

Essay #2

**Civil Government:
In the Light of Luther's Two Kingdoms**

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Introduction

It is both a great joy and honor for me to address our worldwide fellowship. Our common faith and confession is such a treasure! I realize, being gathered here from various nations, countries, and even continents, that the topic before us is both exiting and complicated. Our experience with public order and secular government can be so different! Nevertheless, I believe that, in spite of all the differences, we have much more in common—as our biblical faith and Lutheran understanding will help us navigate through the complicated maze of ideas standing in our way. We pray with the psalmist, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.”¹

The main topic of this essay is “civil government” to which I have added a subtitle: “in the light of Luther’s doctrine of two kingdoms.” The work of Martin Luther and his deep biblical insights on the two kingdoms have been truly vital and groundbreaking.² Therefore, I propose that besides biblical witnesses we listen to Luther’s voice and reexamine what he has to say. Of course, we live in a different world today, yet this doctrine is so deeply biblical that it is still valid, since it is a great tool also for our day. “Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms remains the best available help to live a Christian life in such a world. A more adequate or clearer interpretation of the biblical understanding of Christian existence in a world which must guarantee its own existence by means of force has not yet been given to us.”³ Along with other theologians, we have to agree that Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms is one of the most valuable and enduring treasures of his theology.

The world in the eyes of faith

Why is this teaching so valuable? Luther did not engage in some willful and wild speculations, but thoroughly based his teaching on Scriptures. He made a very serious attempt at what people today call a worldview: a description of reality in which we live our daily lives. He asked what our proper place is in this dying world, and how are we to relate to its realities? He derived his understanding from the biblical insights of the twofold Word of God. According to Luther, the proper distinction between the law and the gospel remains God’s powerful tool by which he still effectively works in the fallen world. Likewise, the reality is twofold, arranged in these kingdoms: secular and spiritual. Thus the doctrine of the

¹ Psalm 119:105.

² Luther’s main writings on the subject: *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), WA 11, 245-80; LW 45, 81-129. *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526), WA 19, 623-62; LW 46, 93-137. *The Sermon on the Mount* (1532), WA 32, 299-544; LW 21, 3-294.

³ Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 82. From Franz Lau, *Luthers Lehre von den beiden Reichen* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1953), 95.

two kingdoms is a comprehensive perspective of God's created, preserved, and ruled world. To see this reality plainly, we need to look at the world with the "eyes of faith"⁴ so that our sight is enlightened by the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. That is how we know that all is governed by an all-powerful God, and he ultimately works everything in everything. This view of reality is not so much a political, social, or economic theory, but rather a theological perspective and biblical worldview which helps Christians to find their way through the so-called "earthly city," which in our days increasingly turns in all sorts of pagan, naturalistic, and atheistic directions.

From the revelation of God's Word, we believe in the hidden reality of God's royal rule, which we comprehend by faith.⁵ Of course, there is so much of God's majesty and his omnipotent leadership which is far beyond our perception and cannot be comprehended by us.⁶ And it is not our business to speculate about God's *hidden* majesty. Hence we focus on what is *revealed* in his Word. And, at least insofar as his rule is visible to the eyes of faith, God has established two different governments, and he rules the world in a twofold way: the spiritual and the secular.⁷

Two hands of God

The essence of the biblical doctrine of the two kingdoms is this: God has ordained two kingdoms or two realms in which humanity is destined to live, the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. The earthly kingdom is the realm of creation, of natural and civic life, where a person operates primarily by reason and law. That preserves this physical, earthly, and temporal life, thereby preserving the world. The heavenly kingdom is the realm of redemption, of spiritual and eternal life, where a person operates primarily by faith and love.⁸ The spiritual government helps to achieve true Christian righteousness and therewith eternal life; it thus serves the redemption of the world.⁹

These are the two ways God rules this world. To use the picture language, we say that there are two hands of God—the left hand and the right hand—and God works effectively "with both hands" in this world. With the left hand he appoints civil authorities to maintain order, to defend its citizens, to punish wrongdoers and to praise those who do what is good and right. However, with the right hand God works through the gospel, the means of grace, and the church, for the salvation of sinners. Those two distinct ways of God's government we discover everywhere.

Both realms belong to God our Lord. Both proclaim that he is in charge. This whole world—all creation, nature, and history—is held by his almighty hands. All the spheres with all their institutions, offices, governments, courts, and laws are upheld and managed by the Lord. Even the most secular affairs are under his dominion. And it is only because these realms are permanently ruled and operated by God that they continue. Should those be left to themselves for a moment, they would be overthrown by the power of the devil and suffer destruction.¹⁰

⁴ Ephesians 1:18.

⁵ Luke 17:22; Matthew 13:11; Romans 14:17.

⁶ WA 45, 252. Luther quotations taken from Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), if not indicated otherwise.

⁷ WA 11, 251. LW 45, 91.

⁸ As quoted by John Witte, Jr., *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teaching of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); WA 39, I, 540.

⁹ WA 19, 629.

¹⁰ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Washington, DC: Ballast Press 1994), 23-24.

Therefore the picture remains one and united, even though there are two different kingdoms. One and the same God has established both. One and the same God stands behind both governments and is effectively present in both, so that even the secular government is “God’s own work, institution and creation” established in opposition to the devil.¹¹ Likewise, in one breath Luther can mention that our God is present not only in the means of grace in Christ’s kingdom but also in the political authorities: “God is in preaching, in baptism, and in government; that is where you can find him.” And what Luther says about government naturally applies also to the household and family.¹²

Everything under God

This unified perspective—with God’s presence everywhere—is important because of our current fragmented worldview that is imposed upon us. People have developed the habit of looking on the religious as only a special field, as if other fields of life were not directly related to the religious, as if you were related to God only in the worship service, devotions, and perhaps in special works of love. It is an exaggerated division between religious and non-religious, where God and faith is considered a “private matter,” which has to be removed from public life. At least, in the western countries such a strict division between the sacred and the profane has led to extreme forms of secularism.¹³

Luther is helpful here as well, for to him there is nothing profane in the created order, and there is no sphere in which God is not at work. The secular world is not foreign to God, and Luther does not regard it as such. Luther combats this false separation with every weapon at his command. During his time, this separation was expressed in the Roman Catholic view, which divides the world in two parts, where only one classification of people are religious: the spiritual orders (the monastic orders). Other classifications of people, those engaged in the various secular activities of the state and the functions of society, were not considered religious by nature, and God had nothing to do with them directly. They could become part of the religious sphere only when brought under the blessing and sanctification of the Roman Church. Such a separation is sharply opposed by Luther. He insists that every single realm of life is under command of the Almighty. In both the heavenly and temporal rule we have to deal with God. He meets us in both, though in different ways.¹⁴

Luther never abandons the political world to autonomous self-administration. People in all offices are accountable to God. Part of Luther’s preaching is to tell all people that God is in charge and to call them to repentance. He constantly struggles against the self-glorification of the rulers and their misuse of the secular government. Luther admonishes the consciences of politicians to conform to the will of God. Thus it is wrong to accuse Luther’s two kingdoms doctrine of opening doors to secularism, as often was done in 20th century scholarship. The emancipation of political rule from moral and religious concerns does not have its source in Luther but rather in the Renaissance, a movement that swept across the entire expanse of European politics, invading Catholic countries earlier than Lutheran areas but with equal force. Lutheranism itself stood in opposition to this development for a long time. That it showed resistance to the secularizing tendencies was a result of Luther’s theology.¹⁵

¹¹ WA 11, 251; WA 19, 630.

¹² Althaus, 54. WA 49, 643.

¹³ Anders Nygren, “Luther’s Conception of Spiritual and Worldly Authority,” from *One Lord, Two Hands?: Essays on the Theology of the Two Kingdoms*, ed. Matthew Harrison and John Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2021), part I, ch. 1, Kindle.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Althaus, 82.

In his doctrine of the two kingdoms, Luther always starts by showing that everything ultimately originates from God and that he still works out his purposes in history. God creates communities.¹⁶ He gives historical sphere to nations and kings, dividing up the world for them to rule.¹⁷ In faith we know that all our nations are created by God and that God loves our people.¹⁸ Luther calls us to rejoice about it, yet simultaneously to live “in the fear of God and humility”¹⁹ because all of this is God’s work and accomplishment. He has created and preserved both: the communities and their rulers.²⁰

Divinely instituted

Luther faithfully follows the scriptural teaching that all governments are established and instituted by God. As Jesus says to Pilate, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”²¹ Though Pilate was not a believer, he recognized the force of what Jesus said: that God would call him to account for the justice he dispensed.²² In Luther’s explanation, he most often uses Genesis 9:6, Romans 13:1-4, and 1 Peter 2:13-17,²³ calling government a “divine thing” and a “divine order.”²⁴ God not only creates all the offices of government, from the highest to the lowest, but also himself is effectively present in them: he himself rules, speaks, and administers justice through them.²⁵

Luther cites Genesis 9:6: “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind,” and says that God himself places “the sword” in man’s hand and thereby institutes law and government. Originally, in the time before the flood, God had reserved judgment on crimes to himself. Now, however, God says that the blood of the murderer is to be shed through men. He thereby gives government a share in his authority over life and death.²⁶

The primary task of the government is to curb original sin. Coarse and dangerous people need to be held in check.²⁷ As people put bonds and shackles on a wild beast, so God has instituted authorities to check violence and injustice in order to maintain peace and order. That is a specific task of the government to protect the people committed to its care against exploitation by the brutal selfishness and violence of their fellow men. The government does this by making laws and using its power to enforce them. Without this power of the sword, laws are useless and justice is powerless. Law is a vital force only when government has power and uses it.²⁸ For this reason, the sword of the government is absolutely necessary. God has set the evil world under the sword that it may be restrained. “If it were not for force, one man would devour the other, since all the world is evil and there is hardly one true

¹⁶ WA 31, I, 193. LW 13, 49.

¹⁷ WA 31, I, 234. LW 14, 14.

¹⁸ WA 31, II, 595.

¹⁹ WA 31, I, 194. LW 13, 47.

²⁰ Althaus, 112-113.

²¹ John 19:11.

²² Paul O. Wendland, “The Function of the Church and State Regarding Moral Issues,” 4, <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/828/WendlandChurch.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

²³ Althaus, 113.

²⁴ WA 31, I, 191-192. LW 13, 44.

²⁵ WA 11, 257, LW 45, 99.

²⁶ WA 42, 360; LW 2, 140.

²⁷ Wingren, 60.

²⁸ WA 14, 665. LW 9, 161.

Christian in a thousand; one could not marry and have children, earn a livelihood and serve God, and in the end the world would become a desert.”²⁹

Due to sin and corruption

Thus the kingdom of this world exists because sin and evil exists. Luther writes, “Princes and magistrates are the bows and arrows of God” and are equipped to hunt down God’s enemies in the earthly kingdom.³⁰ Hence, when the state and governments punish, God’s own wrath is at work. The hand of the Christian magistrate, judge, or soldier “that wields the sword and slays is not man’s hand, but God’s; and it is not man, but God, who hangs, tortures, beheads, slays, and fights. All these are God’s works and judgments.”³¹ It means that those who govern sit in God’s place.³² This is the case even if officials are often “knaves and rascals” who misuse their office, act arbitrarily, and perpetrate injustice.³³

Luther by no means is a naïve romantic about royal monarchy. His opinion of the average ruler is very sharp and bitter.³⁴ Luther often quotes Augustine’s *The City of God* to say that the great states are great robbers.³⁵ “You must know that since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince even rarer. They are generally biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth; therefore one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for the little good, especially in divine matters which concern the salvation of souls.”³⁶ Yet, in spite of all the evil that it is used for (pride, vanity, pleasure, mischief, and all manner of wantonness), the state does not cease to be God’s institution and order—the proper tool through which he works.³⁷ God is still able to rule and preserve peace and order even through a thoroughly bad government.³⁸

Obviously, all ruling and governing is a rough and stormy business. Whenever power is seized and possessed, there is plenty of violence and scheming, exhibition of power and arrogance. Nevertheless, when government comes into existence, and however it conducts its affairs, its all too human nature is sustained by God’s power. “It does not matter to God where an empire comes from; his will is that it be governed.”³⁹

Luther says, ironically, the sword isn’t a “foxtail with which to tickle people,” but a “kingdom of wrath and severity” in relation to evil.⁴⁰ Despite all appearances to the contrary, the sword is rightly understood, when viewed as a work of divine mercy. For the state does not administer punishments simply for the sake of punishments, but because it is indispensable means of protecting and preserving the very precious gifts of peace and security.⁴¹

²⁹ As quoted by Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther’s World of Thought* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 245.

³⁰ WA 30, 554.

³¹ WA 19, 626. LW 46, 96.

³² WA 10, I, 2. LW 13, 44.

³³ WA 30, II, 521.

³⁴ WA 6, 73. LW 39, 19.

³⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, 4:4.

³⁶ WA 11, 267. LW 45, 113.

³⁷ WA 19, 627. LW 46, 97.

³⁸ WA 44, 800. LW 8, 301.

³⁹ Althaus, 118. WA 6, 464. LW 44, 209.

⁴⁰ WA 18, 389. LW 46, 70.

⁴¹ WA 18, 389-91. LW 46, 71-73.

For the sake of peace

Scriptures, therefore, have good, clear eyes and see the temporal sword aright. They see that out of great mercy, it must be unmerciful, and from the utter kindness, it must exercise wrath and severity.... It looks upon the righteous with mercy, and so that they must not suffer, it guards, bites, stabs, cuts, and slays, as God has commanded. ... The merciless punishment of the wicked... is to protect the righteous and to maintain peace and safety. And beyond all doubt these are precious works of mercy, love, and kindness.⁴²

The preservation of peace in this sin-corrupted world is an important part of that. Luther feels that no one's life would be secure if the government would lose control over the situation. "It is the function and honor of worldly government to make men out of wild beasts and preserve men from becoming wild beasts."⁴³ These governments preserve the precious gift of peace. "Where peace is, there is half a heaven,"⁴⁴ says Luther. "Peace is the greatest of earthly goods, in which other temporal goods are comprised."⁴⁵ Then Luther concludes: "Without peace, human life cannot exist, and it is precisely because God wills to create and preserve peace among men that he has instituted governments. For where there is no government, or where government is not held in honor, there can be no peace."⁴⁶ We appreciate this truth also currently, especially in the context of our Ukrainian brothers and sisters and their fight for peace.

That is why a defensive war can be called a just war and a true work of love, where the general population is being protected against violence. "It is a work of a whole community with the sword and will not let the people be abused."⁴⁷ Thus evil deeds need to be restrained lest misdeeds destroy the life of the world and the fabric of society and chaos ensues.⁴⁸ Here we observe how wrath stands in the service of mercy. In this way, the sword is to be understood as an expression of God's goodness, "for without it this life could not endure."⁴⁹

Duty to obey

What does this mean for Christians? Governments—be they good or bad, Christian or pagan, just or unjust—are powers ordained by God. As Peter urges, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."⁵⁰ No matter what is the form of government (monarchy, dictatorship, republic, or democracy), Christians should be obedient and peaceable citizens because they know where government comes from. They know who is behind it.⁵¹ Good government is part of our "daily bread" and must be "received with thanksgiving."⁵²

⁴² WA 18, 391. LW 46, 73.

⁴³ WA 30, II, 555. LW 46, 237.

⁴⁴ WA 31, I, 202. LW 13, 55.

⁴⁵ WA 30, II, 538. LW 46, 226.

⁴⁶ WA 31, I, 192. LW 13, 44-45.

⁴⁷ WA 12, 330.

⁴⁸ WA 19, 640. LW 46, 112.

⁴⁹ WA 32, 390, LW21, 109.

⁵⁰ 1 Peter 2:13-14.

⁵¹ Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Civil Government: God Other Kingdom* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 42.

⁵² WA 30, I, 78. LW 14, 52.

Along with thanks goes respect. In the Small Catechism, Luther places rulers alongside parents, according to the commandment to honor parents. All human hierarchies in essence are based on parental authority, while recognizing through them the work of God's love. "Out of the authority of parents all other authority is derived and developed... All who are called masters stand in the place of parents and derive from them their power and authority to govern."⁵³

However, I'm sure, you know how hard it is to keep a respectful and honorable attitude toward government without complaining and being annoyed. You know how widespread all the "secret backbiting" and evil slanders against the government are. Luther writes: "The lords sit in high places, and everyone sees their sins and faults most of all. And because men see them most of all, no sin is more prevalent than speaking evil of lords. Everyone loves to do it, for in so doing he forgets his own unrighteousness."⁵⁴ Luther suggests that we better stay with what is our task and competence. We better let the criticism of the government be the concern of those whose office requires to do it.⁵⁵ Today we call them experts, whose task is to express criticism "openly and publicly." Of course, we refer here to the important doctrine of vocation which teaches us to do the proper works in the proper place.

Luther urges everyone to be concerned with politics and get involved whenever we are able to do good. This is one of the most productive ways to serve one's neighbor and the common good. Political service is the noblest kind of helping activity.⁵⁶ Participating in a political office is "the finest thank-offering, the highest service of God."⁵⁷ The advantage of Christian political service is that believers are less likely to seek their own selfish goals in fulfilling their office and more likely to devote themselves to serving people.⁵⁸ In this sense, Luther calls also the Christian rulers to follow Jesus by emptying themselves of their power: "In such manner should a ruler in his heart empty himself of his power and authority, and take unto himself the needs of his subjects, dealing with them as though they were his own needs. For this is what Christ did to us [Philippians 2:7]; and these are the proper works of Christian love."⁵⁹ In the proper Christian sense, the ruler is the "father of the community." Just like a loving father, the magistrate is to keep the peace and to protect his subjects from threats or violations to their persons, properties, and reputations.⁶⁰

Limits of civil government

No doubt, civil government is a great gift of God to mankind. At the same time, we must remember that there are clear and definite limits to its authority. Its realm is physical and temporal. Its authority extends only over body and property. If Christ's spiritual kingdom is a "hearing kingdom," perceived through the Word, then the kingdom of this world and civil government is a "seeing kingdom" because it is perceived through the senses, and it is ruled in a visible and public manner.⁶¹ "Civil government has laws that extend no further than to body and property and external things on earth. For the soul God can and will let no one rule but himself. Therefore when civil authority dares to give laws to the soul, it interferes with

⁵³ Althaus, 119. WA 30, I, 152-153.

⁵⁴ WA 31, I, 196-197. LW 13, 50.

⁵⁵ Althaus. 120.

⁵⁶ WA 31, I, 198-200. LW 13, 51-53.

⁵⁷ WA 30, II, 561. LW 46, 241.

⁵⁸ WA 11, 274. LW 45,120.

⁵⁹ WA 11, 273. LW 45, 120.

⁶⁰ As quoted by Witte, , 112; LW 03:44ff., LW 45: 88ff., 013; LW 46:225ff.

⁶¹ WA 51:11, 25-30. LW 12:103.

God's order and only seduces and destroys souls.”⁶² Here we see it very clearly that the power over soul and conscience is not given to the state. The soul belongs to God alone, and only God gives it orders.⁶³

Here is a very important limit. The government has no business in governing the spiritual kingdom, namely in religious matters. It has no right to meddle in church affairs or in congregational matters.⁶⁴ Luther, in this regard, is to be considered a defender of freedom of faith and of conscience. If the state commands something contrary to the Word of God, then the Christian has both the right and the duty to resist.⁶⁵ “We should obey God more than men. Thus God has not given any ruler the kind of authority over his subjects that authorizes him to fight against God and his word.” In this situation the obedience to a government as established by God ceases.⁶⁶

Luther mentions an interesting example about Christian soldiers who are caught up in an obviously unjust war where this rule applies. He calls on the soldiers to refuse the obedience to their ruler, desert their stations, and save their souls. For whoever fights to achieve an obviously evil goal shares in the guilt.⁶⁷ But if they are not certain as to whether or not the cause is just or unjust, soldiers ought to follow “the way of love,” to seek welfare of their ruler, and to obey him without scruples—being certain that their souls are not in danger.⁶⁸ But Luther never encourages direct resistance against government. Rebellion and revolution are never options.⁶⁹ Government itself is directly responsible to God, who is its only judge.⁷⁰ Revolutionaries dream to change and improve the world, but people who overthrow the government succeed only in changing the government, not in improving it. Improvement comes about only through the will and action of God himself.⁷¹

“Not of this world”

Jesus, the ultimate King and Ruler, when he walked this earth, carefully distinguished between the right hand and the left hand kingdoms. He did not abolish secular government. He did not interfere with its civil laws. He aimed higher and deeper: to deal radically with the reality of sin, death, and the devil, not to fight against flesh and blood outwardly, but to overcome “this evil world” and establish his kingdom. Jesus came as a “teacher of consciences” and his kingdom was all about teaching.⁷² He let the kings of this world remain in their worldly places. His proper “office” was to rule over the nations through the Gospel, calling all peoples to faith, forgiveness, and eternal life.⁷³

The same is true today. We aren't here to transform the world. Being the Christian church, we have nothing other to say to the world than the message of forgiveness in the kingdom of

⁶² WA 11, 262, 264. LW 45, 105,108.

⁶³ WA 29, 603.

⁶⁴ Theo. Hoyer, “Church and State,” in *Abiding Word* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 596.

⁶⁵ Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015). 523.

⁶⁶ WA 6, 265. LW 44, 100. Acts 5:29.

⁶⁷ WA 6, 265. LW 44, 100.

⁶⁸ WA 11, 277. LW 45, 125.

⁶⁹ WA 19, 640-641. LW 46, 112-113.

⁷⁰ WA 31, I, 192-193. LW 13, 45.

⁷¹ WA 19, 635, 639. LW 46, 106-7, 112.

⁷² As quoted in William J. Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms (Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought): A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), ch.4, Kindle; WA 40, II:242-43, 264-65; LW 12:42, 57-58.

⁷³ Ibid. WA 40, II, 242-43; LW 12:41-42.

God. Our spiritual authority is “to make disciples.”⁷⁴ We proclaim the gospel in order to assemble from every doomed nation the new people of God. Since the kingdom of the right is a spiritual and hidden reality existing in the hearts of men, the sphere in which the church legitimately operates is the soul of the individual. So we convict, we persuade, we appeal, we proclaim, using the Word of God. We do not manipulate, coerce, or dazzle people into going along with us. However outwardly successful such tactics might be, they would be nothing to God since God does not use such tactics to build his kingdom.⁷⁵

“Under the sun”

Another important limitation of the earthly government is that it belongs to the old and dying world. “This world in its present form is passing away.”⁷⁶ Therefore every government is only provisional; every secular city will crumble. The only permanent city is the one “with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”⁷⁷ This does not mean Christians despise the city of their exile, or will fail to pray and work for its good.⁷⁸ It simply means we do not seek to build the kingdom of God from the order of this world.⁷⁹

The temporary and fleeting character of the left hand kingdom implies that all these present gifts of God are transitory and will pass away. Its righteousness is for this world, not for eternal life. Its wisdom, its experience and happiness is only “under the sun”—the phrase in Ecclesiastes which describes “the realm of vanity.”⁸⁰ Luther concludes that these “good gifts are merely gifts that last but for a season; but God’s grace and regard are the inheritance which lasts forever.”⁸¹ No doubt, the ultimate purpose is the eternal kingdom. That’s why the earthly realm is destroyed little by little, and little by little created anew by God in nature and in all offices.⁸²

Here you observe the biggest difference between the two kingdoms. The earthly kingdom is concerned only with this external life, with people’s outward behavior, with laws and their enforcement. However the spiritual kingdom deals primarily with heart and soul, with the holy Gospel to create and preserve faith, and with this life as a prelude and preparation for eternal life.⁸³

We have, as Christians, a dual citizenship—a dual blessing. We are citizens of God’s kingdom through faith in the gospel promise. We are also citizens of this secular kingdom by virtue of living in this world. The Lord governs both, but differently. In the one kingdom, he rules by his Word. In the other kingdom, God rules through government. The first kingdom gives us our permanent home in heaven and focuses our attention on spiritual matters. The second kingdom deals with our temporary but still important home on earth.⁸⁴

⁷⁴ John 16:8-10; Matthew 7:29; Romans 1:16; Matthew 16:19; Matthew 28:19; 1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 2:5,8.

⁷⁵ John 16:8, 2 Corinthians 5:11, 20; 4:2-5; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 7:31. See also 1 John 2:17; 1 Corinthians 15:24.

⁷⁷ Hebrews 11:10.

⁷⁸ Jeremiah 29:7.

⁷⁹ Wendland p. 4.

⁸⁰ As quoted in Wright, , WA 20:18, 18–24; LW 15:14.

⁸¹ Wingren, 19.

⁸² Wingren, 20.

⁸³ Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 519.

⁸⁴ Deutschlander, *Civil Government*, 8.

The complementary kingdoms

Even though the two kingdoms are different and independent from each other, they still need each other.⁸⁵ Remember: these two kingdoms are the two hands of God, working together and reaching for one ultimate goal! In principle, the two kingdoms are complementary, and the well-being of one in many ways depends on the well-being of the other. It is good for the church if the state does well. And it is good for the state if the church does well. In God's plan they exist side by side and live for each other. The kingdom of Christ could not live and do well in this world apart from the varied functioning of the secular government.⁸⁶ For example, the institution of marriage creates new members for Christendom; the political authorities create the peace that the congregation of Christ needs to carry out its tasks.⁸⁷

Christendom does not have the resources to establish this peace. The church has the gospel. However, we cannot rule the world according to the gospel in such a way that we could do without secular government and the state.⁸⁸ Christians are always a minority; meanwhile the power of evil continues to exist. And the Christian community will never finish its battle against evil in this perishing old world. Rejecting political authority and expecting everything to come from the gospel "would be loosing ropes and chains of the savage wild beast"⁸⁹ as Luther puts it.⁹⁰

The government is particularly useful, serving to preserve peace and prevent war. War is the most destructive of God's visitations. War destroys property; it destroys character; it destroys souls. Other visitations will to some extent drive men to repentance; war rarely does. On the contrary, it usually leads people into even greater excesses and vices. And the church, too, has to suffer the effects. Not only members in general, but also her workers, being but human, are affected by the prevalent atmosphere. Thus important are not only peace-preserving efforts, but also other tasks of good administration. Under poor government, the church also suffers because her members suffer. However, if the land is governed justly and efficiently, the community in general, individual citizens, and such associations as the Church, will prosper.⁹¹

Wholesome influence of faith

The secular government needs the spiritual government as much as the spiritual needs the secular. For no society properly maintains law and order and continues to be blessed if it lacks that knowledge of God and his truth which the spiritual government provides.⁹² It is only through the Word of God that we learn to respect secular government as God's institution. The office of preaching, likewise, helps to create good citizens, by teaching "obedience, morals, discipline, and honor."⁹³

For Christians, by definition, must be good citizens and obey the law of the land, according to 1 Peter 2:15-21. We live peaceably with our neighbors, whether they are Christians or not. We work honestly and faithfully for those who employ us, whether they are honest and

⁸⁵ Althaus, 59.

⁸⁶ WA 11, 258. LW 45, 101.

⁸⁷ WA 31, I, 192. LW 13, 45.

⁸⁸ WA 11, 251. LW 45, 91.

⁸⁹ WA 11, 260. LW 45, 102.

⁹⁰ Althaus, 60.

⁹¹ Hoyer, 603.

⁹² WA 31, I, 50.

⁹³ WA 30, II, 537-38. LW 46, 226-27.

faithful or not. We are obedient and respectful towards the government, whether it always acts as it ought or not. We sign contracts and keep our word. We tell the truth on tax forms and in court. The excuse of the heathen that dishonesty is only wrong if one gets caught is not part of the Christian way of thinking. Disobedience to the law of the land is disobedience to God.⁹⁴

So the church, too, serves the state best by tending to her own business, and that only. The church's business is to preach the gospel. The prime purpose of such preaching is the salvation of souls. The church is to teach people how to prepare for the life to come, so that when they leave this world, they may enter heaven. But this preparation takes place in the world during the earthly life of her members. Thus Christians are called to a new life, which, again, is given only by the preaching of the gospel. That changes man. We know that in this life we will never reach perfection, but whenever the gospel is accepted, people are on the road to perfection; every earthly relationship is improved, the relation between married people, between parents and children, between employers and employees, etc. Every man becomes his "brother's keeper" and a responsible steward of the earthly goods entrusted to man: wealth, power, time, ability, etc. The principles of justice, righteousness, tolerance and helpfulness are advanced, not by direct programs but indirectly—by changing the lives of people through the gospel.⁹⁵

Service of the new person

The character of the Christian life in this world is thus determined by God's relationship to us in justification. When a man comes to faith, says Luther, Christ enters into him and God's Holy Spirit is given to him.⁹⁶ Man is made new. Justification is a completely new kind of encounter between God and man, which is defined by God's spontaneous gift to the sinner. God now confronts man entirely as the self-giving love he really is in Christ. God thus gains a new kind of power over the human heart which previously maintained its inner distance from God through mistrust, slavish fear, and flight. God now enflames this heart with love for God. Through this loving approach to man, God draws him into his own love.⁹⁷ It implies that our experience of God's love necessarily results in our loving our neighbor. In consequence, justification becomes the true source of all Christian activity.

Luther stated very clearly that God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.⁹⁸ Since we are citizens of the two kingdoms, we rest in Christ in his spiritual kingdom, and we serve our neighbor in his earthly kingdom. Luther spoke of various vocations, which are set up by God, in which we are called to do good, to show love, and to serve our neighbor. We often speak of "serving God," and this is a worthy goal, but strictly speaking, in the spiritual realm, it is God who serves us. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."⁹⁹ But in our vocations, we are not serving God, we are serving other people. Genuine good works must actually help someone.¹⁰⁰

Through these vocations we are meant to effect the well-being of others. Through these offices, we are called to become God's hands and co-workers—God uses these earthly vocations, he does his creative work of love and distribution his gifts on earth (food through

⁹⁴ Deutschlander, *Civil Government*, 71.

⁹⁵ Hoyer, 604-605.

⁹⁶ WA 6, 206. LW 44, 26.

⁹⁷ Althaus, 11.

⁹⁸ Wingren, 10.

⁹⁹ Matthew 20:28.

¹⁰⁰ Gene Edward Veith Jr., *God at Work* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), ch.3, Kindle.

farmers, fishermen and hunters, external peace through rulers, judges and orderly powers; knowledge and education through teachers and parents, etc.). Thus all love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations, through both spiritual and earthly governments.¹⁰¹

That is the final thought that I want to leave you with. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”¹⁰² Indeed, having been saved by grace, we are freed by Christ to love and serve our neighbors. And that is best done when we follow our callings in the two kingdoms where we are now citizens, created and blessed by God.

¹⁰¹ Wingren, 27.

¹⁰² Ephesians 2:8-10.