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The two kingdoms and social ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Second World War the Lutheran teaching on 'the two kingdoms' has been criticised by Lutherans themselves and by Christians of other traditions. The main thrust of this criticism is that the two kingdoms perspective almost inevitably contributes to a lack of social involvement and concern for social justice.

The purposes of this document are to

- outline the development of the two kingdoms perspective
- show how it is integral to Lutheran theology
- note how this perspective has been misunderstood and misused
- demonstrate its relevance for our time
- suggest a framework for a Lutheran social ethic.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TWO KINGDOMS PERSPECTIVE

The background to Luther's two kingdoms perspective lies particularly in the New Testament and in the writings of St Augustine. The New Testament, especially the gospel accounts, depicts a struggle between two opposing kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The church father Augustine developed this perspective in terms of two opposing cities (see his book, *The City of God*). But he also wrote about God's sovereign activity in undergirding secular peace for all people, even for those who are members of the city of the devil.

Luther, who was both a biblical scholar and an Augustinian, retained the biblical imagery of spiritual conflict, but applied the concept of two kingdoms specifically to God's work in the world. God is at work in the world as king. While all creation is God's, God has two kingdoms within creation: the kingdom at God's right hand and the kingdom at God's left.

The kingdom at God's right hand consists of those who believe in Christ and live under him. The kingdom at God's left hand embraces all people. They live as fallen creatures in a fallen creation. Those in the kingdom at the right are also in this kingdom. They are members of both kingdoms at the same time.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP OF LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE TWO KINGDOMS

The kingdom of the left falls within the sphere of law. This means that God rules sinful society through law — which combines reason (natural law) with coercion (the threat of punishment, including death). This is called the political use of the law.

Examples of the operation of law in the kingdom of the left are

- the legal systems which have been developed on the basis of natural law or human history, experience, and factual observation.
- the sanctions which government is called on to employ in order to preserve order in society
- the training and discipline which parents use to nurture children to be good citizens
- the whole sphere of the economy where people must depend on the discipline of work in an orderly community to gain a living
- the influence of natural law and conscience on moral behaviour

The work of preservation by law flows from God's kindness and love. God's gracious care for the world permeated by sin is very evident in God's governance of the left. 'God makes his sun to shine on the evil and the good and sends his rain on the just and the unjust' (Matt 5:45).

God lavishes his blessing on the world through the structures he has instituted. Conformity to God's laws means that good order prevails. This results in abundant earthly blessing. As Luther puts it: 'God promises grace and every blessing to those who keep his commandments' (*Small Catechism*, Close of Commandments). Luther refers to this as earthly peace and temporal good (see *Luther's Works* 46,100).

God wants to have a special people for himself in the world. This gracious will of God has been evident throughout history through God's saving activity. This grace finally and fully manifested itself in the person of his Son, through whom God inaugurated his kingdom, that is, his rule of love in people's hearts and lives.

Wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly administered, there the Spirit of God is at work creating this kingdom.

This kingdom of the right is a spiritual kingdom in which people have a special relationship with God and with each other. Here God rules through the gospel of his grace. As the background to the preaching of the gospel, however, the law must be proclaimed to arouse people's consciences and lead them to despair of their ability to become right with God through their own efforts.

Luther considered this theological use of the law, which calls people to repentance, its chief or proper function. By awakening people to their sin and state of separation from God, the law prepares people to be receptive to the gospel and through faith in Christ to enter into the gracious kingdom of God's right hand.

In this kingdom of the right there is also an ordering by God. God calls his people to live by love and to work together in harmony so that 'all things are done decently and in order' (1 Cor 14:40). The teaching and encouragement sections of the New Testament clearly indicate the quality of life which is fitting for those who live by the gospel (Some people call this 'the third use of the law').

3. SEPARATE YET INTERCONNECTED

A proper distinction between God's two ways of governing does not mean there is no connection between them; it should not result in their isolation from each other. The two are related to each other. This interconnectedness stems from the fact that God is the ultimate ruler in both kingdoms.

Earthly structures for law and order (for example, the government, Rom 13:1–4) rule by God's will. They carry out their functions in God's name. In his spiritual reign, God creates and rules through the Spirit. The church, for example, carries out its God-given tasks by God's gracious will.

God's will for both ways in which he rules involves all people. All are subjects in the kingdom on the left and all are objects of his gracious will to save, although by their own choice many people do not choose to live under Christ in his kingdom.

Yet the two ways in which God operates must be distinguished and in practice separated because they have different **purposes**, carry out different **functions**, work in different **spheres**, and operate with different kinds of **power**. Thus, the basic distinction is the different *goal* God has for each and the appropriate *means* God has appointed for reaching the goal.

The structures on the left use reason, backed up by the sanctions of legal justice and punishment, statutes and regulations, as well as parental authority. By way of contrast, the means which the church uses for motivation and empowerment should always and only be the proclamation by word and deed of the good news of Christ and of forgiveness in his name.

4. THE INTERPENETRATION

The way in which the two kingdoms interpenetrate is evident in the mutual interaction and influence of the two when they operate according to God's will.

The connection and importance of the state for the church is obvious: it makes possible a stable, orderly society in which the church can go about its work and its people can quietly live their lives according to the standards and guides they find in God's word. As Luther says, 'The rule of the sword serves the gospel by maintaining peace among people, and without that one could not preach (Luther's Works 20,172).

So, we can think of the state as providing a framework in which God's distinctive work can be done – that is, gathering people into Christ's kingdom.

The church's role is to have a beneficial effect on society generally so that its influence is felt as 'salt' in the community and 'light' in the world. This is not something negative. God wants his people to be involved and to serve in the kingdom on the left, to take part in its various operations at the same time as they remain true to their commitment to Christ and the evangelical ethic. For example:

- The church has a prophetic role in society. God calls on his people to uphold justice and to protest against and oppose injustice of every kind. This may entail disobedience to unjust laws where the principle holds: We must obey God rather

than human authority (Acts 5:29).

- Good citizenship: the quiet, orderly lives of believers who go about their daily business, seeking the welfare of others and making their contribution to society.
- Special service to the state. When Christians hold civic offices, positions of authority, trust, and responsibility, they are at the same time God's servants.

5. ANOTHER KINGDOM

The New Testament knows of yet another kingdom which is a dreadful reality: the kingdom of the devil, the reign of evil based on *lex mali* (the law of evil). This demonic power is at work in all the world; only through God's own activity in Christ Jesus has the kingdom of the devil been overthrown.

It is the clear teaching of the gospel that Christ has indeed overcome this devilish kingdom. Through his work of redemption and his glorification as the almighty Son of God, Christ has overthrown the principalities and powers, the 'spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph 6:12).

However, until Christ's coming again, the kingdom of the devil continues to operate. It exerts its influence through the direct temptation of people by Satan, and through his attempts to exercise control over all the various structures of the world, so that they become systems of evil. The power which Satan has in this sinful age stems from humanity's characteristic sinfulness and rebellion against God.

Since in this present age the devil is still allowed to operate, even those in the church, where Christ rules in grace and mercy, are not immune from the influence of Satan and his demonic forces. Examples of this are all too common in Christian history: the triumphalism of the church which led to intolerance and despotism; or the church siding with the establishment and ignoring the plight of the poor and powerless. Accordingly, just because the church's life is continually subject to this evil influence it must constantly rely on the victorious power of Christ who has disarmed the principalities and powers and gained the victory over the forces of evil.

6. MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MISUSE

Luther's teaching about the two kingdoms has often been misunderstood and misused. One major source of misunderstanding lies in the term 'kingdom'. This term can be wrongly understood to refer to a specific area or sphere of life. In the 19th and 20th centuries this misunderstanding was promulgated by some Lutheran theologians who developed the notion of politics and economics as autonomous 'spheres', and promoted the idea that Christianity is a private, internal, spiritual sphere completely unrelated to other spheres.

This misunderstanding contributed to the failure on the part of many Lutherans to protest against clear instances of exploitation and injustice. Today, Christians are coming under increasing pressure from Western culture to privatise their faith and keep it separate from other aspects of life.

The misuse of the two kingdoms perspective by Lutherans has been amply and clearly presented by Ulrich Duchrow in the study *Two Kingdoms—The Use and Misuse of a Lutheran Theological Concept*. Duchrow distinguishes between two types of misuse:

1. The church adapts to the existing power structures to such an extent that the distinction between God's two ways of governing tends to disappear. In effect, the two kingdoms become one. As an example of this he quotes a statement of faith

made by church leaders and members in Germany after 1933: 'Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Fuehrer' (one kingdom, one people, one leader).

2. More commonly, the church fails adequately to interconnect the two kingdoms. Churches that fail in this respect may tolerate or even promote the notion of quite separate spheres of existence and emphasise the complete separation of church and state. Such churches may commonly fail to speak God's word of law into every area of life. They may refrain from speaking out even in cases of obvious injustice, pointing to the complexity of political or social issues and the need for expert knowledge. Duchrow proposes that, where this happens, churches are more concerned to 'save' institutional life rather than 'lose' it in following Christ on the way of the cross.

While the two kingdoms perspective has been misunderstood and misused in these ways by some sections of the church, other sections of the church have in similar circumstances correctly understood and used this perspective. Therefore the questions remain: to what extent is the misuse of the two kingdoms perspective a failure in understanding and to what extent is it a failure in obedience, inspired mainly by fear?

7. AVOIDING MISUNDERSTANDING AND MISUSE

In view of the misunderstanding and misuse of the term 'kingdom', are there other valid ways of expressing this teaching?

One way is to drop the term 'kingdom' and simply speak of two ways in which God's Spirit works in the world: by law (both coercive and natural) and through the revealed word of God. Another is to speak about **care** and **redemption** as two ways God works in the world, one with his left hand, the other with his right. While something is lost in adopting this language, these terms are clearer and decrease the risk of misunderstanding.

8. THE RELEVANCE OF THE TWO KINGDOMS PERSPECTIVE

The right understanding of the two kingdoms is vital for the life of the church and God's people in the world. It helps avoid confusion between the respective roles of church and state. It allocates responsibility, encourages Christians to face up to their social responsibility, and makes for political realism.

This teaching is also applicable to the wide range of social and political circumstances that churches and Christians face around the globe. Its broad applicability is demonstrated by the range of responses that it calls for. What form these responses take depends upon the specific issues and circumstances that Christians face.

Where a just and participatory democracy exists, **critical-constructive participation** is required. On the other hand, where the political system is irremediably corrupt and injustice is entrenched, a **critical-passive stance** may be more appropriate. Where there is a possibility to bring change to a situation of injustice and oppression, a Christian may opt for a position of **critical-active transformation**. Making judgments about appropriate responses requires churches and Christians to keep themselves informed on political, social, and economic issues.

The two kingdoms perspective has special relevance for Christians in the so-called West, who have witnessed the demise of Christendom and the development of secular states and pluralist societies. To Christians who are saddened and concerned by these developments, the two kingdoms teaching affirms that despite what has occurred, this world is still God's and he is still at work within it.

This teaching also challenges Christians in the West to adjust their role in a way that is appropriate to the changes that have taken place in society. Today these Christians are called to be more critical and more involved to counter the general decline in ethical standards among politicians and the increased influence of certain lobby groups.

Christians in the West particularly need to provide an alternative to the dominant economic perspective, whereby the worth of people and other parts of creation is measured increasingly in terms of money. With such a view those who are seen as costly burdens on the public purse are at greater risk. Ministers of the word have special responsibility to remind those in public office what their duty is to those who are dependent on costly care.

A correct perspective on the two kingdoms also keeps Christians alert to dangers in the church. In many Christian churches there is a tendency to run the care and redemption of creation together into one task. In particular, social or political liberation tends to be identified with salvation.

The two kingdoms teaching reminds us that while such social and political freedom is important, a basic human right, it is not the 'one thing needful' (Luke 10:42). Only Christ can set us free from sin. Only through faith in him do we become children of God. The two kingdoms perspective keeps before us the distinction between the old creation and the new creation in Christ, between the care and redemption of creation.

9. STRENGTHENING OUR TRACK RECORD IN SOCIAL JUSTICE

Australian Lutherans have been criticised for their poor track record in matters of social justice. Thankfully there is a growing recognition of the link between justice and justification, and a movement toward greater concern and involvement in the area of social justice. As a way of encouraging this development, and particularly for assisting pastors and teachers, the following profile for a Lutheran social ethic is offered to the church.

10. PROFILE FOR A LUTHERAN SOCIAL ETHIC

1. The Triune God is Lord of creation. God is owner and rightful ruler of all that is, seen and unseen. Creation in all its fullness belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). There is no area of creation or sphere of existence which is autonomous and outside his jurisdiction. Everything in creation is his because he has both made it and redeemed it.
2. As owner and ruler of creation, God has two ways of operating in creation. He is working to care for creation and to lead us to understand and confess his authority as Creator and his ownership of the creation. Creation needs special care because it suffers from disharmony and decay. God also proclaims his rulership over creation so that we may come under the control of Christ and be obedient to him. God carries out these tasks in different ways and through different institutions.
3. God cares for creation by means of his gracious providence and law. 'Law' includes common sense, natural processes, culture, rules and regulations, and social institutions such as the home, the school, the courts, and the parliament. God works through these means to preserve creation and prevent society from falling into chaos, so that life may be nurtured, and we may work and make a living and receive his blessing.
4. God gives to all people the task of caring for creation, and Christians, too, are involved in this task. People do this through participating in daily work and family life, and in carrying out their responsibilities as members of the community and citizens of the state.

When people do these things faithfully and well, God gives his blessing. When they do these things badly, suffering follows. While most people do not recognise their role in caring for creation as God-given, Christians regard it as a vocation, as a calling from God to serve him by serving other people and the whole of creation.

5. Through Christian people, God also reaffirms his ownership of creation. Through the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, God calls people to faith, frees them from the power of sin, joins them to Christ, makes them members of his family, and instructs them in holy living. Those people Christ calls, he also empowers with his Spirit and sends forth as his servants to continue the task of proclaiming and demonstrating God's ownership of creation. This is a special task God has given to those who are his own people.
6. The church also contributes to the care of creation in various ways. It prays regularly for all people, especially for those who are leaders in government. It teaches its members to respect and obey proper authority, and encourages them to lead lives of holiness and service. It engages in works of mercy and relief, and plays an important role in education.

Sometimes the church or its representatives must take on a prophetic role, pointing out specific sins of a society and nation, opposing social trends or proposed legislation, and calling society to repentance. In extreme cases, where those in power enact laws which support or practise obvious injustice, church leaders may call on Christians to disobey such laws (Acts 4:19).

7. The church also has the duty to encourage members to play an active part in the society, and to have a special concern for social justice. Striving for social justice needs to be taught as a logical response to God's act of justification and as part of one's vocation. God has freed Christians from self-concern for service to others.

Through preaching and teaching, Christians need also to be made aware that sin is a social as well as a personal reality, that injustice becomes entrenched in structures and systems which oppress people and violate creation rather than serve them, and that Christians can do much to bring about change.

8. In striving for a more just society, Christians may well join with non-Christians and learn from them. Christians should avoid the delusion that they have special political insight or wisdom. What they do bring to this task is a sense of justice made sharp and strong by the teaching and example of Christ, and the love and compassion of his Spirit within.
9. While Christians need to know that much progress has been made in promoting justice and combating specific forms of injustice, they also need to know that progress is difficult and that the struggle for justice must go on as new forms of injustice arise. They also need to know that by their own efforts they will not bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

Yet as Christians engage in this ongoing struggle against injustice, they are comforted and encouraged by the knowledge that Christ, who defeated evil on the cross, is on their side, and by the vision they have of the new creation, restored to perfect peace and harmony, which Christ will bring about at the end of time.

APPENDIX

Roman Catholics have a long tradition of social justice teaching and reflections on which to draw. The following principles in particular, taken from 'Social Justice in Everyday Life', published by the Australian Social Justice Council, will be interesting and challenging to Lutherans as they develop their own principles of social justice.

1. **The principle of the fundamental dignity of all persons.** as created and redeemed by God. The purpose of the social order is to serve people and uphold their dignity.
2. **The principle of solidarity.** Standing in tension with the first principle, this principle stresses the social nature of people and guards against viewing society merely as a collection of individuals.
3. **The principle of subsidiarity.** This declares that higher levels of collectivities, such as national governments, should not perform functions which can be better provided at lower levels, such as local communities or families. It guards against the centralisation of power, and safeguards personal initiative and creativity.
4. **The principle of the common good.** According to this principle the purpose of government is to promote the common good.
5. **The principle of participation.** This states that people need to play an active role in the development of socio-economic, political, and cultural life. The emphasis is upon people being subjects rather than objects, active participants rather than only recipients.
6. **The principle of the universal purpose of goods** states that the goods of the world are meant for the benefit of all. According to this principle the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use.
7. **The option for the poor.** This principle states that in coming to decisions about social matters, Christians should stand with the poor and oppressed, and consider matters from their perspective. How an action or law affects the poor is a fundamental test of how just it is.