KEYWORDS: grace, church, state, lordship of Christ, Germany, Rwanda, rulers, clergy, society, heavenly, secular, gospel, sacraments, human reason, physical power, law, coercion, Sermon on the Mount, heretics, order, obedience, unjust laws, good works, faith, politics

Introduction

When I was training at a Church of England evangelical theological college a lecturer once asked me to give a short introduction on Martin Luther’s understanding of grace. Being Lutheran and German I seemed to be the obvious person to approach. After my thirty-minute talk, the lecturer stood up, looked at my fellow students and said: ‘Well, only a maniac can ask the question ‘How can I get a gracious God?’!’ Martin Luther and the European Reformation have a bad press among many British theologians. This is a lesson I have learned over the years. It does not surprise me with theologians of a liberal or Anglo-catholic background like my college lecturer, but I must admit I am still astonished to find misunderstandings and even prejudices with regard to key Lutheran doctrines in British evangelical circles. One of these doctrines is Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms (Zwei-Reiche-Lehre). Let me give you two recent examples of misinterpretations of Luther’s teaching.

The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms and its Critics

In his excellent book Good News to the Poor Tim Chester, who is involved in the Crowded House church-planting initiative in Sheffield, writes: ‘The two kingdoms model of the Lutheran tradition argues that the church and the state are two separate and autonomous realms. In this model the state...
should not interfere with the church and the church should not interfere with the state. It finds a parallel, as we have seen, in the pietism of modernity that separates the public realm of politics and economics from the private world of faith and values.7 Chester continues to argue that the doctrine of the two kingdoms does not do justice to Christ's universal lordship and therefore it is not of great help when it comes to historical crises such as the Nazi dictatorship in Germany or the genocide in Rwanda.7 Graham Tomlin, vice-principal at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, comes to a similar conclusion. In his book Luther and His World he comments: ‘At its best, this doctrine was a valid attempt to separate out two spheres which had become confused. In a world where the papacy and local bishops claimed political and territorial power, and where secular rulers were tempted to interfere in matters of faith, Luther wanted to insist that it was the task of rulers to rule and clergy to preach ... At its worst, the doctrine gave the impression that the gospel had no relevance at all to secular life, and was only of significance for some inner, private sphere.’ For his claim that the doctrine of the two kingdoms is somewhat vague Tomlin finds an easy explanation. Thus he writes: ‘Luther’s language was often confused and imprecise, and he left many questions unanswered.’

Tomlin’s and Chester’s criticisms are anything but new. They can be found in the writings of Ernst Troeltsch, Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth. The doctrine of the two kingdoms, the critics argue, is an expression of a quietistic theology. The doctrine, they believe, is the reason why Lutheranism has no real social ethics, and as a result of this Lutheran churches have failed to take an active part in the life of society and to resist, if necessary, worldly powers. Let us have a closer look at Luther’s teachings to see if these charges are justified.

The Two Kingdoms – Distinctive But Not Autonomous

According to Luther there are two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. The kingdom of God or ‘Kingdom to the Right’ is an eternal, heavenly, imperishable kingdom.8 It is the realm of truth, peace, joy, righteousness, safety, salvation and equality of all people. It is the spiritual realm in which God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. In his sermon on Psalm 8 Luther writes about this kingdom: ‘In this kingdom Christ, the king of glory, exalted to the right hand of God and established as head over all, rules His Christians in faith through the Gospel and the Holy Spirit.’

The other kingdom is the kingdom of the world or ‘Kingdom to the Left’. In contrast to the kingdom of God this kingdom is a secular and finite realm, which ‘is established, strengthened, or preserved by external force and the physical sword.’7 In this worldly kingdom it is the task of human rulers to administer, judge and punish. These rulers may be Christians or non-believers. In the kingdom of the world there is no equality.

Luther insists that these two realms must not be confused with each other. To confuse these two, he argues, would be fatal both for the secular state and the Christian church. Whenever this happens, Luther sees the devil at work: ‘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. Schismatic spirits always want to be masters, though not in God’s name, and to teach people how to organize the secular government.’ Does this sharp demarcation between the two kingdoms not mean that there are two separate unrelated spheres of life? Does it not imply a detachment or withdrawal of Christianity from political and social life? The answer to these questions is ‘No!’ For Luther both kingdoms are clearly distinctive but at the same time they are inextricably linked with each other. They are not rivals, but they are related to one another and belong to one another. This is what many critics seem to overlook.

Firstly, Luther firmly believes that God governs both kingdoms. Only his methods differ. While God rules his kingdom and the church through the gospel and the sacraments, he rules the kingdom of the world through human authorities and the instruments available to them, i.e. human reason, natural law and physical power. God is, as G. Ebeling puts it, ‘Lord in both kingdoms’.10 In other words there is a twofold divine government: a spiritual and a temporal authority. Through his spiritual rule God the Holy Spirit, Luther writes, ‘produces Christians and righteous people under Christ’.11 The task of the temporal authority is to prevent a sinful world from falling into chaos.12

The two authorities have their specific tasks. Lutheran theologians also speak of the doctrine of the two governments (Zweiregimente-Lehre). It explains why the two kingdoms must not be mixed-up. A sinful, fallen world cannot be ruled by the gospel, but only by law and coercion. To abolish the law and to apply, for example, the ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount in politics would endanger peace in society and lead to destruction. It would be, writes Luther, like ‘loosing the ropes and chains of the savage wild beasts and letting them bite and mangle everyone, meanwhile insisting that they were harmless, tame and gentle creatures’.13 In the same way, the kingdom of the world must not claim dominion over the spiritual kingdom. Secular rulers, Luther argues, cannot force people to accept the gospel. Faith, writes Luther ‘is a work of God in the spirit, not something which outward authority should compel or create’.14 Neither is it their task to fight against heretic believers in the church. This too must be left to God’s word. Luther writes: ‘Heresy can never be restrained by force. One will have to tackle the problem in some other way, for heresy must be opposed and dealt with otherwise than with the sword. Here God’s word must do the fighting.’15

Secondly, the two kingdoms are supposed to serve one another. None of the two governments or authorities, writes Luther ‘is sufficient in the world without the other’.16 By maintaining order in society the temporal authority and the kingdom of the world support the work of the gospel. On the other hand it is the task of the spiritual kingdom to radiate into the kingdom of the world. It does so first and foremost by preaching the gospel of salvation to all people but also by warning and admonishing the secular authorities. While all people must respect their secular rulers, Christian preachers have the right and the duty to rebuke rulers who do not ful-
fil their task. It is part of the preacher’s ministry, writes Luther in his commentary on Psalm 82 to rebuke rulers ‘through God’s Word, spoken publicly, boldly, and honestly. To rebuke rulers in this way is, . . . praiseworthy, noble and a rare virtue, and a particularly good service to God. It would be far more seditious if a preacher did not rebuke the sins of the rulers.’ In other words, it is the task of the church to remind the secular authorities that they are subject to God’s law and to call upon them to obey God’s commands. If secular rulers act against God’s will the church has the obligation to speak out.

Thirdly, while it is true that in his treatise Temporal Authority: To What Extend It Should Be Obeyed Luther speaks of Christians who belong to the kingdom of God and of non-Christians who belong to the kingdom of the world, Ebeling rightly points out that this must not be misinterpreted as if there were ‘two completely different groups of persons and spheres of life’. For Luther it is beyond doubt that Christians are citizens of both kingdoms, that they are ‘two different persons in one’. First of all, every Christian is both righteous and a sinner at the same time (simul iustus et pecator), and therefore needs both the spiritual and the temporal rule. Secondly, Christians not only exist before God but they also live in this world. In Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be saved Luther argues that the government of Christians ‘is a spiritual government, and, according to the Spirit they are subjects of no one but Christ’. Luther continues: ‘Nevertheless, as far as body and property are concerned, they are subject to worldly rulers and owe them obedience.’

Luther distinguishes between a Christ-person and a world-person, and as such every Christian has responsibilities towards both kingdoms. Christians, Luther argues, discharge their civic and social responsibilities, for example, by being obedient citizens. ‘The Christian’, Luther writes ‘surrets most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to assist the governing authority, that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear.’ This is done solely for the sake of others, i.e. for society as a whole. For some Christians this even means that they assume public offices. They serve their society as judges, magistrates, or soldiers. By doing so they help the secular authorities to preserve the fallen creation.

But the Christian obedience towards the secular authorities and their cooperation with them have limits also. If the secular rulers interfere in spiritual matters Christians have the obligation to disobey them. The same is true if they ask Christians to act against God’s will. Luther comments in his Treatise On Good Works from 1520: ‘But if, as often happens, the temporal power and authorities, or whatever they call themselves, would compel a subject to do something contrary to the command of God, or hinder him from doing what God commands, obedience ends and the obligation ceases. In such a case a man has to say what St. Peter said to the rulers of the Jews, “We must obey God rather than men”.’ According to Luther this is the case if, for example, the secular authorities will force Christian citizens to lie, to steal, to deceive others, or to fight in a war which has no righteous cause.

The idea of Christian civic service solely for the sake of others has its roots in Luther’s understanding of good works, which itself is closely linked with the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Luther holds that only faith in Jesus Christ, and not good works, is what puts people right with God. In The Freedom of a Christian Luther writes: ‘Therefore the moment you begin to have faith you learn that all things in you are blameworthy, sinful, and damnable . . . When you have learned this you will know that you need Christ, who suffered and rose again for you so that, if you believe in him, you may through this faith become a new man in so far as yours sins are forgiven and you are justified by the merits of another, namely, of Christ alone.’ Luther leaves no doubt that no one can earn his or her salvation by being a good person, but that does not mean that good works are not important. A few pages further down he states: ‘Nevertheless the works themselves do not justify him before God, but he does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God and considers nothing except the approval of God, whom he would most scrupulously obey in all things.’ In other words good works are result of faith in Christ G.W. Forell comments: ‘Faith is never unethical faith. He who has faith will be sanctified and do good works. Justification and sanctification are for Luther two aspects of the same process and therefore mutually interdependent.’

For Luther good works and service in society belong to the Christian life even if these are a risky business. In Whether One May Flee From A Deadly Plague he writes about the civic duties towards one’s neighbour: ‘If his house is on fire, love compels me to run to help him extinguish the flames . . . If he falls into the water or into a pit I dare not turn away but must hurry to help him as best I can . . . If I see that he is hungry or thirsty, I cannot ignore him but must offer food and drink, not considering whether I would risk impoverishing myself by doing so.’

David C. Steinmetz summarizes the heart of Luther’s social and political ethics very well when he writes: ‘For Luther, the vertical relationship to God and the horizontal relationship to the neighbour are so inseparably joined in the act of faith that one is unthinkable without the other. In principle, . . ., there is no place in Luther’s conception of the Gospel for that variety of evangelical Christianity . . . which cultivates individual piety but is utterly unable to identify with the weak, the poor, and the oppressed, with whom Christ is identified.’ Steinmetz continues to say that at the same time ‘Luther has no patience with a social gospel which lacks religious depth and which substitutes ethical analysis and moral obligation for inner liberation and joy’.

The Two Kingdoms and Political Crisis

A closer look at Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms has shown that his theology is anything but quietistic. Luther, as A. Nygren puts it, did not preach ‘the detachment of Christianity from State and political life’. Nonetheless, there are still critics, like Tim Chester, who see a close link between this Lutheran doctrine and the rise of the Nazi power in Germany (I find the link between the doctrine and the genocide in Rwanda, that Chester makes, difficult to accept, since there is no Lutheran Church in this African country!). There are several historical facts, these critics seem to ignore. First of all, Nazi Germany was not a Lutheran country. Many of the
Nazi leaders actually had a Roman-Catholic background and orthodox Lutheranism was less important in the Protestant Church than one might think. After the forced union between the Prussian Lutheran and Reformed churches in 1817, confessional Lutherans were under immense pressure and as a result many of them emigrated to the U.S.A, Canada, Australia or South America. Consequently, J.R. Stephenson is right, when he writes about 20th century Lutheranism in Germany: ‘By the following century German Lutheranism had become one school of thought among several instead of a distinctive Church.’

Secondly, it is certainly true that the doctrine of the two kingdoms was deliberately misinterpreted and abused by members of the Lutheran church who supported the Nazi dictatorship. They regarded it as an authorization both to establish a system of absolute political power and to suspend any political Christian ethics. The so-called German Christians (Deutsche Christen) willingly cooperated with the Nazi regime. They did their best to bring the church under the control of the Nazi state. By doing so they clearly confused what, according to Luther, must never be confused with one another. The church became part of a totalitarian system and ignored the obligation to admonish a sinful government and to disobey their sinful commands. It is also true that even members of the Confessing Church (Bekennende Kirche) misunderstood the doctrine. They considered the two kingdoms not as distinctive realms but as separate realms. At the same time it must be said that the abuse or misinterpretation of a doctrine does not justify its condemnation. Something is not necessarily wrong because some people misuse it for their own interest (abusus non tollit usum), ignore or simply do not understand it.

Thirdly, it is noteworthy that the Lutheran Church in Norway based their resistance against the German occupation during World War II explicitly on Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms. It was the Norwegian bishop of Oslo, Eivind Berggrav, who in 1946 said the following about the importance of Lutheran doctrine for the church’s resistance: ‘The Nazis deprived us of law and justice. We had God and our conscience to fall back on. In this Luther has become our great example. It was great to be able to fling Luther in the face of the Gestapo. Luther gave us arms…’

Relevance

Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms is still relevant today, both for individual Christians and for the Christian church. The doctrine teaches the church what her main duties are: to communicate the gospel of Christ to her members and to a lost world. Where secular issues dominate the church’s preaching, teaching and worship, it is not the kingdom of God that radiates into the world, but a fallen world that forces its way into God’s kingdom. The result is a church that commits a kind of self-securitisation, as it can be currently observed, for example, in the German Protestant Church or the Lutheran churches in Sweden and Denmark. The same danger exists where state authorities choose the leaders of an established church, as is the case with the Church of England. The chances that these appointments are first and foremost politically motivated are very high.

While it is the church’s task to preach the gospel, it also has the office of a political guardian, but within certain boundaries. The church exists in this world and cannot withdraw from it and occupy a neutral position. God rules in both realms, and it is the church’s task to remind the secular authorities of this. As a political guardian the church has to speak up and interfere in politics where she is hindered by the government from fulfilling her calling or where the fundamental values of God’s commandments are clearly violated. The former is the case, for example, if government legislation forces churches to employ non-believers or forbids them to call adultery, practised homosexuality, euthanasia or economic exploitation sin. The latter is the case where, for example, a government plans to separate asylum seekers from their children in order to force them to leave the country or where it wages war against another country on the basis of a lie. In all these cases the clausula Petri of Acts 5:29 applies.

However, there are other issues where a straightforward ethical decision cannot be made on the basis of God’s law, where one cannot clearly distinguish between good and evil or true and false. There are situations where one can only choose between two ‘evil’ options. In such cases the church as an institution has to keep silent. It cannot, for example, be the task of the church to decide whether or not a country should join the Euro, whether it is necessary to introduce ID cards or whether the VAT rate should be 16 or 17 per cent. The church has no mandate to comment on political issues, where Christians on the basis of their consciences can and always will have different views. To deal with such matters of discretion all that is needed is human reason. The Christian gospel is of no real help here. The idea that there is no area of life where the church has nothing to say is a dangerous one. The problem with a church that claims to have the right to be heard on every political issue is that it will soon be a church that is not listened to at all. But that does not mean that individual Christians should stay away from such issues.

The doctrine of the two kingdoms teaches Christians a positive attitude towards state and society and encourages them to play an active role in both. This is an important message, especially for Christians in our postmodern, individualized western societies. One of the main traits of postmodernity is a deep distrust of hierarchic institutions and bureaucracy, as well as any kind of elite. P. Sampson sees an expression of this distrust in the rise of new social movements, such as gay and lesbian rights, anti-racism or environmental movements. These movements, he argues, claim to speak for particular social groups, and by doing so forsake the modernist idea of striving for justice for all members of society. Consequently, there are tensions in the metanarrative of citizenship, which once had a unifying function for society. While Sampson is certainly right, the distrust of political institutions becomes even clearer, when we look at the general attitude towards our political parties. Thus, fewer and fewer people are willing to join political parties or vote for them at elections. There has been a steady decline in people going to the polling stations on election day in recent years. One reason for this is, as J. Finney puts it, that ‘postmodernists . . . are unwilling to be led, for they fear that they will be led by the nose’. Lutheran ethics with
its emphasis on the two kingdoms and two citizenships remind us that such an opt-out of society is not a Christian option.

Thorsten Prill is a Lutheran minister and International Chaplain at the University of Nottingham.

Notes
1 Chester T., Good News to the Poor (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), pp.159-160.
2 Chester, p.160.
4 Tomlin, p. 133.
5 LW 12, p.103.
6 LW 12, p.104.
7 LW 12, p. 103.
8 LW 21, p. 211.
9 LW 13, p.194.
11 LW 45, p.91.
12 LW 45, p.91.
13 LW 45, p.91.
14 LW 45, p.108.
15 LW 45 p.114.
16 LW 45, p.92.
17 LW 13,II, p.50.
18 Ebeling, p.185.
19 LW 21, p. 23.
20 In his 1519 Lectures on Galatians Luther writes about the meaning of the law for the Christian: ‘Therefore, if you look at faith, the law has been fulfilled, sins have been destroyed, and no law is left. But if you look at the flesh, in which there is no good, you will be compelled to admit that those who are righteous in the Spirit through faith are still sinners’. LW 27, p. 231.
21 LW 46, p.99.
22 LW 46, p.99.
23 LW 45, p.94.
24 LW 45, p.103.
25 LW 45, p.112.
26 LW 44, p.100.
27 LW 44, p.100.
28 LW 45, p. 94.
29 LW 31, pp.346-347.
30 LW 31, p.359.
32 LW 43, p.125-126.
34 Steinmetz, p.124.
39 Sampson, p.43.
40 UK general elections turnouts: 1992: 77.7%, 1997: 71.3%. 2001: 59.5% (source: Keele University, Political Science Resources, <www.psr.keele.ac.uk/area/uk/uktable.htm>).

The Third Schism: Christianity and the Legacy of Modernism (Deep Church Series)
Andrew Walker

It has long been recognised that the Christian Church has been divided by two great schisms between Orthodox and Catholic and between Catholic and Protestant. Andrew Walker argues Christians today face a ‘third schism’ between those who maintain allegiance to historic orthodoxy, with its credal basis in the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and a high view of Scriptures and those who do not. The book provides a ground-breaking study of the roots of the third schism and a prophetic call to the Church.

Andrew Walker is Canon Professor of Theology, Culture and Education at King’s College, London. He is also author of On Revival.

ISBN: 1-84227-291-8 / 198x130mm

Paternoster, PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK