² An example germane to the topic comes from an editorial in 1915 regarding the proposed display of a painting of Luther in the new Wisconsin state capitol (“Proposed Luther Painting for the State Capitol,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 2 [April 7, 1915]: 52-53). Editorialist Milwaukee Pastor John Jenny wrote:

The placing of a memorial painting of the Great Reformer in a State Capitol, to our mind, would involve a coalition between State and Church. It would be asking the State to recognize the work of God done through Luther for the Church, while the State does not recognize God and His work. On the other hand it would be doing homage to Luther as a great man and worshiping the hero of the Reformation, which is contrary to Christian principles, for according to them all things, even a public portraiture of Luther, must serve to the glory of God. . . .

Aside from this mingling of State and Church, the placing of Luther’s painting in the State Capitol would be objectionable to a large body of law abiding citizens. What would that face of Luther speak to all those citizens who happen to be members of the Roman Catholic Church? That face would be a constant reminder of the fact which to them is disagreeable in the extreme that through Luther’s work the temporal power of the pope has been overthrown; it would be a standing protest against all the Encyclicals of the pope, particularly those in which he has condemned our most precious liberties, freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, freedom of Church and State. Why should our Catholic citizens constantly be reminded of these things through the State, inasmuch as it is not within the sphere of the State to teach her citizens the blessings of the Reformation? . . .

In view of the American principle of the complete separation of Church and State let us carefully guard against whatever may be construed as inconsistent with that principle.

⁹³ Paul Gieschen, “The Danger of Seeking Government Concessions,” *Lutheran School Bulletin* 16 (December 1945): 2-3.

⁹⁴ E.E. Kowalke, “The Separation of Church and State,” *Lutheran School Bulletin* 17 (December 1946): 4-6. At almost the same time, an article entitled “Church and State,” in *The Abiding Word*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1947), 607, concluded its presentation: “These, then, are the principles

However, the Wisconsin Synod's 1967 convention granted the possibility of accepting governmental aid for church schools by viewing church and state, not as two completely separate realms but as entities which in some areas had overlapping areas of concern. Accepting and using government aid in parochial schools "may in itself not be unscriptural," although the church must consider the effect of such aid on its schools, such as compromising the school's Christian identity, creating dependency on government aid, undermining Christian stewardship, or bringing with it "undesirable government control."⁹⁵ The Wisconsin Synod has continued to move away from its past "complete separation" stance in favor of the "overlapping interests" approach. "Since there are some interests in life in which both the state and the church have a valid interest, such as marriage, sexual morality, education, and so on, their interests and activities may sometimes overlap." It would therefore perhaps "be clearer if we would speak of 'avoiding a mixture or confusion of church and state,' rather than of a 'separation of church and state.'" We now recognize that it is impossible "to demand a total separation of all activities of church and state."⁹⁶

No other institution has the calling to proclaim the gospel in word and sacrament, and no other institution will carry on that responsibility if the church fails at that task. "So churches must take with utmost seriousness the terrible simplicity of their task. Of course they must be engaged in deeds of charity and must be concerned with justice," and "must witness in a public sphere." But the church "is not primarily a political actor, a social transformer or an aggressive interest group. If it acts primarily as one of these, it is identified and treated as one more contentious worldly group."⁹⁷

Noll sees Lutheran teaching and practice as a healthy counterbalance to Evangelical overreach. "Political activity by American Christian believers, especially Protestant evangelicals, has often been lacking exactly in those areas where Lutheran theology is strong," Noll has written. Eager to mount crusades over single issues such as slavery, temperance, or abortion, Evangelicals "have done less well at thinking about Christian political responsibility from the bottom up and acting with consistent Christian integrity as a whole." Noll notes the irony that Evangelicals expressed panic and outrage over the possibility of a Catholic becoming president in 1960 and Bill Clinton being re-elected in 1996, yet they have eagerly endorsed leaders "who professed something like evangelical faith but who have performed in office with anything but a consistently Christian political

which God has laid down in His Word for the relation between Church and State. Wherever men have departed from them, the results have been evil. Where God does not join both parts in a union, it is evil. If God had wanted such a union between Church and State in the New Testament, it would have been a blessing; but He Himself has changed the old order and established the principle of separation."

⁹⁵ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1967*, 159-60.

⁹⁶ John F. Brug, "The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms: General Principles of Christian Citizenship," *Our Great Heritage*, Vol. 2, Lyle W. Lange, gen. ed., (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), 406-407.

⁹⁷ Benne, "The Paradoxical Vision," 217.

ethic.” Noll appreciates the Lutheran approach to the two kingdoms because, instead of disparaging political and governmental functions, two kingdom theology affirms that “God is the ruler over all, including the political sphere” and that “political tasks are God-ordained.” Noll commends Lutheran awareness that cultural influence and political dominance are never of primary importance: “The more fundamental field is the human heart where for every person, believer and unbeliever alike, the battle between God and self, light and dark, righteousness and corruption, is fought every day and where there will be no absolute, complete, or perfect triumph until the end of time.”⁹⁸

Perhaps Prof. Fredrich’s warnings about the difficulties awaiting us in 2017 will never materialize. However, most of us here would grant that we are living in disturbing, even dangerous times, and people’s expectations for their government and their churches play a prominent role.

It may be wise to go back to an earlier, surely more challenging time. Only weeks after shots were fired on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, in April 1861, St. Louis pastor Theodore Brohm submitted advice for Lutheran Christians facing what proved to be troubling, tragic circumstances. His advice indicates that Luther’s influence on church and state had taken root far beyond his place and time. Brohm’s advice was published in *Der Lutheraner* in May 1861. In part it reads:

1. As at all times, it is now chiefly the difference between spiritual and worldly governance; between the things that are of a spiritual nature belonging to the kingdom of heaven, and those that are of a worldly nature belonging in the civic realm, to be kept vigorously and certainly to take care that the one is not blended with the other. . . .
2. As much as a difference of opinion about matters of politics is to be deplored. . . , we may neither expect nor require utter unity of Christians in this part, simply because [such unity] is not promised us. . . . To demand complete unity in the things which God has subjected to the judgment of human reason without revealing His will in Holy Scripture, would be presumptuousness and would lead to intolerable tyranny. . . .
4. So that in consequence of these differences the unity of the spirit and faith will not be violated, brotherly love, the queen of our mutual conduct, must exist toward one another. But love does not judge others because of a different opinion, does not despise them, does not undertake to push its personal conviction upon others with impropriety, much less does it want to exert control over him, or have everything arranged according to its mind. . . . One of the holy purposes of God, why he has let us live to see this present time, is without a doubt also this, that we learn to practice . . . brotherly love to a greater extent and with more self-denial as was possible in calm times. . . .
5. It must not be prohibited among Christians to express their political views in social circles, also to defend them with every reason, to counter the opponent and to

⁹⁸ Mark A. Noll, “What Lutherans Have to Offer Public Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 22 (Summer 2008): 125-26, 129-30, 133.

attempt to refute him; however, all of this must happen among Christians with unpretentiousness, with meekness, with indulgent consideration, not with weapons of ridicule and scorn, whereby no persuasion but only bitterness will be generated. Just by such behavior controlled by Christian love, Christians must distinguish themselves from the children of the world. . . .

10. By all the interest that a Christian, as citizen, takes and owes to take in the political questions and events of this time, he should not forget, for God's sake, that his aim is heaven and that he is destined to be an alien on earth. He should watch and pray that his heart, among the turmoil and confusion of the world, does not stumble into an earthly tendency, that he does not express himself in unbelieving fear or in political zealotry, in which trust in the living God, the love of his Savior, the daily penitent awareness of his own sinfulness, the striving for that which is above, finds no room in the heart.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Theo. Brohm, "The Christian and Politics," *Der Lutheraner* 17 (May 14, 1861): 153-54; trans. Sieghart Rein *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 84 (Summer 2011): 119-20.