

# THE TWO KINGDOMS

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Have you ever heard the expression "the two kingdoms?" What do you think it refers to?

Some Christians seeing the evil in the world naturally assume that they must separate themselves from the society in which that evil is present and withdraw into insolated, godly communities. Such was the thinking of the Anabaptists of Luther's time, ancestors of the present-day Mennonites, Hutterites and Amish. It is also the understanding of many of today's Christians, some of whom attend nondenominational churches.

The Lutheran theological tradition has always rejected this easy move. Though it recognizes evil within sinful society, it has consistently declared that God has not wholly abandoned the world, that He is, in fact, at work in secular society as well - - although in an ambiguous and hidden way. The claim that God rules both within the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world is the basis of Luther's so-called "doctrine of the two kingdoms."

Do you know Christians who try to stay separate from the world? What does that imply about God's relationship with the world?

While the general features of Luther's "two kingdoms" thinking are clear enough, there has been contro-

versy about the nature of these kingdoms within Luther scholarship. It is important to recognize that Luther did *not* self-consciously articulate *one* doctrine of the two kingdoms. (Nor did he ever employ the phrase, "two kingdoms.") Moreover, one can neither identify Luther's kingdom of God with the spirit nor his kingdom of the world with the flesh, as Augustine had 1100 years before. Over and against Augustine, Luther assumes that there is conflict between the divine and demonic both within the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.

How would you define the kingdom of God? How would you define the kingdom of the world?

## *Kingdom of the World*

God rules the world with two hands. Through his left hand He rules the world by using the highest elements of the created order: reason and law. God uses these elements in ruling indirectly in the divinely-ordained institutions of family, schools, and government. Moreover, God rules indirectly by allowing particular social structures to come into being and leaders to come to power. In this way, his left-hand rule checks human sinfulness and preserves society from lawlessness and chaos. Within this worldly kingdom, there are also Christians who are being changed through God's justifying ac-

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- **The kingdom on the left** - the kingdom of the world. Ruled by reason and law.
- **The kingdom on the right** - the kingdom of God. Ruled through faith and grace.

tivity, and who in turn are involved in bringing justice to the world. Although Luther didn't articulate it clearly, one could claim that this transformation of sinful society by Christians is not the work of God's left hand, but rather the work of his right hand, a hand that rules by faith and grace.

What are some examples of God's left hand work in the world? What are some examples of God's right hand work in the world?

### ***Kingdom of God***

God rules his church with two hands as well. While he rules the world with his left hand through the *civil use of the law*, he rules those whom he calls by application of the *theological use of the law*. Accused by the law, believers flee to Christ, to the righteousness that only He provides. So within the kingdom of God, God rules through faith and grace by granting justifying faith over and against the accusation of the law.

### ***Ramifications***

Unfortunately, because of the assertion of God's indirect left-hand rule within social institutions, some have thought that the doctrine of the two kingdoms implies social indifference and quietism. If God passively wills particular social structures and leadership, then why would one want to change them? It is God's will, after all.

But this understanding of Luther's ethics ignores the reality of the power of the devil. The reason why God must rule the world with his left hand is that there is conflict between the divine and demonic. Luther clearly declares that Christians ought not to follow political leadership when such leadership lessens the chance that Christ will be preached and the sacrament administered. A correct reading of Luther during the period of Nazi Germany would have meant that Christians have a duty to oppose Hitler, not follow him docilely just because he happened to be in power.

Can you think of other instances when Christians have a duty to speak and act against something happening in the world? How would we decide when we have that duty?

Furthermore, because a Christian's faith must always be active in love, the justified life

drives towards sanctification and transformation of society. Claims of social indifference do not understand that the justified believer must live a life of justice-making, not because of a 'third use of the law', but rather because it is the nature of such a justified believer to do so.

How does the doctrine of the two kingdoms shape how we think about God's activity in the world? How does it shape what we understand to be the church's role in the world?