

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 4 • FALL 1998

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE TWO KINGDOMS

Kenneth Hagen

The understanding of "Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms" is complicated for several reasons: the doctrine is not Luther's;¹ Luther had more than two kingdoms; Luther had more than one doctrine, or so it seems; the terms kingdom and government are not technical terms; and the doctrine is often criticized, misunderstood, and misused. Since the problems of misunderstanding and misuse lie in modern philosophical assumptions (such as liberalism) and political agendas (such as Nazism), I see no need to force Luther into modern problems.

Let us try to set our focus on Luther, on his time and corpus, setting aside modern agendas. To do so, I offer seven assertions.

1) Set aside the assumption that the two kingdoms equal church and state. The kingdom of God for Luther includes more than the church militant, and the kingdom of this world includes more than the single, divinely instituted secular government.

2) The two cities of Augustine's *City of God Against the Pagans* do not equal Luther's two kingdoms. The two cities for Augustine are two loves—one of the flesh and one of the spirit; the two cities represent the cosmic conflict between the divine and the demonic. The two loves and the cosmic conflict are also in Luther but do not equate with the two kingdoms of God and this world. Both kingdoms of God and the world in Luther are in conflict with the Devil.

3) The famous charge of "quietism" leveled by Reinhold Niebuhr, that German Lutherans particularly were passive regarding the kingdom of this world, has been adequately rebuffed by Brent Sockness.² Furthermore, I always remind my students that when you think of the man Martin Luther who lived in and taught the two kingdoms, "defeatism" and "quietism" are the last words that come to mind. Erasmus wished that Niebuhr would have been right.

4) To focus on Luther in his context, remember that everything in the Middle Ages, above the earth, on the earth, and beneath the earth, was under the rule of God. No independent, neutral, secular realm, no secular state existed apart from God. The *saeculum* is God's creation.

5) Remember that for Luther the "kingdom of the Devil," the third kingdom, was active but not in control of the kingdom of the world. The *regnum diaboli* stands as a threat to both the kingdoms of God and the world.

6) Still trying to focus on Luther in his historical context, Luther's distinction between the two kingdoms developed *vis-à-vis* the polemical contexts of Rome on the right and the Radicals on the left. The papal Middle Ages had confused the two kingdoms such that they were often indistinguishable. Erasmus preceded Luther in reminding the Pope to tend the flock and not to engage in political warfare. The Radicals wandered between wanting to establish the kingdom of God on earth by divine law or force, thereby collapsing the two kingdoms, and wanting to separate totally from all political and social involvements.³

7) Luther had two different configurations of two kingdoms, most often called "two kingdoms" and "two governments." Since the terms are interchangeable and not technical, I find it helpful to picture two schemes or two sets of kingdoms in Luther. The two are separate but overlap and intersect. The two governments are the right and left hands

of God. Some of the subsequent confusion over Luther's teaching results from not seeing and distinguishing the two configurations and how they relate. I do think that Luther had one general doctrine, which I will come back to at the end.

MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

What is needed here is not a discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr, liberation theology,⁴ political theology,⁵ Trutz Rendtorff,⁶ or Karl Barth,⁷ à la recent secondary literature, but a more systematic-historical view of Luther's doctrine of the kingdoms. It is typical of secondary literature to state the complexity of Luther's doctrine, but then in my view to contribute further to the complexity. I have found no full treatment in the secondary literature. All too often the doctrine is discussed in reference to some issue extraneous to Luther.

My own contribution is intended to sort out the complexity and thereby clear up any ambiguity. Luther was not confused over the issue; Luther was clear about heaven and earth, the hangman and the preacher, Christ and the Devil. It is true that Luther did not use a technical vocabulary for the two kingdoms-regiments, such as he did with law, gospel, church, and so on. But his mind was consistent and clear about keeping the two separate, and he employed a wealth of terms to do so.

I have not seen anyone do what I intend to do: Distinguish two different schemes of the kingdoms, isolate a third kingdom of the Devil, identify a third government-regiment of the angels, and suggest that it all hangs together in one theological framework.

A word about the doctrinal character of the doctrine, apart from the fact that Luther did not use the phrase "the doctrine of the two kingdoms." Some wish to argue that the doctrine of the two kingdoms in Luther is not a doc-

trine in the sense of that to which faith is attached. That is true; faith is attached to the Word. The doctrine is not an article of faith, such as those in one of the creeds. But it is a doctrine in the sense of important teaching; to confuse the two kingdoms by collapsing or totally separating them is the work of the Devil, according to Luther.⁸ Luther did have a doctrine of the earthly realm and a doctrine of the kingdom of God, as seen, for example, in his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* (LW 21:50); you might say that he had a doctrine of each of the kingdoms separately but not a doctrine of the two, that is, a doctrine of their relationship.

I have not seen anyone do what I intend to do: Distinguish two different schemes of the kingdoms, isolate a third kingdom of the Devil, identify a third government-regiment of the angels, and suggest that it all hangs together in one theological framework.



The doctrine of the kingdom of Christ is the "chief doctrine."⁹ In his comments on Isaiah 60:19 (1527-30), Luther speaks of distinguishing "Christ's kingdom from the kingdom of the world"; the "visible sun, which rules the world, the elements, and government," and the other sun who is Christ who instructs us in divine righteousness; the gospel

tribulation, the light of Christ. At the end he says, "These are articles of faith which are spoken in the school of the cross."¹⁰ While one could criticize the older scholarship—Wingren, Cranz—for the heaven/earth dichotomy at the expense of the kingdom of the right and left hands, they were accurate to see heaven in Luther.¹¹ Today with a dualistic (existential) orientation, heaven seems to have slipped away in treatments of Luther; the same with the angels. Ebeling, it seems, is symptomatic of a dualistic treatment when he links the two kingdoms with law and gospel. At the outset it appears that the two kingdoms do parallel law and gospel in that law is the instrument of God's left hand, and the gospel the instrument of the right hand. But Ebeling and others miss Luther when they identify law with the Devil, death, sin, and flesh (*diabolus, mors, peccatum, caro*).¹² Has Ebeling missed the point in Luther that the civil use of the law is different from the spiritual use? The identification of the two kingdoms with the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the Devil goes back to Johannes Heckerl.¹³ The kingdom of the world is not identical with the kingdom of the Devil; the secular realm includes state (or government), nature, the family, the arts, and all the sciences.¹⁴

THE WHOLE PICTURE

Allow me to state the whole picture in three paragraphs.

First, a systematic or coherent and historical view of Luther's whole doctrine of the two and three kingdoms focuses on the distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world against the medieval inclination to unite the two under the papacy. Here the horizontal distinction between heaven and earth pertains. The kingdom of the Devil, the kingdom of the underworld, is at work attacking both God's eternal kingdom of redemption and God's created world. The Christian belongs to both the

earthly and heavenly kingdoms. Since there are so few true Christians, the civil use of the law is needed to maintain order and justice in the earthly realm.

Since there are so few true Christians, the civil use of the law is needed to maintain order and justice in the earthly realm.



Second, intersecting this scheme, i.e., the horizontally oriented kingdoms of heaven and earth, a wholistic treatment of Luther notes another aspect to Luther's doctrine of the kingdoms, namely, the two governments as the kingdom of the right hand and the kingdom of the left hand of God. This scheme is vertically oriented in that it represents God's outreach, his rule over all on earth. Luther's doctrine is that God rules indirectly with His left hand in the created order through the God-ordained institutions of government, family, schools, etc.; and God rules directly with His right hand in the church through Word and sacrament. This vertical scheme of two governments-regiments includes a third government; it is the rule of the angelic realm or government through reason and the understanding.

Third, these two, which I am calling schemes or configurations of how the world here and beyond is governed, are complementary and always in force together.¹⁵ To put it simply, think of Luther who lived in both of the horizontal

kingdoms: in the visible earthly kingdom as a citizen of Wittenberg and in the invisible heavenly kingdom as a Christian in the company of all the saints and angels. Furthermore, Luther was an instrument of God's left hand as professor, father, and civil judge, and an instrument of God's right hand as priest and preacher. Furthermore, Luther's doctrine of *Anfechtung* meant he was in daily struggle with Satan and his kingdom, and his morning prayer called for charge of the holy angel.

RELATION TO OTHER DOCTRINES

Many seek to connect "Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms" with some other of his well-known distinctions such as law and gospel, creation and redemption.¹⁶ James Atkinson relates the two kingdoms to the two aeons:

For the biblical foundation of his social ethic, Luther rooted his doctrine of the "two kingdoms" of creation and redemption in the Pauline eschatology of the "two ages" (aeons), in Adam and in Christ (Romans 5). In the kingdom of God, the Redeemer rules all regenerate believers through Christ and the gospel in personal faith and love. In the kingdom of men, the Creator rules all sinful but rational creatures through Caesar and the law in civil justice and order. As both Redeemer and Creator, God is at once the Lord of both kingdoms; as both righteous and sinful, the Christian is at once a subject of both kingdoms. Hence for an evangelical theology of society, the two kingdoms must always be properly distinguished, but never separated in secularism or equated in clericalism.¹⁷

To be sure, all of Luther's theology forms a coherent whole; but to use one distinction as a key to unlock some other theme, I do not find helpful. I recommend seeing each of Luther's ideas as a whole piece, using the vocabulary from within that article of faith.

Let us see how the doctrine of the two kingdoms interconnects with Luther's other main ideas.

Law and Gospel: Civil use of the law is for the left hand, spiritual use for the right hand; both uses of the gospel, alien and proper, are used by the right hand.

Christian Freedom: The Christian is free only in the kingdom of God through the power of Christ to redeem from bondage to sin.

Christian Vocation: All are called to be children of God; in the kingdom of this earth, we have different callings.

Faith and Good Works: Faith is vertically directed to God; works are horizontally directed to the neighbor; God does not need my good works, but my neighbor does.

Christian Society: God rules the world; rulers will be held accountable; human reason and will are to reign to create peace and justice.

Doctrine of God: The two-kingdoms doctrine relates best to Luther's doctrine of God; God is the creator of all that exists, seen and unseen.

Except for the doctrines of God and vocation, the two-kingdom theology does not gain a great deal when set in relation with other key ideas. It is really a theological construct, a *Weltanschauung*, to set up the whole picture. Most of Luther's distinctive ideas relate to the kingdom of God and do not achieve any greater clarity in relation to the other kingdom(s): such is the case where we have to deal with biblical interpretation, Trinity, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, sacramentology, soteriology, and eschatology.

HEAVEN AND EARTH

Next I wish to present two key documents of Luther's that highlight the scheme of the two kingdoms as heaven and earth, namely, *The Large Commentary on Galatians* and *The Bondage of the Will*.

Gustav Wingren points out the importance of the dis-

tinction between the two kingdoms in *Galatians* and *Bondage* by saying "that this demarcation between earth and heaven is the main point in two of Luther's central writings: *Large Commentary on Galatians* and *The Bondage of the Will*."¹⁸

In *Bondage* Luther makes the distinction between the two kingdoms very clear by the terminology of things which are "above" us and things which are "below" us. For Luther, man and woman, in their special place within the pyramid of creation, were created to have free dominion over all things, even though they have lost their freedom before God.¹⁹ Luther says that if we do not wish to drop the term "free will" altogether, "let us at least teach men to use it honestly, so that free choice is allowed to man only with respect to what is beneath him and not what is above him."²⁰ Thus human will is free in earthly matters, but not before God. Later, in *Bondage* Luther reaches the same conclusion in a discussion of Sirach 15:14-17 by dividing mankind into two kingdoms:

We thus learn from Ecclesiasticus that man is divided between two kingdoms, in one of which he is directed by his own choice and counsel, apart from any precepts and commandments of God, namely, in his dealings with the lower creatures. . . . In the other kingdom, however, man is not left in the hand of his own counsel, but is directed and led by the choice and counsel of God, so that just as in his own kingdom he is directed by his own counsel, without regard to the precepts of another, so in the kingdom of God he is directed by the precepts of another, without regard to his own choice.²¹

The distinction of the two kingdoms is between the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. Near the end of his work, Luther again makes use of the distinction

between the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven: "We are not disputing about nature but about grace, and we are not asking what we are on earth, but what we are in heaven before God."²² And so Luther again continues to solve the problem of free will by making the distinction between the two kingdoms. Hence in *Bondage* Luther used the distinction of the two kingdoms as the conceptual framework and as the eyeglass by which he constructs his reply to Erasmus. And on this account I disagree with Gustav Wingren's point that the demarcation of the two kingdoms is "the main point" of *Bondage*. Luther does not seek to establish the point or to prove it, but he rather assumes the distinction of the two kingdoms as his basic frame of reference. The main point of the treatise is to show that our salvation is utterly beyond our powers, will, and works and is absolutely dependent on the free will of God.

Luther gives a very clear picture of the two kingdoms in his *Large Commentary on Galatians*. At times he uses the distinction of the two kingdoms to indicate the two realms of existence. This can best be seen in Luther's fundamental contrast between the two justices (*Gerechtigkeits*).²³ He says, "We set forth two worlds, as it were, one of them heavenly and the other earthly. Into these we place these two kinds of righteousness, which are distinct and separated from each other."²⁴ The two realms of justice are the contrast between passive and active justices. Christian justice, i.e., justice before God, is passive justice: "For here we work nothing, render nothing unto God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, 'passive.'"²⁵ This worldly justice, i.e., justice among humans, is active justice—it is "all other kinds of righteousness" than righteousness before God:

There is a political righteousness, which the emperor, the

princes of the world, philosophers and lawyers consider. There is also a ceremonial righteousness, which human traditions teach . . . There is, in addition to these, yet another righteousness, the righteousness of the Law or of the Decalog.²⁶

Luther equates the distinction between the two justices with the basic biblical distinction between law and the gospel and argues that just as God carefully separated heaven and earth, so we should carefully separate these two justices:

Therefore whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian. . . . The way to distinguish the one from the other is to locate the Gospel in heaven and the Law on earth, to call the righteousness of the Gospel heavenly and divine and the righteousness of the Law earthly and human, and to distinguish as sharply between the righteousness of the Gospel and that of the Law as God distinguishes between heaven and earth.²⁷

Luther distinguishes the two justices because the Christian lives in both the realm of God's kingdom and the realm of the human kingdom, and as long as Christians are in the human kingdom they may never "mix" them.

Luther uses a number of other contrasts to indicate the two realms of existence. For example he urges the distinction between morals and faith, works and grace, and polity and religion.²⁸ He urges that the political and economic realm of reason be distinguished from the spiritual realm: "For the kingdom of man's reason and the spiritual kingdom must be separated far asunder."²⁹

Distinguishing between the life of religion and life of secular polity, Luther says, "Where religion and the Word of God are the issue, there must be no partiality. But apart

from religion, apart from God, there must be partiality."³⁰ He corrects his "adversaries" by distinguishing the realm of natural or moral works from the realm of theological works and matters of divinity: "Therefore 'doing' is always understood in theology as doing with faith, so that 'doing' with faith is another sphere and a new kingdom, so to speak, separate from moral doing."³² "The boundaries and the kingdoms of the Law or works and of faith should be correctly distinguished from one another." At other times Luther uses the distinction of the two kingdoms to indicate the two realms of discourse. Certain propositions and concepts apply only to the kingdom of heaven, other times only to the realm of human reason. And sometimes statements have different meanings as they are applied in one or the other realm. For example, Luther says at one point, "For we must note here that Paul is dealing (*quia Paulus versatur*) not with a political topic (*non in loco politico*) but with a theological and spiritual one, with something in the sight of God (*sed theologico et spirituali coram deo*)."³³ Commenting on Paul's statement that God is no respecter of persons, Luther says this is true in the realm (*in loco*) of justification: "We must pay careful attention to this distinction, that about theological issues we must speak in a way that is vastly different from the way we speak about social issues."³⁴ Considering some of the statements of the "sophists," Luther illustrates the two realms of discourse by saying, "We do not then deny that these sentences are true in the corporeal realm; but if you drag them into the spiritual kingdom before the presence of God, I utterly deny them."³⁵

To sum up this scheme of the two kingdoms, from another source in Luther: "Christ did not come to establish a worldly kingdom; He came to establish a kingdom of heaven."³⁶

LEFT AND RIGHT HAND

Now I wish to present two other documents of Luther's that highlight the other scheme of the two kingdoms as the left and right hand of God, namely, *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* and *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*.

Luther also thinks of the two kingdoms in terms of two governments (*Regimente*) established by God in order to rule the human race. The scheme is two vertical governments and kingdoms, representing the extension of the left and right hands of God: the secular kingdom, being the kingdom of the left hand, which God rules through secular authority; and the spiritual kingdom, being the kingdom of the right hand, which God rules through the church.

Weltliches Regiment is spoken of as Gottes Reich for God wills it to remain and wishes us to be obedient within it. It is the kingdom of God's left hand where God rules through father, mother, Kaiser, king, judge, and even hangman; but His proper Kingdom, the Kingdom of His right hand, is where God rules Himself, where He is immediately present and His Gospel is preached.³⁷

This aspect of Luther's teaching of the two regiments must be seen within the context of his doctrine of providence and creation, that is, as Gordon Rupp says, "*coram Deo*."³⁸

The two kinds of rule are ways by which God himself runs his world. Hence, as Anders Nygren says, it is God with whom we deal in matters spiritual and temporal—God himself rules both realms.³⁹ Luther divides all of mankind into two groups: the Christians who belong to the kingdom of God, and the non-Christians who belong to the kingdom of the world. Each group and kingdom has its own government, with its special means for govern-

ment, and with its particular goals and purposes for governing:

We must divide all the children of Adam into two classes; the first belong to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world. Those belonging to the kingdom of God are all true believers in Christ and are subject to Christ. . . . He [Christ] also calls the Gospel a Gospel of the kingdom of God, because it teaches, governs, and upholds God's Kingdom.⁴⁰

All who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law. There are few true believers, and still fewer who live a Christian life, who do not resist evil and indeed themselves do no evil. For this reason God has provided for them a different government outside the Christian estate and God's kingdom. He has subjected them to the sword so that, even though they would like to, they cannot practice their wickedness, and if they do practice it they cannot do so without fear or with success and impunity.⁴¹

For this reason these two governments must be sharply distinguished, and both be permitted to remain; the one to produce piety, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in the world without the other.⁴²

Gordon Rupp summarizes Luther well: "God's spiritual government is that of the 'Kingdom of God,' the 'Kingdom of Christ,' and is exercised through the Gospel, as a 'Kingdom of Hearing' (through faith)."⁴³ Luther says, "Christians can be ruled by nothing except God's Word."⁴⁴ This means that if all were Christians there would be no need of secular law and sword:

If all the world were composed of real Christians, that is, true believers, no prince, king, lord, sword or law would be needed. They would serve no purpose, since Christians

have in their hearts the Holy Spirit, who instructs them and causes them to wrong no one, to love everyone, willingly and cheerfully to suffer injustice and even death from every one. . . . Therefore, it is not possible for the secular sword and law to find any work to do among Christians, since they do of their own accord much more than all laws and doctrines can demand.⁴⁵ Since, however, the whole world is evil and that among thousands there is scarcely one true Christian . . . it is out of the question that there should be a common Christian government over the whole world, or indeed over one land or company of people, since the wicked always outnumber the good.⁴⁶

For this reason God rules the two different groups of people in the world by two different instruments.

In *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, Luther states the "sum and substance of it":

God has established two kinds of government among men. The one is spiritual; it has no sword, but it has the Word, by means of which men are to become good and righteous, so that with this righteousness they may attain everlasting life. He administers this righteousness through the Word, which He has committed to the preachers. The other kind is worldly government, which works through the sword so that those who do not want to be good and righteous to eternal life may be forced to become good and righteous in the eyes of the world. He administers this righteousness through the sword. And although God will not reward this kind of righteousness with eternal life, nonetheless, he still wishes peace to be maintained among men and rewards them with temporal blessing.⁴⁷

Thus according to Luther, God has established and rules two *Regimente* and *Reiche*: the temporal for *iustitia civilis* through the law by the sword, and the spiritual for *iustitia christiana* through the Word. "Thus God Himself is

the founder, lord, master, protector, and rewarder of both kinds of righteousness."⁴⁸

KINGDOM OF THE DEVIL (*Regnum Diaboli*)

Luther also speaks of a *regnum diaboli* which must now be understood. I think his discussion of the *regnum diaboli* can best be understood as presupposing his emphasis on the two horizontally oriented kingdoms of heaven and earth. A further difficulty in trying to specify what Luther means by the two kingdoms arises when Luther speaks of a *regnum diaboli* distinguished from a *regnum dei*. For example,

Whatever is flesh is ungodly, under God's wrath, and a stranger to his Kingdom. And if it is a stranger to God's Kingdom and Spirit, it follows of necessity that it is under the kingdom and spirit of Satan. For there is no middle kingdom between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, which are mutually and perpetually at war with each other.⁴⁹

Gordon Rupp says that the conflict and dynamism in history, the ferment of evil, to which Luther's doctrine of the Devil bears witness, "blurs all theorizing and prevents a smooth and rounded doctrine in this matter."⁵⁰ When confronted with Luther's thought on the *regnum diaboli*, it must be kept in mind that both the spiritual and temporal *Regimente* and *Reiche* are under the rule of God. It is only because the kingdoms are governed by God that they continue; whereas if the kingdoms should be left to themselves for a moment, they would be overthrown by the Devil. Thus, as E. M. Carlson points out, the *regnum diaboli* is not to be identified with either regime, but can affect both: "Both regimes are ideally and properly a defense against evil, but both of them may be corrupted."⁵¹ The Devil's dominion seeks to prevent submission to God which is demanded in both regimes.

Luther wrote on Psalm 101:5:

Such divine direction is especially necessary in that secular government in which David and God-fearing Christian princes rule; for they are supposed to do both—serve God and rule the people. The devil is much more hostile to these than he is to the heathen, who are his subjects. . . . As the Bible teaches us, therefore, God Himself has always had to protect and preserve His people's kingdom through His own power and miraculous deeds, through all the extraordinary leaders whom He chose and awakened for this purpose. While the devil is also hostile and opposed to the secular government of the heathen, still he hates the government of the saints of God on earth much more fanatically. Against this he has always used the kingdoms and the powers of the heathen, as is shown by all the heathen who have been round about Jerusalem; and he will never quit until the Last Day, when he will finally have to stop.⁵²

GOVERNMENT OF THE ANGELS (*Engelisches Regiment*)

Just as the doctrine of the two kingdoms as heaven and earth has a third kingdom, that of the Devil, so the doctrine of the two kingdoms-governments as the right and left hands of God has a third government, that of the angels. In Luther's works, I have seen the view of the angels as a third government spelled out only in his *Commentary on Zechariah* (1527).⁵³ Certainly Luther speaks of the rule, protection, and influence of the angels often. I have not seen anyone in secondary literature point out the existence of both the—third—kingdom of the Devil and the—third—government of the angels (*Commentary on Zechariah* [WA 23:513.36—514.31]).

He has, then, three outward governments and in addition three outward ways or means for His own divine rule. In the secular government it is the sword and the fist, in the spiritu-

al government it is the Word and the mouth, in the angelic government it is reason and the understanding. These are the three means: sword, Word, reason. By the sword, however, I understand all that pertains to the secular rule, such as secular justice and laws, customs and habits, manners, estates, various offices, persons, clothes, etc. By the Word I understand all that pertains to the spiritual government, such as spiritual gifts, 1 Cor. 12:5, Eph. 4:11, Rom. 12:6f., and the sacraments and the like. By reason I understand everything that the dear angels use to move us, to keep us from evil or to nudge us toward the good. For they do not rule by the sword or the Word, though they might. The spiritual rulers, on the other hand, cannot rule by reason, like the angels, nor, do they rule with the sword, though they could do that too, but by the Word. The secular rulers cannot rule by reason, like the angels, nor by the Word, like the spiritual rulers, but govern by the sword. Thus each has its designated work and limit: the lowest cannot perform the office of the highest, but the highest can indeed perform that of the lowest. The secular government, however, is the lowest and least of the governments of God; for it makes no one pious but only punishes the evil and resists the rebellious. But more of that elsewhere.⁵⁴

Going beyond the Luther texts covered, one could cite Luther forever on the topic of the two kingdoms. Let me provide a further sample of a document where the horizontal scheme dominates, a sample where the vertical dominates, and a text where both are present.

First, the distinction between heaven and earth. In his comments on Psalm 8 (1537/1572), Luther, following John 18:36 ("My kingship is not of this world"), distinguishes "sharply" between Christ's kingdom, an eternal, heavenly, imperishable kingdom, and the kingdom of the world, an earthly, perishable, mortal kingdom.⁵⁵

Next, the vertical scheme. In his comments on Psalm

101 (1534), Luther distinguishes "two areas of authority," the secular kingdom and God's kingdom. The secular government of the godless is God's ordinance and creation: "both kingdoms were in Rome at the same time—Emperor Nero ruled the one against Christ, Christ ruled the other through His apostles Peter and Paul against the devil."⁵⁶

Last, a good example of both schemes present:

The spiritual government or authority should direct the people vertically toward God that they may do right and be saved; just so the secular government should direct the people horizontally toward one another, seeing to it that body, property, honor, wife, child, house, home, and all manner of goods remain in peace and security and are blessed on earth. God wants the government of the world to be a symbol of true salvation and of His kingdom of heaven, like a pantomime or a mask.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

I have tried to present the whole picture of the various ingredients that go into "Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms." Without repeating what I have set forth, let me indicate how I diagram the matter for my students: I see two horizontal planes, that is, the two horizontal kingdoms of heaven and earth overlapping two vertical lines. I see the two vertical lines reaching out from the left and right hands of God extending from the heavens above to the earth below, both the secular and spiritual governments ruling and intersecting the kingdom of this earth.

For Luther it is doctrinally necessary to separate the two kingdoms. For our purposes, I have separated the two schemes of the two kingdoms, calling the one a horizontal configuration of the heavens above and the earth beneath and calling the other a vertical picture of God's two governments as his two hands. For Luther the kingdom of heaven

is not the earth, and yet on this earth God is present and at work through sword and Word. Also, the earth is not heaven; our temporary abode here is sustainable because we participate in the heavenly realm and worship Christ in the company of all the saints. Both schemes are further nuanced by the kingdom of the Devil and the government of the angels.

As is typical for all of Luther, he has the whole theological picture in his head. I see Luther in general as operating with a complete theological arsenal from which he draws particular weapons depending on the situation.



The reason I have separated the two schemes is that in Luther's writings usually only one is present. The two are very different. Refusing to believe that Luther contradicts himself, and refusing to isolate the one as the mature and real Luther by ignoring the other, as is sometimes done, the only way I could avoid the confusion so prevalent from the literature on the subject is to see that Luther has two complementary views of the two kingdoms.

As is typical for all of Luther, he has the whole theological picture in his head. I see Luther in general as operating with a complete theological arsenal from which he draws particular weapons depending on the situation. I see

Luther as having a complete and coherent picture of the complexities of heaven, earth, Word, hangman, Devil, angels, and all their interrelationships in his huge storehouse of a mind; however, since most of his writing was occasional in some polemical context, he drew out and developed what was needed for the moment.

The two conceptions of the kingdoms provided him with a theological structure to organize his thoughts in a particular context. Just as all of Luther's nuances complement each other, so the two sets do not conflict but complete each other.

And not only are the two complementary, they are both necessary. The horizontal scheme alone could lean in the direction of otherworldliness, as it did in the case of the Spiritualists, or secularism, as it did in the medieval papacy. The vertical configuration alone could lead to immanenism; and it has, as in Enlightenment Christianity.

It may be that the difficulties associated with Luther's two-kingdom doctrine in the history of Lutheranism are attributable to the isolation of one scheme at the expense of the other. The two views, then, are not only both complementary and necessary but also serve as correctives to each other.

Finally, we may ask, does Luther have a doctrine of the two kingdoms? I am willing to say yes, not only because it is such a commonplace in the literature, but also because I think Luther had one doctrine with several nuances and complementary configurations depending on the historical (and polemical) situation. I see no problem with the term "two" kingdoms while there were actually four or six. Predominantly there were two kingdoms and two governments, namely, two different schemes, two configurations in one overall framework. The point here is that for Luther it all hung together. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so the kingdom of God is to be separated from the

kingdom of the world. So too as the Word is mightier than the sword, the right hand of God is to be differentiated from the left hand. Luther frames his understanding of the kingdoms with basically two horizontal and two vertical kingdoms. The frame is under siege by the Devil and guided by the angels.

Author

Dr. Kenneth Hagen has been a professor of historical theology for thirty years at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he has developed a departmental focus on Luther Studies in a Catholic Context. He is a graduate and distinguished alumnus of Augsburg College and received his Th.D. from Harvard Divinity School. Dr. Hagen was also a Fulbright professor at the University of Oslo. He also served on the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Theological Dialogue. He has authored numerous books, including *Luther's Lectures on Hebrews in the Light of Medieval Commentaries on Hebrews*, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: "The Lectures on Hebrews," Annotated Bibliography of Luther Studies, 1967-1976*, and *Luther's Approach to Scripture As Seen in His "Commentaries" on Galatians*.

Notes

1. It began to take shape in the nineteenth century. Bernhard Lohse finds the first usage of the term in 1922; see his *Martin Luther, An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 188.
2. Brent Sockness, "Luther's Two Kingdoms Revisited, A Response to Reinhold Niebuhr's Criticism of Luther," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 20 (1992), 93-110.
3. Luther condemns both the Anabaptists and the Pope for confusing the rod of the Word and the rod of wood: "they all reach for the sword, the Anabaptists, Münzer, the pope, and all the bishops" (*Sermons on the Gospel of John* [1537-38], LW 22:225).
4. Craig Nesson, "Liberation Theology's Critique of Luther's Two Kingdoms Doctrine," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 16 (1989), 257-66.

5. Andreas Pawlas, "Evangelische politische Theologie, Zwei-Reiche-Lehre von der Königsherrschaft Christi als ihre Kriterien und Interpretamente," *Kerygma und Dogma* 36 (1990), 313-32.
6. Ernst-Wilhelm Wendebourg, "Die Reformulierung der lutherischen Zweireiche-Lehre in Trutz Rendtorffs Ethik—der Versuch einer theologischen Bewertung," *Kerygma und Dogma* 38 (1992), 199-229.
7. Gérard Siegwalt, "Les Deux Règnes (Concernant la relation entre Eglise et Etat)," *Revue D'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 70 (1990/2), 165-72.
8. *Commentary on Psalm 101* (1534): "Constantly I must pound in and squeeze in and drive in and wedge in this difference between the two kingdoms, even though it is written and said so often that it becomes tedious. The devil never stops cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into each other. In the devil's name the secular leaders always want to be Christ's masters and teach Him how He should run His church and spiritual government. Similarly, the false clerics and schismatic spirits always want to be the masters, though not in God's name, and to teach people how to organize the secular government. Thus the devil is indeed very busy on both sides, and he has much to do. May God hinder him, amen, if we deserve it!" (LW 13:194-95).
9. *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, LW 23:178.
10. LW 17:324-25.
11. A problem with Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms arises when men like Cranz and Wingren reduce all of Luther's distinctions between the two kingdoms to a two-level, horizontal scheme of heaven and earth. See F. Edward Cranz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society*, Harvard Theological Studies (Cambridge, 1959); and Gustaf Wingren, *Luther On Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Philadelphia, 1957). Luther, indeed, partially fits into this scheme. But there are also parts of Luther's distinction of the two kingdoms which cut across the two-level scheme of heaven and earth. These may be represented as emphasizing two vertical realms extending from heaven and earth. These two schemes or ways of distinguishing Luther's discussion of the two kingdoms are not self-contradictory. In fact, both must be kept together in mind always.
12. Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 391.
13. Lohse, 189.
14. Lohse, 188.
15. Below is a discussion of the two schemes present in Luther's distinction of the two kingdoms. I am perhaps in danger of misrepresenting Luther by separating them, but I do so because interpreters of Luther tend to emphasize one or the other, and even one to the

- exclusion of the other. Furthermore, I present two schemes separately because more often than not Luther uses one or the other in a given work. Occasionally, both are present.
16. The one who does the most interrelating of doctrines is Franz Lau, "The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," *Lutheran World* 12 (1965), 355-72.
 17. "Introduction to The Christian in Society," LW 44:xiii-xiv.
 18. Wingren, 14.
 19. Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 275.
 20. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:70.
 21. *Ibid.*, LW 33:118-19.
 22. *Ibid.*, LW 33:284-85.
 23. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* 1535, LW 26:4f.
 24. *Ibid.*, LW 26:8.
 25. *Ibid.*, LW 26:5.
 26. *Ibid.*, LW 26:4.
 27. *Ibid.*, LW 26:115.
 28. Luther, *Galatians*, WA 40:I, 51, 10f.: "Audistis heri subiectum huius Epistolae, quod Paulus docet illam iusticiam Christianam, et, sicut dixi, diligenter est observanda ista distinctio, ne confundantur mores at fides, opera et gratia, politia et religio, et valde multum conducit istas 2 iusticias distinguere."
 29. Luther, *Galatians* 1535, LW 26:174.
 30. *Ibid.*, LW 26:97.
 31. *Ibid.*, LW 26:262-63.
 32. *Ibid.*, LW 26:273.
 33. *Ibid.*, LW 26:249.
 34. *Ibid.*, LW 26:96.
 35. *Ibid.*, LW 26:174.
 36. *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537), LW 24:155.
 37. Luther, "Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent," WA 52:26.22-27 (1544), trans. T. F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), 24; cf. also WA 36:385.6-11 (1532) for a slightly different version of the same.
 38. Rupp, 289.
 39. Anders Nygren, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," *Ecumenical Review* 1 (1949), 304.
 40. Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523), LW 45:88.
 41. *Ibid.*, LW 45:90.

42. *Ibid.*, LW 45:92.
43. Rupp, 290.
44. Luther, *Temporal Authority*, LW 45:117.
45. *Ibid.*, LW 45:89.
46. *Ibid.*, LW 45:91.
47. Luther, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526), LW 46:99-100.
48. *Ibid.*, LW 46:100.
49. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:227.
50. Rupp, 290.
51. E. M. Carlson, "Luther's Conception of Government," *Church History* 15 (1946), 270.
52. LW 13:201.
53. My conclusion is also that of Franz Lau (p. 357), whom I read at the end of my study.
54. This passage in *Commentary on Zechariah* (LW 20:172) and first paragraph in Karl H. Hertz, ed. *Two Kingdoms and One World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), entry 61, pp. 63-64; translation my own. The text continues: "And none of these governments is against the other, and none crushes or destroys the other; but the one serves the other. The lowest, the rule of the sword, serves the Gospel by maintaining peace among the people; and without that one could not preach. The Gospel, in turn, serves the sword by teaching, holding people to the obedience of the sword and bearing witness to the fact that the sword is the ordinance and rule of God (Rom. 13:1ff.) and is therefore to be feared and respected. Without this fear and respect, however, the sword would have a very wretched rule. And the angels serve both the Gospel and the sword by helping to promote them and moving the people toward them through reason. The sword and the Word, in turn, serve the angels; for they create opportunities and through peace and prosperity prepare the people so that the angels may all the better approach them and promote their rule. For in the midst of strife and error the angels find it difficult to rule through their reason."
55. LW 12:103.
56. LW 13:193-94.
57. On Ps. 101, LW 13:197.