

How Does a Christian Understand His Commitment to the Church and to the State?: Two Kingdom Theology and War

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It may start with what would appear to be an innocent question: “Pastor, what do you think about the possible war?” Or, “Mr. Weiss, what’s going to happen if we go to war? What do we do about it?” Such questions actually encompass several levels of inquiries. Such questions from grade school students often mask fear and worry. These may be the same emotions driving adults to ask these questions, but often because a child or friend may be placed into harm’s way as a member of the military.

While emotional concerns are important, questions about war and our response to war also indicate a need to understand God’s Word and what the Lutheran Church teaches about war, terrorism, and society. When we understand why war and force are part of God’s will to maintain order in the fallen world, some of these questions become less disconcerting. This essay will explore how Martin Luther’s Two-Kingdom theology mirrors the Bible’s teaching on the relationship between church and state, the roles of priest and king, the responsibilities of those under authority and in positions of authority. This essay also will apply this two-kingdom theology to contemporary circumstances as the church serves God’s children by exploring His will concerning war and peace.

Luther’s Two-Kingdom Theology

One of the most practical teachings for the layperson and the professional church worker, Luther’s Two-Kingdom theology explains the relationship between Sunday morning and the rest of the week.¹ It helps us live out our daily callings (vocation) as a professional church worker, a businessperson, a factory worker, a farmer, a mother, a father, or any of those functions in life to which God has called us. Vocations are given to Christians for different purposes, yet they are all “callings” from God. Often, Christians misuse their vocations within the church to look for “practical” answers for life situations. These answers are transported from pop theology and have

¹ The following sources are helpful in summarizing Two-Kingdom theology: Kurt E. Marquart, “The Two Kingdoms or Governments,” in *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance* (Waverly, Iowa: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), 174–94; Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Evansville, Ind.: Ballast, 1994); Paul Althaus, “The Two Kingdoms and the Two Governments,” in *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 43–82. The footnotes in Althaus’s book provide an entry point to Luther’s writings on this subject. For a thorough study, one can explore Luther’s writings on the Christian in society. For a summary directed more toward laypeople, see Gene Edward Veith, *Spirituality of the Cross* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 91–106; and Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002). See also the chart at the end of this document entitled “Two Kingdom Theology.” A thorough discussion of Two-Kingdom theology, particularly as it relates to church and state, is Hermann Sasse, “Church Government and Secular Authority According to Lutheran Doctrine,” in *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, vol. 1, trans. by Matthew Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002).

little or no connection to God's Word. In their worst forms, these answers twist God's Word, tempting people to feel good about doing "what God wants them to do." Such answers may take the form of "six easy steps to being a better Christian" or "Christian leadership in the Bible." In the case of war, pop theology says: "We will fight a Christian war" or "I will pray about going to war and wait for God to tell lead me into what to do." Putting the Christian spin on the subject of war is not the answer.² Such attitudes twist God's Word, which teaches us a Christian approach to order, war, and peace and how a Christian's daily life interacts with these. This is Two-Kingdom theology.

For Lutherans, Two-Kingdom theology makes Christianity "practical." It touches the daily life of every believer. It is the medicine that cures moralism yet identifies the high place of morals in the daily Christian life. Two-Kingdom theology frees Christians to live in society and provides the freedom to become servants to everyone. It frees Christians to engage fully in their communities as good citizens. Because of Two-Kingdom theology, we can recognize others, even non-Christians, as good citizens, and we are able to engage in society. Two-Kingdom theology highlights the Christian's life as one immersed in Baptism, repentance and absolution, and fed for eternity at the Holy Feast.

Two-Kingdom theology also provides the order that a chaotic and terror-driven world needs, along with the justice for which our society yearns. The wisdom of Two-Kingdom theology is found in the *distinction* and *dependence* of the two kingdoms. Two-Kingdom theology does not confuse order with salvation. It permits civil leadership and patriotism to reign in their sphere of civil order and just government (*iustitia civilis*). However, Two-Kingdom theology requires an eternally just God who rules in His church through the submissive Lamb of God. Lutherans call this the theology of the cross. Two-Kingdom theology distinguishes between two separate kingdoms, both of which are given by God but are driven by different purposes, different tools, and different realities. Although separate, these kingdoms depend on each other.

The Kingdom of the Left

Biblical Foundation

The Kingdom of the Left is temporal life. The biblical basis for this kingdom can be found in Romans 13:1–7 and Romans 2:14. The primary purpose and function of the Kingdom of the Left is *civil justice* and *order*. Its secondary purpose and function is compassion and grace, though not in the sense of Christ's forgiveness. The Kingdom of the Left is more concerned with daily kindness, mercy, and service to one's neighbor.

Everything in this life begins with what God gives. Through parents, God gives rulers their authority as His ministers or servants (*διάκονός*). Rulers are to bring order and civil peace to society and protect temporal life. In this endeavor, rulers have as their primary tool reason,

² The popularity of this approach in LCMS circles is possibly the result of the doctrinal controversy in the 1960s and 1970s. While the Synod made the correct decision regarding the nature of the Bible as God's Word, what has ensued in the practical life of the church is often a Reformed biblicism that either denigrates legitimate "left hand" disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, medicine, technology, etc., or exalts them so they rule God's Word. The struggle Lutheranism now faces is her identity as "Lutheran," not only or not just "Christian."

especially as it is manifested in civil law. They do not make use of God's Word. Reason must be understood in its pre-critical perspective. Reason does not mean something that is "purely instrumental and content-free, namely logic, 'I.Q.,' or the computing function. . . . Rather [it is] a power of judgment deeply embedded in man's irreducibly moral nature (Romans 1:20; 2:14,15)"³ When well-reasoned laws are disobeyed, force is employed to maintain order and societal peace. In the sphere of the Kingdom of the Left, civil righteousness (morality) is the measure of good citizenship. In the Kingdom of the Left, those in authority keep track of good works as an evaluation of civil righteousness. The Kingdom of the Left is responsible for rewarding good and punishing evil.⁴ Such a system enables the continuance of life as a society.

In the Kingdom of the Left, God requires higher and lower stations. One person is subordinate to another.⁵ In the Kingdom of the Left, people live with the lesser of two evils for the purpose of order. The goal is not to make the society Christian. To do so confuses the message of God's Word. Efforts to Christianize society flow from Reformed theology and its cousins, and such efforts lead to theocracy. But a theocracy should not be the desire of Christians.⁶ To turn society into a theocracy is equally wrong for Christians who desire to "Christianize" the laws of the land and vote only for Christians or for Muslims who seek to govern the community by the Koran as interpreted by Muslim clerics. Both are contrary to God's Word and bring injustice to the community. Only Christians know that the Kingdom of the Left exists to serve God's ultimate purpose, the Kingdom of the Right: "The whole 'Left Hand' kingdom is but a vast scaffolding for God's ultimate purpose: the eternal salvation of His church."⁷

The Kingdom of the Left in Luther's Catechism

Most Lutherans, at some point in their lives, have studied (and even memorized) the summary of the Bible that is Luther's Small Catechism. In the Small Catechism, the Kingdom of the Left is founded in creation, which is discussed in the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. The Kingdom

³(Marquart, "Two Kingdoms or Governments," 176). On the other hand, when reason is objectified, it produces the romantic and naïve conclusions of modernism, which turn science into a deity that will solve all human problems. A modernistic approach to Scripture and creation eventually removes Christ from both. Even exegesis when it objectifies the text and sterilizes its humanity and history will lose sight of Christ and His presence. It becomes a form of 21st-century scholasticism. However, with all the problems of extreme postmodernism, one must not conclude that Scripture is not objective in the pre-critical sense as Lutheranism has always professed in the "external" or objective nature of Scripture to the person.

⁴ See also 1 Timothy 2:2; 1 Peter 2:13, 14.

⁵ "He calls men into a variety of stations and offices and into corresponding relationships of dependence and of commanding and obeying. Wherever people live together, there is a top and a bottom, there are higher and lower stations. The equality of all Christians before God in faith and love does not abrogate or invalidate the natural differences and relationships of dependence and authority among men. The attempt to eliminate these differences would throw human society into chaotic disorder" (Althaus, "Two Kingdoms and the Two Governments," 57).

⁶ This desire to avoid theocracy is an important distinction between Lutheranism and Reformed theology and Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism and the Reformed churches seek to Christianize society. This confusion of the two kingdoms leads also confuses believers as they seek to live out their vocations. Although Christians often seek biblical answers to daily decisions, God's Word does not address most situations we face. In such situations, Lutherans apply the gift of reason, which is enumerated as one of the God the Father's gifts to His creatures in the First Article of the Apostles' Creed (see Luther, *Small Catechism*, "Explanation to the First Article").

⁷ Marquart, "Two Kingdoms or Governments," 176.

of the Left surfaces on a daily basis in the actions governed by the Fourth Commandment.⁸ God created all things, including humanity. Humanity and the earth require order to function. All earthly authority flows through those who are second in authority only to God—parents.⁹ God calls parents into service to co-create and populate the earth. From our parents, Christians learn that all good gifts come from our heavenly Father through the means of creation (see the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed). Through our parents, we learn how to use these gifts of creation wisely and to the glory of God. Our parents teach us the two tables of the Law and how we are to live them. Our parents exemplify how we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

God governs the world and the universe through power. His power is vested in the means of creation. God’s power and might is Law, but He gives power and authority to parents to rule the earth. Thus civil authority flows from parents. Teachers teach on behalf of parents. In his Large Catechism, Luther writes: “Where a father is unable by himself to bring up his child, he calls upon a schoolmaster to teach him . . . Thus all who are called masters stand in the place of parents and derive from them their power and authority to govern.”¹⁰ Therefore, police officers, rulers, executioners, and soldiers all carry out their functions in society because God has given to parents the authority to maintain order, justice, and peace in society. Parents cannot possibly do everything, so they task the government, teachers, the police, and the military with the functions of ordering society.

In service to the Gospel, the church also uses the unbreakable relationship between parents and an orderly society. Congregations maintain order in Bible studies, Sunday schools, meetings, and the Divine Service. The realities of creation as explained in the First Article allow people to accomplish their tasks inside and outside the church. However, the church uses the power of the Kingdom of the Left to support her primary objective—proclaiming the Law and the Gospel, the former to identify sin and the latter to forgive it.

The Kingdom of the Right

Biblical Foundation

⁸ The Augsburg Confession links Two-Kingdom theology to authority: “Our teachers have been compelled, for the sake of comforting consciences, to point out the difference between spiritual and temporal power, sword, and authority, and they have taught that because of God’s command both authorities and powers are to be honored and esteemed with all reverence as the two highest gifts of God on earth” (AC XXVIII, 4; see also AC XXVIII, 12–14).

⁹ “To fatherhood and motherhood God has given the special distinction, above all estates that are beneath it, that he commands us not simply to love our parents but also to honor them. . . . Thus he distinguishes father and mother above all other persons on earth, and places them next to himself. . . . Honor includes not only love but also deference, humility, and modesty, directed (so to speak) toward a majesty hidden within them . . . that we respect them very highly and that next to God we give them the very highest place. . . . Therefore, we are not to think of their persons, whatever they are, but of the will of God, who has created and ordained them to be our parents. In other respects, indeed, we are all equal in the sight of God, but among ourselves there must be this sort of inequality and proper distinctions. God therefore commands you to be careful to obey me as your father and to acknowledge my authority” (Theodore Tappert, trans. and ed., “Large Catechism,” 108–10, in *The Book of Concord* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959], 379–80).

¹⁰ Tappert, “Large Catechism,” 141–42, *Book of Concord*, 384.

The Kingdom of the Right is the church. The biblical support for this kingdom can be found in Ephesians 1:22ff.; Romans 8:9ff.; Colossians 1:13; and Ephesians 4:4–6.¹¹ The primary purpose and function of the Kingdom of the Right is the proclamation of sin and grace. The secondary purpose and function of the Kingdom of the Right is civil justice and order as it nourishes the believers and teaches them the Second Table of the Law, to love their neighbor.

The church is the community of believers gathered by Christ around His Word and Sacraments. Christ is the one and only head of the church, which He does not rule through power. Instead, Christ governs His church through humility, servitude, and faith through the means of grace. Any appeal to God's power as He works for the Kingdom of the Right is misguided. It invites a lack of faith and causes believers to question God when disaster strikes. The church has no claim to the power of God in earthly matters, but the state does. The church's "power" is in the humility of Jesus' incarnation. Jesus' power is in the hidden glory of the cross, human words, water, bread and wine. Surely, God is present everywhere, but only in His power, which is law not Gospel. The church is defined by the humility of the proclamation of sin and grace through the Word and by the sacramental life.

Christ rules only through created means, that is, through the incarnation. From the Incarnate One came the promises and the gift of the Spirit through the words of inspired men. In the church's life, water intertwined with those words and bread and wine intertwined with those words become eternal mysteries of God's gracious will. God is present on earth for the Gospel's sake only in these means of grace. In the Kingdom of the Right, the message of God's Word is His presence on earth for mercy, forgiveness, and grace. Thereby, for Christians, Christ rules only through the Word and Sacraments, which are the only marks of the Kingdom of the Right. Through these means of grace come forgiveness, mercy, and Christ's presence.

The Kingdom of the Right uses Law to identify sin (*lex semper accusat*) so the sin may be forgiven. The Kingdom of the Right is hidden under the cross (*tecte crucem*). The Kingdom of the Right is only manifested around the preached Word of God and the sacraments faithfully offered. In the Kingdom of the Right, force does not motivate good works; everything is done voluntarily. The Christian's "weapon" is sacrificial love for one's neighbor, regardless of whether the neighbor is Christian. The only justice that counts is that of the Father, who brought His wrath to bear in Christ, then declared sinners justified by grace through faith in Christ's work on our behalf. Thus we confess the article on which the church stands or falls: justification. The Kingdom of the Right is known, understood, and participated in by faith.

In the Kingdom of the Right, sin is sin. There is no place for the "lesser of two evils." Spiritual righteousness is what counts. One must be perfect, holy, without blemish or spot before he or she is permitted to live as a saint, and eat at the Feast of the bodily presence of Christ. Any claim of personal morality, goodness, or "becoming a better Christian" propels the claimant to hell. Punishment for any evil is total and complete. Believers do not find justice by becoming "better" or "more mature" Christians. Eternal justice (justification) is found in Jesus' forsaken

¹¹ More passages could be cited along with different imagery of Christ's church: bride, body, temple, heavenly company, communion of saints, etc. The LCMS definition of the church is stated in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: "Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered" (AC VII, 1).

punishment for the world's total sin. The fruits of Christ's work have been freely given to believers by faith. In the Kingdom of the Right, all are one in Christ by faith.

Faith that grows or matures is faith (*fides qua*) that trusts all the more in what has already been given in Baptism. Christians grow in the knowledge of the Lord, but this knowledge already was given in Baptism (*fides quae*). As in all of the Christian life, we grow into what is given to us. (This applies also to secular education. Children grow into the knowledge that is given to them.) Faith is a gift from God through the means of grace and is not the result of a believer doing "more" to fulfill God's Law. In our vocations, we can improve, but such improvements are a matter of the Kingdom of the Left not the Kingdom of the Right. The Christian improves in civil righteousness. However, the more Christians understand the Law, the worse we become when judged against spiritual righteousness because we realize how holy God expects us to be.

In the Kingdom of the Right, there is no respect of persons. Everyone is knit together as one in the mystical union of Christ. The Kingdom of the Right is the ultimate purpose of God (*opus proprium*). Secondly, the Kingdom of the Right makes use of creation in an orderly fashion to reflect the will of God for salvation. The civil kingdom is not to create the church in its image just as the church is not to create the civil realm in her image.

The Kingdom of the Right in Luther's Catechism

The roots for Luther's teachings concerning the church may be found in his explanations to the Apostles' Creed, especially in the relationship between the Second and Third Articles of the creed. In the Second Article, we confess the work of Christ for salvation. The Third Article focuses on the work of the Spirit, who calls gathers and enlightens the church through the work of Christ confessed in the Second Article. The fruits of faith enumerated in the Third Article use wisely the gifts of "reason and all my senses" listed in the First Article.¹² Thus it is sanctified or baptized reason that finally (and fully) uses the gifts of God the Father as listed in Luther's explanation to the First Article. The Christian uses these gifts as means to love, which is where Lutheran's get their view of the Christian's daily life as worship.¹³

When Lutherans speak of vocation, they are really talking about the Second Table of the Law.¹⁴ In vocation, Christians move into the Kingdom of the Left. In fact, the two kingdoms in the life of the Christian overlap and interpenetrate (*perechoresis*) in a manner similar to how the two

¹² Luther's Small Catechism. "Explanation to the First Article."

¹³ Luther frequently speaks of the Christian's life of service as *Gottesdienst* (objective genitive), which comes from 2 Peter 2:4. Such an understanding is different than worship in the Divine Service (which is *Gottesdienst* in the subjective genitive).

¹⁴ See Veith, *Spirituality of the Cross*, (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, MO, 1999) pp.71–90. Veith eloquently speaks of vocation as the "spirituality of ordinary life." This "daily divinity" of life helps Christians, especially church workers, understand appropriately their call in the church's life. It provides the biblical structure for understanding the relationship among the auxiliary offices of the church. See also Kenneth A. Cherney Jr., "Hidden in Plain Sight: Luther's Doctrine of Vocation," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 78:4 (Fall 2001): 278–90. Cherney correctly points out that there is "relative silence" among us Lutherans on the doctrine of vocation. "A good dose of vocation is the medicine that would cure much of the confusion that exists in the area of church and ministry and what is the role of the layperson in the church. We must get back to elevating other works of love: the binding of wounds, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked. Playing with a child. Giving my employer or my customer his money's worth" (289).

natures of Christ exist. The two kingdoms are distinct but not separate. In this light, we realize that a call to be a pastor is no different than the call to be a parent, an architect, an engineer, a soldier, or a student. The offices are distinct. God created each office for a different service in different realm. The call to be a Lutheran day school teacher and the call to be a pastor are no different than the call to be a mother or a doctor. The offices are different and are derived from different sources for different purposes; however, they intersect when the teacher teaches theology on behalf of the pastor or the pastor does so on behalf of the parent.

The Kingdoms of the Left and the Right—Separate but Dependent

The Kingdoms of the Left and the Right depend on each other's gifts that are brought to bear in this world.¹⁵ The two kingdoms do not "need" each other to fulfill their specific natures within their own realm.¹⁶ However, the Kingdom of the Right depends on societal order so it can preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. The Kingdom of the Left depends on the goodness of that only God's Word can create in the hearts of believer so they will go the extra mile, live a holy life, and bring repentance and mercy into the world.

In the category of civil righteousness, an unbeliever can be "good"—a good parent, a good governor, a good police officer, a good soldier, etc. Because of its reliance on the law, the Kingdom of the Left will produce only hypocrites when it comes to seeking divine justice. In the same manner, the Kingdom of the Right does not possess the resources to bring peace to the world (Matthew 10:34). The Kingdom of the Left must not maintain order through forgiveness. A forgiveness-driven government will breed chaos.¹⁷ The Kingdom of the Right preaches the Word, and the citizens learn to love and respect authority as gifts from God. The Kingdom of the Right uses order. The Kingdom of the Left needs forgiveness.

Two-Kingdom Theology and War

The purpose of war is not revenge; it is justice. The purpose of a just war is to maintain a just and orderly community. The church's role is to identify sin and forgive it, not to bring order to the world by taking up arms. The church can speak only of the moral goodness that a government brings into the society and make clear the importance of good citizenship for peace and order. The church must not elevate one government over another as if one country was chosen by God and not the other. God places civil leaders in positions of authority, even those leaders we don't like. God gives governments the freedom to maintain order and to take action when order and justice are violated. The church exists in a world that must function on a sliding scale of morality. The church must be careful not to take sides in a war so the government is not mistaken

¹⁵ Here one can begin to grasp how the order of creation serves the order of salvation. Order serves salvation, thus it places creation in the proper context. Without this context, order exists only for the sake of order . . . a Calvinist approach. To understand creation in service to salvation places the subject at the incarnation.

¹⁶ Althaus, "Two Kingdoms and the Two Governments," 60. This paragraph summarizes much of what Althaus writes in his section "The Two Governments Depend on Each Other," in "Two Kingdoms and the Two Governments," 59–61.

¹⁷ The Braunschweig Church Order of 1569, written by Martin Chemnitz, includes instructions for pastors who visit those condemned to capital punishment. Pastors were to inform the condemned who had repented and been forgiven that it is now their duty to die as a Christian example and warning to others not to follow in the same path and suffer a similar fate (*Sehling* {MARK IS PREVIOUS WORD THE TRANSLATOR?}, *Kirchenordnungen*, VIII).

for God's church, thus exalting the government beyond its God-given purpose. As Christians take up arms to support a moral war, they can do so confidently, knowing that God has called them into this vocation. They are being used to maintain order and peace in the world.

Two-Kingdom Theology and Terrorism

Terrorism has entered the U.S. political scene only recently. Terrorism may be defined as “the threat or use of violence, often against the civilian population, to achieve political or social ends, to intimidate opponents, or to publicize grievances. The term dates from the Reign of Terror (1793–94) in the French Revolution but has taken on additional meaning in the 20th cent. Terrorism involves activities such as assassinations, bombings, random killings, and hijackings. Used for political, not military, purposes, and most typically by groups too weak to mount open assaults.”¹⁸

From a Christian perspective, terrorism is harsher than war. By design, terrorism does not function according to the civil mandates of society or even of war. Terrorism has no rules, no orderly objective. Justice does not result from a purposeful attack on civilians that only creates disorder. Organized efforts of terrorism are an unjust form of government because such efforts purposely have no governmental rules. In these days of continued terrorist threat, the church worker needs to set forth cautiously a clear understanding of Two-Kingdom theology because it helps solidify the church's understanding and function as church. Two-Kingdom theology brings structure and reason to those who participate in society as Christians, especially those who are called to vocations within the realm of civil authority, who are God's “ministers” of the sword to maintain civil order and justice.

Emotions must be kept in check so we do not permit either the Kingdom of the Left or the Kingdom of the Right to slide into the other's sphere of responsibility or purpose. A Christian lives in both kingdoms, but mixing the two results in a confusion of Law and Gospel in the church and a false sense of security in the community. It is a wise balance that permits believers to function in each sphere, according to each kingdom's unique purposes and means.

¹⁸ Encyclopedia.Com, “Terrorism.”

Two-Kingdom Theology

The Kingdom of the Left	The Kingdom of the Right
Scripture: Romans 13:1–7	Scripture: Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:13, 14
Catechism: Fourth Commandment, First Article	Catechism: Second Article, Baptism, Office of the Keys, Lord’s Supper
Purpose: order, civil peace	Purpose: Identify sin and forgive it
Governing rulers: Ministers— <i>διάκονός</i>	Christ rules through means: Word and Sacraments
Means: reason as it governs civil law; when law is rejected, force is used to maintain order	Ecclesiastical use of the Law
Goal: civil righteousness (morality)	Sin is sin
Reward good, punish evil	Spiritual righteousness by faith
Order maintained through higher and lower stations in life	Justification
Lesser of two evils	All are one in Christ by faith
Only the Christian knows that the ultimate purpose is the Kingdom of the Right	

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