

## **Reaction to Dr. Mark Braun's "Martin Luther and the State"**

It is in the Holy Scriptures that a troubled monk named Martin Luther finally discovered the peace he was looking for and the certainty of his salvation in Christ. Once the Lord had taught him that Scripture alone is the source of all doctrine and the only authority in the church, Luther found clarity and certainty on many other doctrines as well. The Bible's teaching about God's two kingdoms is one example. Every believer is a citizen of both kingdoms, the temporal kingdom (the state) and the spiritual kingdom (the church). Both have been ordained by God, and both have a role to play in the believer's life in this world.

The essay we just heard reviews how the Lord graciously led Luther to understand and confess what the Bible teaches about these two kingdoms, and it gives examples of those both before and since who have failed to do so. Dr. Braun's ambitious essay covers a great deal of territory. This reaction will be selective in its comments.

### **Luther and Augustine**

The essay points out that in his early years Luther viewed the two kingdoms much as Augustine did in his *City of God*, as a simple division between the believing and unbelieving world, or what Augustine called "the city of God" and "the city of the world." It is evident that in his later years Luther came to understand the kingdom of the world as God's ruling also in the lives of believers through the governing authority he had established in the world. Yet already by 1520 Luther's view of the two kingdoms had grown well beyond that of Augustine. From personal experience he had learned that the ideal Christian life is not spent holed up in a monastery. The Christian is to be in the world, though not of it. It is faith alone in Christ that makes one a member of the kingdom of God. But that invisible faith in Christ will show itself as the child of God lives out his Christian life in the world. Luther expresses this beautifully near the end of his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520):

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor (LW 31:371).

### **Luther and the Peasants' Revolt**

The essay also touched on Luther's role in the Peasants' Revolt of 1525. The revolt was a horrible tragedy in its own right. But it was tragic also for Luther because his enemies then and many historians since have laid the blame for the bloodshed largely at Luther's feet. His Catholic contemporaries blamed Luther for stirring up the peasants, the Reformed blamed him for siding with the princes, and many today blame him for driving the princes to excess in putting down the revolt. But a careful reading of Luther will show that his position was completely biblical and consistent throughout.

Before hostilities broke out he warned both the peasants and the princes "both of you are wrong . . . God hates both tyrants and rebels" (LW 46:40). He chided the princes for their tyranny and wantonness, but also warned the rebels with Paul's words in Romans 13: "Would

you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good . . . But if you do evil, be afraid." When war did break out he urged the princes to use their God-given power of the sword to restore order and to protect the innocent. The critics seize on the strong language Luther used to urge the princes to quell the rebellion. But the essay puts Luther's words into the context of the rabid rants of Muentzer and the other "murder prophets" (as Luther labeled them) who actively incited the peasants to take up the sword. Scott Hendrix' comments in note 35 of the essay are especially appropriate: "There is nothing surprising about a Christian writer condemning violent rebels and calling for their forcible suppression; what would have called for an explanation would be Luther not condemning them."

In an essay delivered on this campus in 1983 Prof. Deutschlander provides this summary of the lessons learned from the Peasants Revolt:

Luther's Bible-based attitude toward the state saw the Christian living in two kingdoms, the temporal and the spiritual. His duty, if a subject in the temporal kingdom, was to obey the God-ordained authority over him so far as body, property and life are concerned, but to disobey if the temporal kingdom tried to rule his soul; but never could revolution or riot be justified. On the other hand, rulers in the temporal kingdom have a God-given duty to maintain law and order – not to preach the Gospel. The preaching of the Gospel, suppressing heresy, building up the faith, those all belong to the spiritual kingdom which fights only with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God ("Luther and the State," p 5).

### **Luther and the Jews**

Luther's comments on the peasants' war are not the only example of his rhetoric eliciting harsh criticism. Much better known are his regrettable remarks in his book, *On the Jews and their Lies*, published three years before his death. The essay quotes William Shirer who blamed Luther for the Jewish holocaust. A more recent example of such continuing criticism is this from Alan Dershowitz, whose words are intended as an indictment not only of Luther but of all of us as well:

Toward the end of his life – and at the height of his influence – Luther articulated a specific program against the Jews which served as bible of anti-Jewish actions over the next four centuries, culminating in the Holocaust. In many ways, Luther can be viewed as the spiritual predecessor of Adolf Hitler. Indeed, virtually all the themes that eventually found their way into Hitler's genocidal writings, rantings, and actions are adumbrated in Martin Luther's infamous essay "Concerning the Jews and Their Lies." . . . It is shocking that Luther's ignoble name is still honored rather than forever cursed by mainstream Protestant churches (As quoted in Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Fabricated Luther*, p 23).

One can't help but wince when reading Luther's incendiary recommendations in the final section of the book. Even many of Luther's contemporaries and colleagues were dismayed by what he wrote (LW 47:123). Yet it needs to be stated that Luther's concerns about the Jews were not ethnic or racial, but religious in nature. This is clear from his writing of 20 years earlier, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* (LW 45:197-229), which was "greeted with joy by Jewish readers throughout Europe" (LW 47:124). In it he lauded the Jews as the blood relatives of

Christ. He realized that so few had converted to Christianity because they had never heard the truth about Christ. He stated, "If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads [the papists] govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian" (LW 45:200-201). But by 1543 the aged and ailing Luther was exasperated by the fact that most of the Jewish community had not responded to the Gospel for decades. The "lies" against which Luther wrote were that Jesus was not the Christ but the illegitimate son of an unchaste mother. Luther was moved to write by anti-Christianity, not by anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, even in an era when *cuius regio, eius religio* (the prince's religion is the state's religion) was the common sentiment, if not yet the law, Luther's comments cannot be excused. It has always been the church's responsibility to preach the Gospel to the Jews. It has never been the state's responsibility to banish them.

The essay provides several examples, both in the text and the notes, of godly resistance by Lutherans to the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime. We who bear Luther's name do well to insure our words and actions do nothing to invite charges of racial or ethnic insensitivity, but rather exhibit the same spirit of the Gospel that breathes through most of Luther's other writings.

### **Church and State in the U.S.**

The final section of the essay touches on issues of church and state in our own country. We should thank the essayist for the much-needed reminder on page 19 that Jefferson's words from the *Declaration of Independence*, so hallowed by those who exalt "civic religion," are directly contradicted by God's Word. According to St. Paul, governments do not derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed;" rather, "the authorities that exist have been established by God" (Ro 13:1).

The essay also documents how we in the WELS have learned to express ourselves more clearly on the subject of the "separation of church and state." It is the government's responsibility to keep church and state separate. We in the United States are singularly blessed to live in a country which has incorporated that principle of separation in its founding documents, though we often find that expressing the ideal is easier than implementing it. However, for the individual Christian or Christian church body maintaining a strict separation of church and state is a practical impossibility, since we live in both realms and owe obedience to both. Our task is rather to keep from confusing the roles each play in our lives as Christians and as a church. Dr. John Brug's article, cited in note 96, and Prof. Joel Otto's recent quarterly article, cited in note 3, both expand on this point with several examples. We thank the essayist for sharing their wise perspective with us.

Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms teaches that God rules in our world in both his temporal and spiritual kingdom. Neither realm should try to do the other's business, nor use the other's tools to accomplish its own business. These principles are summarized very well in our Augsburg Confession:

Now inasmuch as the power of the church or of the bishops bestows eternal benefits and is used and exercised only through the office of preaching, it does not interfere at all with public order and secular authority. For secular authority deals with matters altogether

different from the gospel. Secular power does not protect the soul but, using the sword and physical penalties, it protects the body and goods against external violence.

That is why one should not mix or confuse the two authorities, the spiritual and the secular. For spiritual power has its command to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments. It should not invade an alien office. It should not set up and depose kings. It should not annul or disrupt secular law and obedience to political authority. It should not make or prescribe laws for the secular power concerning secular affairs . . .

In this way our people distinguish the offices of the two authorities and powers and direct that both be honored as the highest gifts of God on earth (AC XXVIII:10-13, 18).

This reactor, too, was privileged to sit at the feet of the sainted Prof. Fredrich. Was he correct in predicting that 2017 would be a challenging year for confessional Lutherans? In many ways, he was. But our gracious God still rules. His grace has insured that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ” (Re 11:15). That means that no challenge is too great for those God has led by his grace to treasure the truth he passed down, through Martin Luther, to us and to our children. *Soli deo gloria!*

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October 3, 2017