

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE TWO KINGDOMS

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Contemporary man is suffering from a type of historical amnesia, a condition which is partially the result of a pathetic attempt to live entirely in the "specious present." In the *Future of Man*, Teilhard de Chardin accurately assigns to history its role in human knowledge:

It is clear in the first place that the world in its present state is the outcome of movement. Whether we consider the rocky layers enveloping the Earth, the arrangement of the forms of life that inhabit it, the variety of civilizations to which it has given birth, or the structure of languages spoken upon it, we are forced to the same conclusion: that everything is the sum of the past and that nothing is comprehensible except through its history.¹

As an historian of western religious thought, this is where I stand. In this essay I ask you to struggle with me through an attempt to understand what Luther, the renovator, had to say about the social order and what this might imply for our "specious present."

The Sitz im Leben of Luther's Two-Kingdoms Doctrine

Religious history cannot afford to neglect the political, social, and economic factors of a particular historical situation. To assess adequately the contextual fabric of Luther's Germany we must devote some time to elaborating, or at least enumerating, such factors.

The process of the development of the territorial state was well under way in western Europe by 1500.² It was led by princes, both ecclesiastical and lay, and frequently in opposition to the cities. They retained control of the imperial Diet and at the same time established police powers with uniform justice,

¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Future of Man*, trans. by Norman Denny (London, 1964), p. 12.

² Cf. Harold Grimm, "Social Forces in the German Reformation," *Church History*, 31 (March, 1962), 3-13.

administration, and protection throughout their lands. Naturally, they were inclined to cling to all that they considered good in the old order, and thus they behaved as conservative reactionaries. Nevertheless, by developing territorial states they were furthering changes of revolutionary proportions.

The lesser nobles were being replaced by the rise of a wealthy and influential class of townsmen. The knights in Germany were reduced to subject status and to economic ruin because of the growth of capitalism and the concomitant decline of their agrarian economy and landed wealth. The alternatives were serfdom, thievery (robber barons), or service in secular or ecclesiastical courts (as warriors, ambassadors, and counselors). How did the leaders of the knights retaliate? By producing reform pamphlets, seeking to create effective unions of knights for common action, calling for reestablishment of the medieval order under a common emperor, and the abolition of church and capitalistic monopolies. The main difficulty was that they were hopelessly divided by their territorial, economic, and religious differences, so that effective cooperation was impossible. Many of them had some naive hope that if they embraced Lutheranism they would gain widespread support for their cause.

The same can be said for the peasants, who in the main were revisionists; i.e., they called for reestablishment of peace, order, and justice of an earlier period. Seldom did they discriminate in their attacks upon feudal knights, princes, towns, churches, and monasteries.

The patrician class (wealthy merchants and property owners) were inclined to think of the common welfare of their citizens and the Empire as a whole. In the cities under their control, they had experience in dealing with religious matters such as furtherance of monastic reforms, selection of local clergy, supervision of morals, control of education, and care of the poor and sick.

The guildsmen had been in revolt against patrician control for not serving the common welfare, for discriminating against them, and for failure to allow them representation in city offices. When they did gain complete or partial control of a city council they still permitted the patrician class to remain as influential

citizens. Thus it is not a valid generalization to claim that this class of guildsmen, which supported the Reformation, had as their political goal the democratization of the city government. The economic hopes of the guildsmen had been raised by Luther's teachings; but with the exception of a relatively few big merchants and financiers, Germans of the 16th century seemed unconcerned about production for profit and remained satisfied with making a modest living. Indeed, there was on the part of all classes a considerable spirit of communal concern for the entire commonwealth.

The revolts of the time seem often to have been spearheaded by unorganized workers who had failed to find security. They were supported by the free laborers, recent immigrants to most cities, and a floating population of beggars. Preachers of radical religious and social reform gained many followers here; but since a uniform program and plan of action were lacking, the revolts were normally suppressed with relative ease. All classes, in fact, were being compelled to make adjustments which caused widespread dissatisfaction, and the Reformation provided many people with a dynamic hope that their difficulties could be solved.

In Wittenberg serious disturbances broke out while Luther was in hiding at the Wartburg Castle. Luther responded with a short pamphlet, his *Sincere Exhortation to Beware of Revolt and Insurrection* of 1522. In this, his starting point was his own experience: He felt that through his agency the Word had been made effective beyond all expectations; the Word was all that mattered; it was the Word that would triumph, not force of arms. If the Word of Christ were preached correctly, if everyone led a Christian life in obedience to it, the great change would come about at once. He added some practical instructions to do away with all man-made papal laws but to do so in faith and love, otherwise a thousand revolts would not help. However, the people did not interpret Luther's exhortation as simple instruction. They looked beyond what Luther said and included other man-made laws that touched and oppressed them. Nevertheless, with regard to Wittenberg itself, he effectively dealt

with the unrest in 1522 by slow, methodical exhortation through preaching.

He also spoke to the Swabian peasant unrest and revolt of 1524-25. In most regions the feudal form of overlordship had gradually and relentlessly demolished all that remained of ancient protective rights. Extensive tithing, forced labor, removal of hunting and fishing rights, and the uncertainty of the legal position of the peasants were causes of the revolts. In his *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, Luther spoke out against the abuses of overlords and also exhorted the peasants to patience.³ But as the warfare proceeded and destruction was rampant, Luther produced a second and furious pamphlet, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, which appeared just as the battle in Thuringia ended in 1525. In it he condemned the peasants for three reasons:

In the first place, they have sworn to be true and faithful, submissive and obedient, to their rulers. . . . Since they are now deliberately and violently breaking this oath of obedience and setting themselves in opposition to their masters, they have forfeited body and soul, as faithless, perjured, lying, disobedient rascals and scoundrels usually do. . . .

In the second place, they are starting a rebellion, and are violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs; by this they have doubly deserved death in body and soul as highwaymen and murderers. . . . Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. . . .

In the third place, they cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the gospel, call themselves "Christian brethren," take oaths and submit to them, and compel people to go along with them in these abominations. Thus they become the worst blasphemers of God and slanderers of his holy name.⁴

A third tract which soon followed, *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants*, is Luther's response to his critics in the form of a letter to Caspar Müller. Luther defended at length his views as expressed in the *Admonition* and *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes*. It is the Christian's duty

³ Text in Eng. trans. is given in *Luther's Works* (henceforth abbrev. *LW*), 46, 17-43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 50.

to suffer injustice, and anyone who thinks otherwise is a secret rebel against God and the state. This does not exclude the rulers from treating the rebels justly. Any abuse on their part is as reprehensible and sinful as insurrection itself.

But these furious, raving, senseless tyrants, who even after the battle cannot get their fill of blood, and in all their lives ask scarcely a question about Christ—these I did not undertake to instruct. It makes no difference to these bloody dogs whether they slay the guilty or the innocent, whether they please God or the devil. They have the sword, but they use it to vent their lust and self-will. . . . I had two fears. If the peasants became lords, the devil would become abbot; but if these tyrants became lords, the devil's mother would become abbess. Therefore I wanted to do two things: quiet the peasants, and instruct the pious lords. The peasants were unwilling to listen, and now they have their reward; the lords, too, will not hear, and they shall have their reward also. However, it would have been a shame if they had been killed by the peasants; that would have been too easy a punishment for them. Hell-fire, trembling and gnashing of teeth [Matt. 22:13] in hell will be their reward eternally, unless they repent.⁵

It is well known that Luther's attitude in connection with the Peasants' Revolt cost him the sympathy, not only of the peasants, but also of others, including many townsmen.

Luther's Theological and Psychological Presuppositions

There is a growing consensus among scholars that the fundamental issue of the Reformation for Luther was the sovereignty of God. It is also generally agreed that Luther was absolutely orthodox in preaching that God alone—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, and sanctifies man. Moreover, his significant emphasis on God's Word is well recognized. These features of his thought all have a bearing on his view of the two kingdoms. More specifically, however, I would like to call attention to a useful thesis recently suggested by John M. Tonkin:⁶ (1) In Luther one has to reckon with a coincidence of two apparently contradictory attitudes: (a) a fervent apocalypticism which looked for the disintegration of the secular order,

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁶ J. M. Tonkin, "Luther's Interpretation of Secular Reality," *Journal of Religious History*, 6 (December, 1970), 133-150.

and (b) a remarkably positive affirmation of secular reality. (2) This coincidence is explained by the peculiar dialectical structure of Luther's thought. (3) The distinctive character of Luther's perspective on secular order derives not from the presence of "modern" notions but from the reappropriation of forgotten elements in the biblical tradition. (4) For both internal and external reasons, the truly radical implications of his outlook were not realized in socio-political terms.

Concerning the first attitude, (1,a) viz., a fervent *apocalypticism* which looked for the disintegration of the secular order, one finds ample evidence that Luther lived his whole life with a vivid consciousness of the last day. This was reinforced by his interpretation of the advance of the Turks as a sign of impending judgment. Luther was convinced that the judgment of God would come suddenly, that the angels were already girding on their swords to prepare for the final battle, and that the opportunity to escape the penalty was slipping out of man's hands.⁷

Luther thought that history could be divided into six parts. The sixth part began with the coming of Christ which would terminate the papal rule of the Roman Empire and then would come the end of the world. The world was like a creaking old house on the verge of falling down. Therefore all attempts to reform society were merely efforts to repair a social order doomed to collapse very soon.

Because there is no hope of getting another government in the Roman Empire, as Daniel also indicates (Dan. 2:40), it is not advisable to change it. Rather, let him who is able darn and patch it up as long as we live; let him punish the abuse and put bandages and ointment on the smallpox. But if someone is going to tear out the pox unmercifully, then no one will feel the pain and the damage more than those clever barbers who would rather tear out the sores than heal them. Very well, Germany is perhaps ripe and, I fear, worthy of stout punishment. God be gracious to us! . . . Whoever is able to do it better, to him I yield my poor Pater Noster with a glad heart. Just let me have the chance to add the Amen at the end. For I have often said—but who will believe me until he

⁷ See Luther's *Sermon on Luke 21:25-36*; *Sermon on Christmas*; *Exposition on Psalm 6:2*. Also see G. W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Augsburg, 1954), pp. 156-185, and his "Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought," *Church History*, 38 (1969), 164-174. Forell considers the apocalypticism to be a limiting principle in Luther's social ethics.

experiences it?—that changing and improving are two different things. One is in men's hands and God's decree, the other is in God's hands and grace.⁸

Even in the 1540's when there were evident signs of the progress against the Turk and the Pope, Luther saw this merely as the last brilliant flaring up of a candle about to be extinguished. This extinction of the light would be followed by a period of wild abandonment until Christ should bring all things to their fulfillment. A new heaven and a new earth would emerge only out of the ashes of the old ones.⁹

The second attitude (1,b), which appears to be contradictory to the first one, is Luther's positive affirmation of secular reality. We have already noted in the above quotation that he does affirm the task of improving the social order. Furthermore, one can discern this attitude in his analysis of government, and of vocation or calling, as I shall show when I treat some polarities that ensue from his doctrine of the two kingdoms.

Another psychological presupposition that in this case reflects Luther's antipathy toward violence stems from his early years at Erfurt (c. 1508) just after he had been ordained. The quiet of his monastic life was disturbed when a row began over the question of taxation. The city authorities, largely of patrician blood, had plunged the town into debt by raising loans and then pocketing the money. The citizens wanted accountability. The council reluctantly supplied some information and reported the matter to the the elector. When the council could not account for a sum of a hundred guilders, a haughty alderman named Kellner shouted: "If you don't know what I spent it on, put down 'brothels'!" This touched off armed conflict between the citizens and representatives of the elector archbishop. Students joined in, the main building of the university was burned down, the library was destroyed, and a new city council was appointed in which the plebeians (smaller craftsmen and journeymen) were in a majority. After a summary trial, the hated Kellner was strung up for his insolent remark. This conflict was a class struggle which ended in compromise. The archbishop retained the

⁸ "Exp. Ps. 101." in *LW*, 13, 217.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 221.

city, while the citizenry won the right to elect the city council.

This was Luther's first real exposure to a Germany that for a large part resembled a landscape of volcanic mud in which small eruptions continually broke the surface and subsided again. He never forgot the fighting in the streets, the burning university buildings, and the mangled books.

The Precise Nature of Luther's Two-Kingdoms Doctrine

The essential unity of Luther's apocalypticism and his secularity inheres in the distinctive dialectical structure of his thought as developed by the juxtaposition of opposites. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms (regiments or realms) provides the most significant example of his dialectical contrasts.¹⁰

Luther himself fully treated this concept in his treatise, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed* (1523). He sharply distinguished the two communities into which the human race is divided. The worldly realm stands under God's rule and is His instrument. But the relationship to the worldly realm on the part of the Christian is distinctive. True Christians are governed by the Holy Spirit and really have no need of worldly authority but ought to do good of their own accord just as an apple tree bears apples without coercion.¹¹ The argument is predicated on the assumptions that "there are few true believers and fewer still who live a Christian life," and that the world and its masses will always be unchristian. No one can really be called a true Christian, so all must be placed under the restraint of worldly authority.

The Christian stands in a tension between the old life and the new, a tension which has no present resolution. Thus as a citizen of both kingdoms, polarities or opposites co-exist within him "in constant alternation" but "joined together completely in the same heart."¹²

Though the two kingdoms are utterly distinct in their principle of life and mode of operation, they not only stand under one rule of God but are dialectically related in the life of the Christian

¹⁰For a brief review of the doctrine see Ivar Asheim, ed., *Christ and Humanity* (Philadelphia, 1970), pp. 84, 92.

¹¹Cf. *LW*, 45, 89ff.

¹²See *LW*, 35, 411.

man, who is a citizen of both kingdoms. The Christian belongs to the worldly kingdom, stands under its authority and participates in its life; but his commitment to it is qualified and limited by his ultimate commitment to the spiritual kingdom.

This doctrine is one of the consequences of Luther's concept of creation. God exercises His dominion over the human race in different ways: in part through the Word and the sacraments, in part through the authorities and the secular order. The gifts which are needed for man's salvation are imparted in the spiritual realm, while the external order, necessary for human society, is upheld through the secular realm.

This concept is not to be confused with modern ideas of church-and-state, in which the state is thought to stand outside the religious sphere, while the church represents the spiritual domain. Here may be a real difficulty inasmuch as there remain very few societies which really hold that God rules in both realms, the spiritual and the secular. Within much of the modern world view, God is now confined to a very small closet.

Luther drew a sharp line of demarcation between the two realms. The spiritual realm is without external power. Its power is exercised by God Himself through the Word and the preaching office. The secular realm is subject to human reason, and its authority is exercised by men who have the power to enforce laws, etc. It is God Himself who is active in both realms, and thus they are united. In the spiritual sphere God works through the Gospel to save men, and in the secular He works through the Law and impels men to live in a certain way, to do good and avoid evil.

The doctrine of the two realms or kingdoms opposed the medieval concept of the church as being superior to the state. It also opposed the political concept of the enthusiasts, who looked upon the state as something foreign to faith and who conceived of man's relation to God in purely spiritual terms. The *politia* and the *economia* represent the secular realm (state and home) and the *ecclesia* the spiritual. These are interdependent with the appropriate callings.

Luther's concept of authority was based on Rom. 13:1-8:

"Every person must submit to the supreme authorities." Nevertheless, this authority is a limited one, based upon Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." This is not a systematic and abstract formulation of a doctrine. It grew out of Luther's experience of confronting the social order as we have described it, of being influenced by the psychological dimensions of his early life, and of formulating in a dialectical manner certain theological presuppositions. Internally, the Christian, as a citizen of both kingdoms, must make new, free decisions which satisfy the external boundaries of the spiritual kingdom (the realm of faith involving Christian freedom, service, and office) and the worldly kingdom (the external order involving the law, coercion, authority, and power). These kingdoms are independent partners.

The life relationships which the Christian has with these kingdoms are equally distinguishable. In the spiritual kingdom the relationship will be characterized by a personal, loving attitude toward one's neighbor, witnessing to the gospel, forgiveness, endurance, and sacrifice, supported by the uncoercive Word of God. As a citizen of the temporal or worldly order, he will relate to the common welfare of society under the limits set by the law and justice. In this relationship the citizen will be supported by the coercive power of the law (government) which is grounded upon the power of punishment and the right of collective self-defense.

To return to my original thesis: the complementarity of Luther's apocalypticism and positive secularity involves unresolved tension, limitations upon the secular affirmation, and a denial of any utopian vision of the world's destiny. Unlike the Anabaptists, who consigned the world to the devil and required the regenerate to sever all links with it and to withdraw into holy communities, and also unlike Calvin, who made the world a target for redemptive conquest, Luther let the world be the world. He deprived it of its gods, demons, and spirits without seeking to invest it with new religious meaning.

Indeed, Luther was never able to extricate himself from a basic ideological conflict as expressed in this doctrine. God's kingdom, which could become reality only in the life beyond, was infinitely

higher and purer than the lesser world of this earthly kingdom which was always sinful. God instituted government precisely because of natural man's self-centeredness. There will always be a few citizens who have been transformed by the gospel; but there will never be enough in any society to warrant the elimination of government supported by reason, law, public sentiment, and force. Only force or the threat of force is able to maintain the order which reason dictates as the minimum condition for some sort of acceptably functioning society. Government is necessary because man has brought disorder into creation through his own sin. Therefore, he dwells in the "Kingdom of Satan."¹³

But just as the structures of worldly authority are limited by God to fulfill His purposes, so too the devil is limited. The purpose of civil authority is to restrain evil, to preserve a decaying world, to patch and mend it while the present age endures.¹⁴ The princes are the instruments of God who rule by reason and common sense and not by gospel. This is a rather positive affirmation of the secular order. Provided that reason keeps to her proper task, she is the empress who conclusively demonstrates Luther's respect for reason.¹⁵ The government of society has a rationale and an integrity of its own, though this is not absolute, for it is always under God's judgment—but not through ecclesiastical control. *Billigkeit* (equity) is about the most one can expect from the state. Often it does not even give that. One should pray for the bad rulers and accept them as the scourges applied by God to the self-centeredness of natural man living in society.

Some Polarities, Contrasts, and Necessary Comparisons

Here one must necessarily reflect on another of Luther's polarities upon which our previous statement depends, i.e., Luther's Law-Gospel concept. At the obsequies of Luther, Johann Bugenhagen commented:

. . . he was without doubt the angel of which the Apocalypse speaks in chapter XIV: "And I saw an angel flying through the

¹³ *LW*, 23, 33.

¹⁴ Cf. "Exp. Ps. 101," *LW*, 13, 164.

¹⁵ Cf. Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason* (Oxford, 1962).

midst of heaven, who had an eternal gospel to preach," . . . the angel who says: "Fear God, and give glory to Him!" These are the two articles of the teaching of Martin Luther, the law and the gospel, by which the whole Scripture is opened and Christ made known as our righteousness and eternal life.¹⁶

The question is not one of two distinct orders, with the law to be replaced by the order of the gospel in the life of the Christian. These orders are really interdependent poles. The law never reaches fulfillment apart from the gospel. The gospel must be preached together with the law. The meaning of the gospel would be lost without the backdrop of the law. The law reveals sin and accuses the conscience; it unmask sin and condemns man; it drives him to seek the help of Christ. Thus the gospel proclamation of the forgiveness of sins could not take place apart from the law.

They can be distinguished. The law tells us what we are to do, under the threat of punishment. The gospel promises and provides the forgiveness of sin. One task of the law is to compel men to act, to promote the good and prevent the evil. As such it therefore includes all public order and activity on the different levels of life. This is the "civil use of the law" (*usus legis civilis*). However, when it comes to a man's relation to God, to righteousness in a higher sense, then man is referred to the Word of the gospel, which offers him forgiveness of sin for the sake of Christ. Now the task of the law is simply to reveal sin and to make the threat of wrath real—the wrath under which man stands because of his sinful nature. This is the spiritual use of the law (*usus theologicus seu spiritualis*).

There is also a correlation with the doctrine of Providence. Providence brought a particular power into existence: not a structure called the "state" (a word used from the 17th-18th century), but *Obrigkeit* or authority. God in His love works through (1) His own "proper" work—love, mercy, grace, or the *gospel*—; and (2) His "strange" work—punishment, threat, power, or the *law*. The law works for the gospel. In a sense Luther's conception of the state is a *Theocracy* defined as "a rule of God

¹⁶ On Feb. 22, 1546; cited from W. Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Glencoe, 1961), p. 19.

through the political situation." The proper function of the state is to repress evil and preserve society.

For Luther, call and creation go together. It is God, in His sustaining power, who places men in the various callings and positions. The purpose of the call is to serve one's neighbor. It is a part of this earthly life and is upheld by mutual service as its highest goal. Man cooperates with God in his calling. There he is an instrument for God's sustaining activity. When he fulfills that which belongs to his calling, he is doing something useful for his neighbor, and God thereby reveals His goodness and foresight.

Luther's concept of the call implies two things: (1) that the position and work which each man has is to be looked upon as a divine command, in which man is to seek God's help and obey His will; and (2) that human society is to be shaped by mutual service, in which men serve each other and bring God's gifts to their neighbors by fulfilling their various tasks. This second implication is poignantly expressed in Luther's Advent Sermons of 1522.

The secular order is also affirmed in Luther's understanding of vocation.¹⁷ The gospel is not excluded from the world when the prince is denied strict rule by the gospel. The gospel is freed for creative expression in the world through the Christian's vocation. Man's faith, in which he stands *coram deo* in the spiritual kingdom, becomes active in love towards the neighbor in the worldly kingdom. The proper fruit of faith is love towards the neighbor in the world. Christian discipleship becomes flesh in the context of ordinary human life. Radical commitment to God implies radical involvement in the world. The world is a sphere of free, creative, and responsible activity, in which the Christian may participate as a man alongside other men in the common tasks of social life and civilization, seeking to regulate and build according to the common gift of reason.

Such a Christian becomes everyone's servant. He becomes active because faith always produces fruit. He becomes zealous for his neighbor's rights but does not consider his own. He seeks

¹⁷ Cf. G. Wingren, *The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation*, trans. by Carl C. Rasmussen (Edinburgh, 1957).

to correct injustices and evils affecting others but suffers his own in silence in imitation of Christ.¹⁸

Application to the Contemporary Scene

Some scholars, including A. Nygren, P. Althaus, G. Ebeling, H. Bornkamm, and G. W. Forell, have defended the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms as the source of a salutary political realism, and as combined with a definite sense of Christian social responsibility. Others, such as K. Barth and D. Bonhoeffer, have condemned the doctrine as the source of a hopeless dualism and defeatism. Perhaps somewhere between these two positions one can locate those critics who *qualify* the applicability of the Two-Kingdoms doctrine to 20th-century social and political issues.

It can be argued by Luther and his commentators—and here I think is a valuable contribution in terms of modern Christianity—that the very finitude and contingency of the created order is the charter and guarantee of its character as a secular sphere, a given order for the responsible care and dominion of man. In Luther's time there was a credibility gap between (a) his conception of creation as appropriated from the OT and mitigated by the Pauline motif of world-rejection, and (b) the lack of fulfillment or application of this concept in his socio-political context. He had neither the liberty to shape a new order out of a confused one nor did he want to do so. He never followed through from his theological starting-point to a coherent vision of social and political order. He regarded all political forms as imperfect and ephemeral. He remained uncommitted to any particular form of political organization and in fact regarded the whole question as secondary. This was due to many factors, among them his limiting eschatological principle and the historical context of the time. In practice, this made Luther a social and political conservative who was prepared to work within the framework of the status quo; but it should not denigrate his recovery of forgotten elements in the biblical tradition.

I now wish to explore some dimensions of Luther's Two-Kingdoms doctrine which might profitably apply to the political

¹⁸ On this whole concept, see also, e.g., Luther's famous *Freedom of the Christian* of 1520.

sphere in both general and specific contours. With the development of political bureaucracies to unmanageable proportions, the crucial problem of the 20th century is the problem of politics. Political decisions are at the center of our lives and are increasingly the determinants of our destinies. We may think, for example, of the problems connected with inflation, international economic and monetary crises, socialization, unemployment, pollution, natural resources, drug abuse, and education which are facing modern society. These and other issues have become the concern and the indentured offspring of politics from local to federal level. In the process of decision-making within the constellation of power known as politics, the Christian proclamation has often been irrelevant, sentimental, and reactionary.

Can it be anything else? I would suggest that on the basis of the general outlines of Luther's position—especially as it relates to the correlative polarity of law and gospel—, the Christian assertion does provide a more positive contribution to the welfare of man in the body politic. We shall deal with the two poles with respect to *universality* and *absoluteness*.¹⁹

The *universality* of the law is proclaimed by the Christian church on the basis of God's revelation in the Bible. All men everywhere and at all times are under the law. This may appear hard to appreciate, especially when there are such vast differences in the positive laws of various human societies. It is not true that laws are merely the will of those who are powerful and oppress those who are weak. Such oppression may reveal the perversion of justice and the administration of laws due to the fact of sin, but is not the intrinsic fault of the principle of law. The universality of law provides a basis for cooperation with all those who share respect for law, regardless of their theological convictions.

With regard to *absoluteness* of law, we must bear in mind that the structure which confronts us is not arbitrary or freely reversible. The soundness of certain essential principles of equity seems to be discoverable by all people, and political life should be so organized as to give the greatest amount of support to the

¹⁹ Cf. Forell, "Law and Gospel as a Problem of Politics," *RL*, 31 (1962), 409-419.

related norms of action. The objective of the state and of politics is the earthly welfare of man. Therefore, to achieve these goals they must not ignore the absoluteness of the law. Positive laws of society must support the absolute norms of action which are by their nature reasonable. The Christian man must accept the law as ultimately rooted in God's will for man and the world. It is a means which God has established to preserve order and to restrain the self-destructive tendencies of sin while the church is waiting for the final consummation. This is also to recognize the essential content of Luther's doctrine of sin and of his eschatology. Man has the responsibility to serve his neighbor by doing everything in his power to contribute to the earthly welfare of man by political means.

When it comes, as it does now, to relating the gospel and the Christian assertion of it to the realm of politics, a much thornier process is involved. The gospel cannot be the basis for cooperation with non-Christians, nor can it undergird politics; for most of the western world lives in a highly pluralistic society in which perhaps a majority neither know nor believe in the gospel. It is even highly dubious to equate western societies which initially had their origin in a Judeo-Christian tradition with an identical typology today.

Furthermore, we cannot establish the gospel rule with our resources. As Luther has said in his *Small Catechism*, "The kingdom of God comes indeed of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come unto us also." Only God can effect the establishment of His Kingdom, which is not of this world.

However, the Christian and the Christian Church can function as a leaven leavening the loaf and as a light shining in the darkness. Thus they can be instruments for the gospel of Christ to exert an indirect but important influence upon the political life of the community.

To return once more to the categories of "universality" and "absoluteness": For the Christian the gospel is *universally* relevant. It is as a forgiven sinner that the Christian participates in political life. This will protect him against false hopes and false despair. He should know about sin in its pervasiveness and thus

participate in politics with fewer illusions concerning the possibilities of political achievement. He will not expect unattainable utopias nor succumb to the siren songs of all sorts of political and social saviors. The gospel is for him the source of cool and calm realism in the political turmoil and fanaticism of our age. On the other hand, he will not subscribe to false despair since he can depend upon the resources of the gospel. God offers him forgiveness of sin through grace which frees him for responsible and intelligent action in the realm of politics.

There is also relevance in the *absoluteness* of the gospel, which is always the same, immune to the changes of opinion, clime, and time. It is a gospel which offers the steadfast love (*hesed*) of God. The Christian works under it *sub specie aeternitatis*. It adds stability and identity to the thinking of the Christian in politics. Preserving man from such perversions as opportunism and moral surrender, though he is subject to relapses, the gospel stands ready to raise man up again and turn him in the right direction. Thus the law is immediately and socially relevant and the gospel is mediately and personally relevant. Through both, God deals with man.