

How does a Christian live in the kingdom of the World?

Luther's approach to social ethics

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Introduction

Christians struggle in the social sphere. Can they be soldiers with a good conscience? Can they be involved with government and even be someone of authority? Can a Christian judge sentence a criminal to death? These questions are noway unique to the modern context. The princes of the Reformation too struggled with these same issues. Lord John, the Duke of Saxony compelled Luther to write "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed" in 1523 in response to his struggles as lord and Christian. Luther's "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved" of 1526 was written in reaction to a conversation with knight Assa von Kram. In both cases, Luther writes to specific historical contexts. Yet, because the ethical principles at work are wholly Biblical in origin, Luther's advice to Lord John and Assa von Kram can with reason be re-appropriated for our modern context. What are the two kingdoms of Scripture? What authority has been given to each? How may a Christian exercise his faith in both kingdoms? When must a Christian tolerate the oppression of an unjust ruler?

Temporal Authority

The principles which guided Luther's descriptive ethics must be illuminated. These are most clearly demonstrated in his work "Temporal Authority." First, temporal authority is in the world by God's will and ordinance. Luther cites Paul in Romans 13:1-2: "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves." Indeed, the whole of chapters thirteen through sixteen of Romans present the Biblical view of Christian ethics in the social sphere. Peter

also speaks of human authority in 1 Peter 2:13-14: "Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good."

God instituted civil laws even in the Torah. In Genesis 9:6 God says, "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man." Justice will be had for murder, says God, and it will be given into the hands of man to mete this justice. The Lord repeated this law to Moses in Exodus 21:14: "But if a man acts with premeditation against his neighbor, to kill him by treachery, you shall take him from My altar, that he may die." Luther believes Christ confirmed this teaching when He spoke to Peter in the garden: "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52.)

John the Baptist said to some soldiers, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14.) He would not have said this, according to Luther, had God not ordained civil government. John would have advised these men to abandon their posts as soldiers. "It is God's will that the temporal sword and law be used for the punishment of the wicked and protection of the upright."

What then of the difficult passages like Jesus from Matthew 5:38-39? "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also." These words are not for believer and unbeliever alike; These words apply to the believer. Here, our Lord is illuminating the Christian principle of brotherly love, acted out in faith. The tension between the Christian and acts in the civil realm which seem to contradict his faith will be discussed below.

Before moving on, Luther "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." The Kingdom of God is made of all true believers in Christ. This kingdom is confessed by Christ in John 18:36-37, Matthew 4:7, 6:33, and 10:7. The people of this kingdom do not need law or sword. They are guided by the Holy Spirit to love and long-suffering. They do more than is demanded by law on their own accord. Christians are good trees who bear good fruit. The fruit of this tree is doing right without laws and decrees.

So why did God lay down so many laws? As Paul says to Timothy: "The law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly, and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for man-slayers" (1 Tim. 1:9.) These laws were given to punish evil in the world. Christians in the world commit none of these evils. No one in this kingdom of the world is "by their nature Christian or righteous, but altogether sinful, and wicked." God put these laws in place to restrain them from evil. All who are not Christian belong to this kingdom and are under its laws. Indeed, every Christian continues to daily drown his old Adam and so he is still subject to this kingdom's laws and decrees until the resurrection of the dead. Without these laws, no one would have the ability to support wife and child and serve God. The whole world would devour each other.

"For this reason 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 unchristian and wicked so that - no thanks to them, they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace." Temporal authority is not for good conduct but for bad. Thus, the

Gospel is not appropriate but the Law. The Gospel is meant to produce righteousness in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of the world is meant to keep external peace and prevent evil deeds, not produce righteousness before God. The Holy Spirit can only work with those of faith who dwell in the kingdom of God. His work is not for the unbeliever and so the principle of the Gospel is not for them.

Yet, because the sword of the kingdom of the world preserves peace, punishes sin, and restrains the wicked, "The Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to assist the governing authority." The government is a gift given by God. We joyfully submit to this government because of its great benefit in the world and the safety of Christians from temporal evil. While the Christian may lose wife, child, house, home, or even his life, he has the promise of eternal life and so may suffer all things in this world. As Christians we don't need our enemy punished, but our neighbor does. His life remains in jeopardy, having not converted to faith.

A Christian acting in government or as a soldier suffers all manners of injustice yet is bound to punish the wicked. How can he do both? In terms of his own life, possessions, or income he suffers. Yet, he has been given an office which demands that he punishes evil for the sake of the neighbor. While they are ordained by God in their governmental position, they are acting on behalf of God's law to prevent evil not on behalf of the Gospel for redemption. "No Christian shall wield or invoke the sword for himself and his cause. In behalf of another, however, he may and should wield it and invokes it to restrain wickedness and defend godliness." The Christian's guiding principle in social ethics is how profitable his actions are to the neighbor or community. "A Christian prince must certainly lay aside any intent to ex-

ercise lordship or proceed by force." A Christian ruler must consider and attend to his subjects. He deals with their needs as if they were his own needs. He maintains a vigilant watch on those of authority around him, for he knows their corruption as unbelievers. He must deal justly with evil doers, not by the letter of the law but through wisdom and prudence. As with any Christian, his whole life is governed by prayer in the Word of God.

We must distinguish here, as Luther does in "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved," between the man and the office he holds. This is especially true of Christian soldiers. God ordained the office of soldier to protecting the citizens of a country from harm to body and property. The actions committed by a soldier in wartime may seem to contradict their faith. Luther says, "when I think of a soldier fulfilling his office by punishing the wicked, killing the wicked, and creating so much misery, it seems an unchristian work contrary to Christian love. But, when I think of how it protects the good and keep and preserves wife and child, house, and farm, property, and honor, and peace, then I see how precious and godly his work is."

Finally, what of tyrants or madmen? Must the Christian obey them? Scripture offers two suggestions. First from Matthew 10:23: "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another." If a tyrant prevents you from exercising your faith, you should get out of Dodge. Second, Luther suggests, "If injustice is to be suffered, then better for subjects to suffer from their rulers than for rulers to suffer it from their subjects." Luther is reflecting undoubtedly on his experience with the Peasants' War. This war is best described as mob revolt. In this situation, subjects place themselves over rulers, overthrowing the very government God ordained (as wicked as it may be.)

The Christian must suffer all harm to his body and property even at the hand of tyranny. God will punish the tyrants in this life or in the life to

come. This may be at the hands of disaster, revolt from unbelievers, war, or at the hands of foreign rulers. For "it is easy to change a government, but it is difficult to get one that is better." The Lord says "Vengeance is mine" (Rom. 12:9) and "Judge not" (Matt. 7:1.) "What would become of the world if everyone who was in the right punished everyone who did wrong? The servant would strike his master, the maid her mistress, the children the parents, the pupils the teacher."

Government must not extend in scope past life and property and the affairs of this earth. This government must not make demands of the soul. "It is futile and impossible to command or compel anyone by force to believe this or that." Man was given dominion over the earth not over heaven. Yet, he must exercise this authority with virtue, wisdom, and justice. At times, he may moderate the Law for the sake of justice.

The church also must not extend her scope past what the Word of God speaks. The Church is not the realm of the Law. The Church's authority is the free rule of faith. The Word compels the Christian to action, and he is empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Church holds the keys to heaven as the bride of Christ.

Conclusion

While Luther's historical situation is not like our modern day democracy in America, his works on the "two kingdoms" remain true. He prescribes ethics for Christians living his time as princes, subjects, and soldiers. He does so not using reason or intellect but using the clear Word of God. And so the principles he set forth remain as true for the sixteenth century as they do today. They can be soldiers in good conscience. They can serve as "cobbler, tailor, farmer, prince, hangman, or constable" in good conscience provided

they allow the Spirit to guide them. "God has thrown us into this world, under the power of the devil. As a result, we have no paradise here. Rather, at any time we can expect all kinds of misfortune to body, wife, child, property, and honor." Christians live as citizens in the kingdom of the world, suffering at the hands of unbelievers, and perhaps losing everything we have. We must remember Christ's Word: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth, and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth, nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21.) We suffer loss while trusting in the promise of heaven given to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Bibliography

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