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*Law and Gospel: A Lutheran Perspective
on Personal and Political Existence**



Robert Benne

INTRODUCTION

“Who, therefore, can rightly distinguish between the gospel and the law, let him thank God and know that he is indeed a theologian. In the time of temptation I myself do not know how to do it as I ought,”¹ offered Martin Luther.

Second-rate theological ethicists rush in where real theologians fear to tread. If Luther has little confidence that he can distinguish rightly between law and gospel, what chance do I have to communicate such a challenging doctrine? Nevertheless, that is my task, just as it has been for all those Lutheran seminarians who are told that in each sermon they prepare they should rightly distinguish and apply the law and the gospel. If they can try it, why shouldn't I?

A living tradition, according to philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, is “an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit

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of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations."² Lutheranism, if it is anything, is just such a tradition. It possesses a vision—an articulated theology—of God's activities and purposes, an ethos constituted and sustained by practices of many sorts: liturgical, religious, moral, intellectual, and so forth. Key among those intellectual practices is theology—the disciplined reflection on the revelation of God's mighty deeds. Lutheranism has had a remarkable tradition of theological reflection, from Luther and Melanchthon in the sixteenth century to Wolfhart Pannenberg, Oswald Bayer, and Robert Jenson in the twenty first.

Crucial to Lutheran theology, as Luther himself discerned, is the proper distinction between law and gospel. In the following, I will work through that distinction as it is applied to personal and political existence. However, I do not wish to talk about law and gospel in the abstract. Rather, I intend to relate the law/gospel distinction to the vocation of the Christian (personal existence) and to the calling of the church in public life (political existence.)

THE CHRISTIAN'S CALLING IN THE WORLD

The central—but certainly not the sole—focus of Lutheran theology is justification by grace through faith on account of Christ. The proclamation of justification is the gospel. It is also mediated through the sacraments—baptism and the Eucharist. As Einar Billing, the Swedish Lutheran theologian of the early twentieth century, wrote:

Whoever knows Luther, knows that his various thoughts do not lie alongside each other, like pearls in a string, held together only by common authority or perchance by a line of logical argument, but that they all, as tightly as petals of a rosebud, adhere to a common center, and radiate out like the rays of the sun from one glowing core, namely, the gospel of the forgiveness of sins.³

God in Christ offers the grace and mercy that justifies us mortal and sinful beings. We need not climb up some ladder

of moral or spiritual achievement to make ourselves worthy before God. Such a path is fruitless because none can stand on their own before God's demand. Attempts to do so lead either to frustration or to a destructive, spiritual pride. Rather, we are offered justification before God on account of Christ. We become saints before God not on account of any extraordinary obedience, or even what unwavering faith we might offer, but rather because of the extraordinary grace of God in Christ. We are called by God to be his own in Christ, now and forever. Our eternal destinies are assured in our baptism and in our continued, faithful hearing of the Word of God and in our receiving his Holy Supper.

Such a powerful event of acceptance, however, has a history: it is not a point in time suspended above and beyond a prior and succeeding history. God has long dealings with Israel and the church; God has long dealings with us.

This is another way of saying that Lutheran theology is not simply Christomonist. The gospel is preceded by the law, by the workings of God as Creator, Lawgiver, Sustainer, and Judge. The God of the Old Testament is active in world history—as well as in our own personal history—before we meet the Christ of the gospel.

We meet God in our creation in his image. We are given reason, freedom, and the capability of entering into covenantal relationships with God and with each other. In our creation we are given both an eternal and a temporal destiny. Temporally, we are given a meaningful story in which to fit our obedient lives. We are embedded in covenantal existence.

Moreover, the covenantal existence offered us is not something we each must construct *de novo*. It is already present in the structures of life in which we are embedded. Lutherans have called such structures "orders of creation" or "mandates" (Bonhoeffer)⁴ or "natural orders" (Forell)⁵ or "places of responsibility" (Benne).⁶ God works through these structures to sustain the world and to provide moral contexts within which we—both believers and unbelievers alike—can live.

What gives people their moral direction? God does, of

course, but he uses many means to sustain their moral character. The standards for them are derived at times directly from the Decalogue, sometimes from a rational appropriation of the moral law, and sometimes from human practical experience or engagement with the world. Externally, they are guided by positive law, but at deeper levels that positive law is often shaped by a moral reason which is finally a reflection of the law "written on the heart" (Romans 2:15) that God has placed in every human soul. Thus, non-Christians also have capacities to discern the moral ordering of our common life.

Modern American and Scandinavian Lutheran theology has recognized that these "natural orders" are neither static nor only negative. God's "Law of Creation,"⁷ to use Gustaf Wingren's phrase, is dynamic. Older structures are reshaped in accordance with God's will, which both Christians and non-Christians try to discern in their own ways. Further, they are not shaped only by God. They are subject to the individual and corporate sins of humans who can bend them away from God's intentions. They are a battlefield upon which contend both God and Satan. They are the arena of blessing, conflict, and judgment. God's hidden hand works through them in mysterious and unrecognized ways. God's hand is hidden behind masks, said Luther.

The discernment of God's Law in these structures is thus a great challenge for Christian theology. It calls for careful reflection, rejecting those guidelines and practices that are directly contrary to God's will, while affirming and working toward those that more adequately represent the divine purposes. It is a task fraught with ambiguity, though that gives no excuse from making clear judgments when possible or from maintaining a humble uncertainty when necessary.

We will return to these "places of responsibility" when we discuss the Christian life. Now it is important to note that the law of God not only orders our common life (its political use), it also serves as a teacher that convinces us of our sin and drives us to the gospel of grace and mercy. In Lutheran terms this is the "theological" or "pedagogical" use of the law.

Lutherans have a very realistic estimate of our life under

the law in relation to other humans as well as our life under the law in relation to God. Both lead inexorably to a crisis of conscience that opens the way for the gospel. In our common life we are buffeted by claims and obligations (behind them is God's law) that divest us of our proud self-sufficiency or complacency. We know we are up against a great demand. Our fellow human beings are often the vehicles of that demand. But the sensitive conscience also examines itself before God. And in the court of God, we know, as Martin Luther confessed, "that we are all beggars."

Driven by life under the law, Christians finally open their repentant hearts to the gospel, which offers affirmation and forgiveness. Thus we are back to the center of the Christian life: justification by grace through faith on account of Christ. From this glowing core of God's extravagant love in Christ, we move outward and forward in the Christian life.

Faith fastens in trust to the God who has offered such grace in Christ. It allows the love of God in Christ to permeate the soul and to bend the will outward toward the neighbor. Indeed, in the "happy exchange" with Christ, our faithful hearts receive the righteousness of Christ, and our faith becomes active in love. This love expresses itself in deeds that follow spontaneously from faith—no longer from the compulsion of the law. Such love is creative and dynamic, going beyond the limits and structures of norms and standards of the law, though it certainly does not violate them. It "grasps the kind of hand that need holds out," to use the famous words of Joseph Sittler.⁸ It is a love shaped by the engendering deed of God's love in Christ. It is self-giving and neighbor-regarding.

This *agape* love that moves from God-in-Christ through the Christian is initiatory: it does not wait on formal signs of distress to grasp the hand that need holds out. It is disinterested: it does not demand a return before it acts. It is steadfast: it is not dissuaded by suffering or loss. It is extravagant: it does not parcel out its efforts in a *quid pro quo*. It is universal: it does not observe the limits that human love sets around its own in-group. It is biased toward the lost, the last, and the least, much like a parent who lavishes love on the needy child

even while loving the other children equally. It invites to mutuality: it does not keep the other dependent. It risks forgiveness: it does not restrict itself to the strict reciprocity of human mutual love.

This heightened sense of both divine and human *agape* seems to differentiate Lutheran ethics from other sorts. Without affirming the exaggerated separation drawn by Anders Nygren between *eros* and *agape*,⁹ it seems true that Lutherans have such a high estimate of human *agape* because they have such an acute sense of God's *agape* in Christ. Reinhold Niebuhr, in a back-handed compliment, confirmed that observation when he remarked that Lutheran ethics are so unworldly because they have such a profound notion of *agape* love.¹⁰

This emphasis on the transcendent character of *agape* love leads Lutheran ethics to a paradoxical view of *agape's* relation to mutual loves. There is both a denial and an affirmation of those loves that reflect their denial and affirmation in the cross of Christ. Such a view of love means that it can never be domesticated into principles and rules, however important such norms and rules are for the moral life.

All of this—the faith that fastens to the gospel and the love that is activated by it—is illustrated in Luther's well-known formulation of the Christian life in his *Treatise on Christian Liberty*. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."¹¹ The Christian is freed by the gospel from all striving for salvation even as he or she is sent to love the neighbor. So the Christian life can be seen as the response of obedient and grateful love to the gospel.

It is important to note here that Lutherans see the whole process of salvation and ensuing sanctification as the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.¹² There is no room for boasting. The whole of the Christian life, then, is a work of the Spirit.

It is now time to come back to the "places of responsibility" in which all humans are located. For it is in those places that we are called by God to exercise our obedient love to the neighbor in response to the gospel. If we are called by God

through the gospel to be eternally his, we are also called by God to help the neighbor in and through the places of responsibility we have been given. We are given both eternal and temporal destinies by God.

Luther enumerated three "orders" to which the Christian is called: family, state, and church, which number reflects a medieval context in which family and economy were not differentiated.¹³ But later Lutheran ethics recognize four: marriage and family life, work, public life (citizenship and voluntary associations), and church.¹⁴

As mentioned above, these places of responsibility are guided and sanctioned by positive law, cultural expectations and, finally, by moral claims which sometimes are in tension with both positive law and cultural expectations. These places are also ambiguous in that they can be both gifts—covenantal structures—sustained by God and curses twisted by sin and evil. Nevertheless, Lutheran theology avers, these are the places in which all humans are given the obligation to live responsible lives. Moreover, Christians are to see them as divinely given callings wherein they are to exercise their particular gifts for the sake of the neighbor.

So, Lutheran theology affirms that faith not only fastens to Christ for salvation but also discerns a deeper meaning in the ordinary structures of life. They are, in spite of all, blessings of God to be accepted with gratitude and joy. Further, they are the places in which we discern our special missions in life—our callings. They provide roles for Christians to play in the drama that God is unfolding. They provide the context, the locale, in which Christians are to play out their temporal destinies.

Yet, they are very worldly with very worldly demands, some of which are obviously helpful, some of which are highly ambiguous. Indeed, some occupations and roles are "out of bounds" for Christians. But even those that are legitimate according to the law press a narrow set of demands on the Christian. (For example, we are inexorably obligated to a specific family and a specific occupation, with all the prescribed roles that these places of responsibility demand.) These

demands are the way that the world under law must come to terms with both finitude and sin. They are the work of the hidden God. But they are also the work of sinful human beings under the sway of Satan.

Because these places of responsibility are ambiguous, Christians participate in them critically. Paul writes that the justified Christian should not be conformed to the world, but instead be transformed by *the renewal of his or her mind* so they might prove what is the will of God (Romans 12:1-2). Christians carry a world view, or perspective, with them when they enter these places of responsibility, and they are called to employ this world view as a lens through which to view critically their engagements with the world.

Moreover, Christians, while critically beholden to their particular responsibilities, do not simply live up to the worldly demands of the callings: they also go beyond them. This is the dynamic work of love. The *agape* love that flows through the Christian creates a lively tension with worldly demands. Some demands are simply accepted and responded to with a joyful heart. Others are stretched intensively and extensively. The radical force of *agape* love leads to a restlessness concerning the world as it is. It summons the Christian to widen and deepen the "reach" of covenantal existence. It awakens the Christian to the call of Christ to love others as he has loved us.

When Lutherans have attempted to state concretely what this lively obedience might look like, they have often followed their mentor Luther in expositing the Decalogue, not only in its negative formulation, but also in its indeterminate positive thrust.¹⁵ Thus, the call of love does not lead to antinomianism. There is structure and form to the Christian life. Love is both the leaven that permeates and the salt that enriches those structures and forms without violating them.

Indeed, when Christians "stretch" the worldly expectations of their roles in their places of responsibility, they often run into all kinds of difficulties and/or resistance. The gap between what the world demands or allows and the summons of Christian love can be an excruciating one. In these instances the Christian is conformed to the crucified Christ.¹⁶

As Luther said, if Christians take their callings seriously, they will not have to seek the cross; it will find them. Love does not simply triumph in this world. Worldly success is not a guaranteed outcome of the Christian life; bearing the cross is more likely.

Thus, the theology of the cross permeates Christian existence in the world. It disallows the kind of optimism that suggests that Christians can build the kingdom of God by sheer force of their energy and will, or even that they can discern clearly and confidently what "God is doing in the world."¹⁷ Nevertheless, Christian obedience makes a difference in the world. It sustains and renews as God wills. To the eyes of faith, *agape* love is the scarlet thread that holds together the fabric of covenantal existence; without it the world would indeed unravel.

Likewise, the theology of the cross prevents undue optimism about our own sanctification. Even though the Spirit imputes to us and indwells in us the righteousness of Christ, the old Adam in us never dies. We are sinners and saints all the days of our life on earth. In fact, we regress as well as progress. The struggle goes on.

This fact throws us back on the mercy of Christ which is new every morning. We are reminded again and again that our status before God depends on his grace in Christ, not on our own works. We are driven back to the promises of our baptism and to the Table of the Lord for sustenance for our daily lives. Such hope in the steadfastness of God's mercy allows us to move forward into the future, confident that the paralyzing obstacles of our sinful existence can be overcome by a power beyond us.

Yet, taken as a whole, our lives in the Spirit can show growth. In one of his more surprising sayings, Luther remarks:

This life is not righteous, but growth in righteousness; it is not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise; we are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but it is going on; this is not the end,

but it is the road; all does not yet gleam in glory,
but all is being purified.¹⁸

This exposition of Christian personal existence should apply to all Christian callings, whether they operate in the private or the public spheres. The personal and social are inextricably related. Husbands and wives in marriage, teachers in school, politicians in office, and pastors in church are all summoned by God to work out their callings in those places. In so doing, they transform ordinary places of responsibility into Christian callings.

THE CHURCH'S CALLING IN PUBLIC LIFE

If the above applies to the individual Christian's calling in his or her places of responsibility, the following will pertain to the relations of social institutions. The church as an institution has a calling in a world of institutions. As a corporate body it is called to relate to the corporate structures of the world. The church is and has a social ethic guided by both gospel and law.

It is clear that the Lutheran tradition has a particular way of construing the relation of the church to public life. Some scholars, such as Ernst Troeltsch,¹⁹ and, following his lead, Reinhold Niebuhr,²⁰ have condemned that particular construal as cynical and defeatist, leading to a pallid quietism. But such a posture has not been true of the Lutheran tradition in America, especially as it has developed in the recent twentieth century. Lutheranism in America, surrounded by a heavily Calvinist ethos and fed by the Luther research of the Scandinavians, has not been so passive. Nevertheless, it has related to the public world differently than the Reformed and Catholic traditions, mainly because of theological themes that have shaped its tradition. A number of scholars have called for a stronger Lutheran voice in the ongoing discussion of religion's role in public life.²¹

The Lutheran view of political existence does not lead in a specific ideological direction, if that is taken to mean a rather detailed blueprint for public policy. Rather, the Lutheran view

provides a *framework* for doing political ethics or public theology. It elaborates a set of theological assumptions that stipulate how the church and public life ought to be related, not only for the sake of politics and society, but also for the sake of the church's fidelity to its own biblically-warranted mission in the world. What is legally permitted in our society—the direct and aggressive intervention of the church in political affairs—may well not be good for the church and its mission. Undue entanglement in politics can be the ruination of the church.

The Lutheran theological ethical tradition does, however, set a general direction for public policy, even though it does not stipulate a specific set of public policy injunctions. It tends toward what has been called "Christian realism," though that general tendency can be refracted into a number of different policy directions. There are Lutherans of various political persuasions who share commitment to this framework.

Four main themes constitute the Lutheran theological tradition as it applies to political life. (1) a sharp distinction between salvation offered by the gospel and all human efforts; (2) a focused and austere doctrine of the church and its mission that follows from the first theme; (3) the two-fold rule of God through law and gospel; and (4) a paradoxical view of human nature and history.

SALVATION VERSUS HUMAN EFFORT

What is meant to be merely a distinction I have stated here as something of a contradiction, but overstatement often has a point. Humans, particularly in the political sphere, are prone to claim soteriological significance for their efforts at social and/or political transformation. The twentieth century, perhaps the bloodiest of all centuries, has been virtually jammed with such efforts. When the God-man Jesus Christ is rejected as Savior, the man-god in many different guises rushes in.

The good news of the gospel is that God saves us through his gift of grace in Christ alone. Our salvation is pure gift. We need do nothing but accept the gift with a repentant heart.

This Lutheran insistence on a radical doctrine of grace

puts all human efforts into proper perspective. Human efforts deal with penultimate improvements in the human condition, with relative goods and bads, not with salvation. This means that politics is desacralized and relativized. Education and therapy are put in their place. Salvation is through the gospel of Christ, not through human political schemes, nor through educational or psychological efforts, for that matter. Following from this, we might appropriately speak of liberation ethics, but never of liberation theology, if that is taken to mean that revolutionary praxis is the same thing as salvation. Such a judgment provides a critical shield against the constant attempts in American Christianity to give redemptive significance to movements of social transformation.

One would think that the world has had enough experience of revolutionary change to obviate any claims that political or social "transformation" lead to anything remotely resembling human fulfillment. Ordinary human observation and experience arrive at such a negative verdict. But for religious people to make such claims is even more baffling.

Such sacralizing claims are ruled out by Lutheran theology. Humans are obviously not capable of their own salvation. The Lutheran vision, however, aims at cutting off such claims for even more profound reasons than their lack of empirical validity. It does so for the sake of the gospel, for its radicality and universality. The radicality of the gospel insists that salvation is pure gift—we do not earn it. If we do not recognize this, we dishonor God who gave his Son in the unique and decisive saving act. When we claim an active part in the drama of salvation, we at the same time insist that God's action in Christ is not good enough. Something else, presumably our virtuous action, must be added.

Furthermore, the universality of the gospel is compromised if we fail to make a sharp distinction between God's saving act in Christ and all human efforts at improving the world. In any overt or covert claim for human effort as a constitutive part of our salvation, there are always those on the right side of the struggle as well as those on the wrong. Some are saved and some are damned, not because of their faith—or lack of

faith—in God's work in Christ, but because they either are or are not participants in the group or process that claims to be bringing redemption. Their salvation is dependent on which side of earthly fault lines they find themselves.

The picture is clear: the claims of the man-god always exclude. The gospel, however, does not. All humans, regardless of their relative proximity to the world's fault lines, are equidistant from and equally near the grace of God in Christ.

The New Testament gospel of the suffering God who abjured all worldly power and all worldly group identification simply rules out those schemes that compromise the radicality and universality of the gospel. The cross of Christ freed the gospel from enmeshment in all human efforts to save the world. No one was with Christ on the cross to die for our sins. Or, viewed differently, everyone was with Christ on the cross, but only as passive inhabitants of his righteous and suffering person.

When we are freed from the need to look for salvation in human schemes, our vision should then be clearer, thereby enabling us to make the very important distinctions between the relatively good and the relatively bad in the realm of human action. Liberated from worry about our salvation we can turn unobsessively to the task of building a better world, not by prideful claims of transformation, but by determined yet humble attempts to take firm steps for the better.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

If the most important event that ever happened in human history is the event of Christ, particularly his cross and resurrection, then the essential and unique mission of the church is its calling by God to proclaim the gospel in word and sacrament. In the Lutheran vision, the gospel of Christ is the church's treasure. The church is the earthen vessel whose sacred obligation it is to take the gospel to every nook and cranny of the world. Its calling is to proclaim the gospel and to gather a people around that gospel, forming them through the Spirit into the body of Christ.

No other community has such a calling; and no other will

promote the gospel if the church fails in its task. So the church must take with utmost seriousness the terrible simplicity of its task. Of course it must be engaged in deeds of charity, and it must be concerned with justice. Of course it must involve itself in many other activities—financial, administrative, liturgical and educational. Of course it must witness in the public sphere. But the church is not primarily a political actor, a social transformer, or an aggressive interest group; if it acts primarily as one of these, it is identified and treated as one more contentious worldly group. What's more, it loses its own integrity, its own reason for being.

The church must attend to its own core vision, not only proclaiming it, but attempting to be faithful to it in all its practices and endeavors. (Stanley Hauerwas is at least partially correct when he argues that the church does not have a social ethic, it *is* a social ethic.)²² The church cannot insure that its gospel vision will prevail in the hearts of human beings; only the Holy Spirit can capture those hearts for the gospel.

What is contained in this core vision? At the very center is the event of Jesus as the Christ. Surrounding it is the biblical and early church's witness to the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The ecumenical creeds are a key witness to these events and their meaning. The larger apostolic witness is both a record and interpretation of that revelatory event. It incorporates not only the "glowing core" of God's justification of sinners on account of Christ, but also the key teaching without which the gospel makes little or no sense. The Old Testament background, the doctrine of the Trinity, the eschatological tension between the Christ event and the coming kingdom, and the calling of the church and individual Christians to their mission in the world are all essential elements in this core vision.

This core vision ought to be held with clarity and confidence by the church. Its main elements are stable through time, though they must be communicated afresh for each new generation. This core makes up the great tradition that can be traced from the time of the apostles to the present day. Its main tenets are not negotiable if the Christian faith is to remain the Christian faith.

Closely related to this central religious core is the central moral vision of the Christian faith. The Decalogue, the calling of all Christians to faith active in love and justice, the preciousness of all created life redeemed by Christ, and the covenantal structure of God's creation (which includes the special covenant of man and woman in marriage) all constitute the moral core of the Christian vision. They too are constant through time, though they must be applied creatively to each new historical situation. It is difficult to imagine authentic Christian identity without them.

The next concentric circle away from this inner orb includes the more speculative theological reflections of the church, including its social teachings. This band represents the efforts of the church to apply its religious and moral vision to the dynamic world around it. These efforts entail significant steps in moving from the core vision to its application to specific problems. Each step means an increasing chance for disagreement among Christians who hold their core vision in common. Theological reflection on society—the arts, sciences, etc.—and social teaching on economics, or politics, and society are examples of this extension of Christian meaning. Ventures in this direction are important in the life of the church, but unanimity on them is highly unlikely. The church needs to allow a good deal of latitude for disagreement and plurality of opinions. Its clearest litmus test should stipulate that these extensions do not conflict with the core vision itself.

Finally, there is a concentric circle that represents the church's posture on specific public policy issues. Such specific commitments on the part of the church ought generally to be quite infrequent. But in special times with regard to special issues, the church may have to stand for or against particular policies. In more ordinary times, however, it is important for the church not to commit to particular policies since there are many other agencies through which Christians can exert their influence. Further, there will be much difference of opinion among intelligent Christians of good will on such specific policies.

It is essential that the church be able to distinguish these

different circles, or, to use another image, levels of discourse. It must hold their contents with differing degrees of authority and commitment. The central religious and moral core ought to be held with clarity, confidence, and steadfastness. It has the highest degree of authority and consensus in the church. The outer circles are much more susceptible to genuine and permissible disagreement. Moreover, as one moves toward the outer circles, the church has less and less warrant and knowledge for pronouncing or acting upon its judgments. (Again, there are exceptions here. If a social practice is glaringly in opposition to the Christian religious and moral core, the church must speak and act, even though there would yet be room for discussion of *how* it must speak and act.)

The American Lutheran tradition has been quite admirable in distinguishing these levels of authority. It has been a refreshing alternative to the American churches on both the left and the right that conflate the levels into one, or collapse the periphery into the core. The liberal churches are often confused or permissive about the core but dogmatic about the periphery. Denial of the decisiveness and uniqueness of Jesus as the Christ creates little alarm while dissent on "inclusive language" can bring ostracism. Current secular ideologies serve as the functional equivalent of the core. No longer clear or confident about their central reason for being, such religious groups turn to secular sources for their identity.

Activist conservative churches are more likely to elevate their conservative political commitments to the level of dogma. They often engage in "straight-line" thinking. They hold their religious and political commitments with equal intensity and are thus as likely as their liberal compatriots to exclude persons from the "circle of faith" on the basis of their political persuasion. In either case, the integrity of the church and its mission is threatened along with the radicality and universality of the gospel.

THE TWO-FOLD RULE OF GOD

Perhaps the most difficult element, yet one of the most important, in Lutheran theology is the doctrine of the

two-fold rule of God, sometimes called the "two-kingdoms" doctrine. As the most difficult, that doctrine has also been the most vulnerable to distortion. Karl Barth was the first to call this Lutheran teaching "the two-kingdoms doctrine," and he was not paying a compliment to the Lutheran tradition. Rather, he was sharply criticizing those Lutherans in the 1930s who had used Lutheranism's doctrine of the two-fold rule of God to justify Hitler and National Socialism.²³

Actually, Barth was criticizing the misuse of the teaching. Instead of the highly dialectical and paradoxical view of God's two-fold rule, the misusers sank into a dualistic approach. According to this dualistic model, which is a Lutheran heresy, there are two completely separate spheres, one having to do with earthly society and the other having to do with the salvation of our souls. Moreover, this dualism is often given a spatial twist. The secular world and the world of the church are two separate realities. The secular world in this view is autonomous. It runs according to its own principles and rules, and the Christian must simply submit to them. The church preaches the gospel, which then affects only the inner souls of Christians and perhaps their intimate relationships. As one Lutheran jurist put it, the issues of public life "should remain untouched by the proclamation of the gospel, completely untouched."²⁴

Such a dualistic approach was used to argue that the Christian *qua* Christian had no grounds for resisting tyrannical governments, be they that of Hitler, Stalin, Pinochet, or Vorster. This approach leads to the infamous political quietism that Lutherans have sometimes fostered. As with all heresies, this dualistic approach has in it an element of truth, but that element is so magnified that it pushes out the other elements that make it a genuinely useful doctrine.

The doctrine of the two-fold rule of God is more than useful, however, it is deeply biblical and Christian; it is not a Lutheran oddity. Paul writes of the two aeons in Romans (chapter 5): the new era that Christ is bringing into the world and the old aeon that is under the rule of law and sin. The same eschatological tension is present in other biblical

sources. The new order of Christ is in tension with the old order, yet Christians must live in both. Jesus said we must give to Caesar what is his and to God what is God's (Matthew 22:21). There is at the heart of the Christian vision a duality but not a dualism. It cannot be flattened into one dimension. We are caught in two realities that must be taken seriously.

Carl Braaten puts the essence of the doctrine succinctly:

This doctrine of the two kingdoms marks out the identity of the church within the global horizon of the politics of God and the divine governance of the world. This doctrine draws a distinction between the two ways of God's working in the world, two strategies that God uses to deal with the powers of evil and the reality of sin, two approaches to human beings, to mobilize them for active cooperation in two distinctly different kinds of institutions. One is created as an instrument of governance seeking justice through the administration of law and the preservation of order, and the other as an instrument of the Gospel and its sacraments announcing and mediating an ultimate and everlasting salvation which only Christ can give in an act of unconditional love and personal sacrifice.²⁵

This biblical and Christian perspective arose when the kingdom expected by the followers of Jesus did not come. The kingdom had come in Jesus—the preacher had become the preached, but the full realization of that which was announced and experienced in the Christ event did not take place. Nevertheless, Christians believed that the world they were given to live in and to follow Christ in was not abandoned by God. The Old Testament witness to God's creating, sustaining, and judging activities was not discarded. God as law continues to operate. Indeed, this was affirmed in the face of heresies that tried to split the Creator from the Redeemer God.

Surely the God who in Jesus suffered and died on a cross for all and who rose again approaches humans differently in the gospel than he does those same people in their worldly life in society. There is a two-foldness in God's action in the

world, a two-foldness that both generates and reflects a real tension in the individual as well as the corporate lives of all Christians. All the major Christian religious traditions recognize in some fashion this tension between Christ and the ongoing societal necessities of the world. They are aware that following Christ and living in the world is no easy task. Those who are unaware of that difficulty understand neither Christ nor the world.

However, Christian religious traditions handle this tension in very different ways. H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* is a classic analysis of how they handle this tension. The "Christ against culture" (sectarian) tradition escapes the tension by withdrawing from the world. The classic "Christ above culture" (Roman Catholic) tradition aims to manage the tension by forging Christ and culture into a grand synthesis presided over by the church. The "Christ transforming culture" (Reformed) tradition seeks to convert the culture toward the will of God as it is discerned by the church and carried out by its laity. "The Christ of culture" (liberal religion) tradition escapes the tension by absorbing Christ into the enlightened culture of the day.²⁶

The "Christ and culture in paradox" (Lutheran) tradition handles the tension in a paradoxical way through its teaching on the two-fold rule of God. Thus it is not the tension of Christ and culture that is the contentious issue; rather, it is how that tension is handled. Of the five possible ways of managing it as suggested by Niebuhr, the Lutheran way comes closest to living with an unresolved tension. The other traditions move more vigorously toward resolution, and that can often be problematic and perhaps unbiblical.

In the Lutheran theological ethical view, Christians live in two realities at the same time. Each reality is under the governance of God but in sharply different ways. God governs the "kingdom on the left" with law and the "kingdom on the right" with the gospel. God's aim in both modes of rule is the same: to overcome evil and recall the disobedient creation to himself, but God uses very different means in each "kingdom."

I have already elaborated above the basic meanings and functions of the law and the gospel in Lutheran theology and ethics. If the law and gospel are not accorded their proper meaning and functions, we get either the law being made into the gospel or the gospel being made into the law. In the former, the demands and operation of the law are viewed as redemptive and thereby make Christ unnecessary. In the latter, the extravagant love revealed in the gospel becomes a guiding principle for ordering life in the rough and tumble of this world. In this case there is little account taken of the power of sin and evil in the world, and society is made vulnerable to the most willful agencies of evil. Such an approach dishonors God the Creator.

Both pitfalls are common in American Christianity. Human efforts are often made *de facto* substitutes for the liberating power of the gospel (making the law into the gospel), and the radical love revealed in the gospel is often used as a direct principle for commending public policy (making the gospel into the law). The former secularizes the gospel while the latter sentimentalizes it.

While the two ways that God rules the world must be clearly distinguished (for the sake of both the gospel and the law), they are not finally separated. God the Creator and God the Redeemer are not separate deities. Likewise, the two ways that God reigns are not separate spatially or existentially; they interact in creative ways. A tentative duality does not lead to a final dualism. There are three ways in which the two-fold rule of God comes together creatively in this world.

The first of these is in the calling of each Christian person, which I have already elaborated above. As faith, love, and hope are kindled by the Spirit in the hearts of Christians, they will practice those virtues within and through the worldly callings they have been given. These Spirit-driven virtues will affect the roles and responsibilities Christians have as family members, workers, citizens, and church members. They will transform these worldly responsibilities into authentic Christian callings. God's creative love enters the world through the exercise of Christian vocation.

As I have argued above, this process is never uncomplicated. Christians must take their worldly responsibilities seriously as well as the special summons of faith, love, and hope. They will be called to responsible risk. Christian virtue will be a leaven that works creatively on the hard demands of worldly life. It is the creative task of each Christian to find the fitting deed between an adventureless acceptance of the world as it is and an irresponsible desire to replace it with some utopian scheme. Insofar as that deed is truly fitting, it will cooperate with God's dynamic law of creation.

Second, in corresponding fashion, the church is a place where the two-fold rule of God is conjoined. The church's proper work is, of course, to proclaim the gospel so that, through the Spirit, it might bring God's creatures into his right-hand kingdom. But the church is also responsible for addressing the world according to God's law. It is called to proclaim the whole word of God—both gospel and law. Further, it is to claim only the power of the word as it operates in society. Its powers are thoroughly in the realm of persuasion, not coercion.

The church is also called to apply the insights of the whole word of God to its understanding of the world. The dynamic law of God is applied to all the structures of social life. Further, the radical love expressed in the gospel is relevant, at least indirectly, to the affairs of the world just as Christian virtues are relevant to the lives of individual Christians in their callings. These insights are to be applied vigorously and realistically, avoiding both cynicism and sentimentalism. The gospel is relevant to the world's affairs in a paradoxical fashion. It is a constant judgment on whatever is achieved in the world and is a constant lure to higher achievement. It is always "out in front," just as is God's eschatological future, and it cannot be completely captured or legislated in the present. We must never forget that the person who fully expressed that radical gospel love was crucified. The gospel ethic does not fit smoothly into the world.

Finally, it is in God's total action in the world that we confess the conjoining of the two ways that he reigns. The actions

of God the Creator and God the Redeemer cannot finally be separate. However, even the eyes of faith are not given to perceive how this is so in this world. Short of the *eschaton* when we shall all see clearly, the two-fold nature of God's rule must be affirmed. But this affirmation must be held with humility and openness, for our human constructs cannot hold God hostage. God's ongoing redemptive manifestations may indeed erupt spontaneously in the midst of worldly affairs. At times we might even be able to identify them. While they may not be full manifestations of the final kingdom of God, they may be seen as signs and anticipations of the eternal shalom toward which the whole world strains. But these will have to be consistent with the only clear anticipation we have of that kingdom, Jesus as the Christ.

THE PARADOX OF HUMAN NATURE AND HISTORY

"Whatever your heart fastens to, that is your god," said Luther. From the viewpoint of Lutheran theological ethics, humans are irretrievably committed to finding something other than God to which to fasten their hearts. This analysis of inescapable sin, however, is not so simple. We do not fasten to the non-alluring and worthless things of the world. On the contrary, we fasten to the things that really tempt. Highest among our temptations is devotion to ourselves. We are obsessed with ourselves and make ourselves the center of the universe. Our attention to ourselves crowds out everything else except those things we want in order to feed the image of ourselves we have concocted. This obsession may be one of willful assertion or self-pitying negation, but in either case it makes a mockery of the divine command "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul." We love ourselves, or those things that seem to afford us some semblance of importance and immortality.

Thus, none are good. All human actions are tainted with the effect of our sin, even those performed by Christians. We can never be completely free of the old Adam in this life. This Augustinian view of human nature extends to human action in society. Human sin is particularly magnified and unrestrained

in the life and action of groups. It is especially expressed in collective situations.

Yet, humans are not dirt. Even in their fallen state they possess qualities of their being created in the image of God. There is an essential self that longs for wholeness and completion, though it cannot heal or complete itself. The essential self has capacities for moral reason, which Luther called "civil righteousness." Humans have capacities for justice.

Moreover, humans never lose their dignity in God's eyes. They are beloved for what God has made them to be, not what they have made of themselves. They are infinitely valuable because they have been given a destiny in their creation and have been redeemed by the work of Christ. They can refuse that destiny and that redemption, but they can never lose the "alien dignity" that their creation and redemption bestow on them.

Humans find themselves in a paradoxical predicament. Created and redeemed by God, they are "exalted individuals."²⁷ They have a capacity for freedom, love, and justice. Yet they use their freedom to fasten to lesser things, creating a hell for themselves, their fellow human beings, and the world around them. They are a paradox of good and evil, manufacturing idols of the good things they are given. And they cannot solve this predicament on their own.

Thus, the paradox of human nature creates the paradox of human history. "History cumulates, rather than solves, the essential problems of human existence," wrote Niebuhr.²⁸ The fulfillment and perfection of history are not ours to grasp; we cannot be gods in history. Indeed, great evil is done by those who try to complete history by their own powers.

Rather, it is up to God to bring history to an end (*its finis*) and to fulfill its purpose (*its telos*). God has given us an anticipation of the kingdom in Christ and will bring it to fullness in his own time and by his own will. We are in an interim time of struggle between Christ's first coming and the second.

Given that scenario, we are freed from trying to manage history according to great schemes. Rather, we must strive for relative gains and wait on God. We must work for reform

without cynicism's paralysis or idealism's false hope. The Lutheran political vision leads to a non-utopian view of history that yet is not cynical. It expects neither too much nor too little of history.

The "Lutheran attitude" reflected in these four main themes provides a wholesome corrective to an American Christianity that is all too prone to identify promising human achievements as the salvation of God, to make the church into anything but the proclaimer of the gospel, to apply directly the "gospel ethic" to the power struggles of the world, and to hope for the intractabilities of individual and corporate sin to be completely overcome by some sanctified human effort.

The perennial themes of law and gospel I have elaborated above provide Lutheranism with a coherent and persuasive account of Christian existence in both their personal and political dimensions. However, this Lutheran account has been immeasurably enriched by Lutheranism's interaction with Catholic, Reformed, and evangelical proposals. Perhaps as we interact through history, our convergences might finally overcome our divergences, so that one day we all might be one, for which Christ so fervently prayed.

Author

Dr. Robert Benne is director of the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College (Virginia) and the author of several books, including *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* and *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century*. He has also contributed numerous articles to periodicals. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. Luther, WA 40,I, *Commentary on Galatians*, 207.
2. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 207.
3. E. Billing, *Our Calling*, trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Book Concern, 1951), 7.

4. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. N. H. Smith and ed. E. Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1955,) 73ff.
5. G. W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love: an Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), 112.
6. R. Benne, *Ordinary Saints: an Introduction to the Christian Life*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 63ff.
7. Wingren, *Creation and Law*, (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961).
8. Sittler, *The Structure of Christian Ethics*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 76.
9. A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, (London: SPCK, 1932).
10. R. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 1:220. Niebuhr was reflecting on what he termed "Lutheran quietism." He notes that Lutheranism has a profound estimation of both human sinfulness and divine grace. Both, he asserts, fit together. The miserable condition of humans must be addressed by a radical divine grace. This grace he compares to a peak that is so high and glorious that it makes foothills (the relative distinctions so important to political judgments and responsibilities) seem flat and undifferentiated. Thus, he claims, Lutherans tend to bask in the wonder of grace and ignore political responsibilities. Niebuhr contrasts this with what he calls the "more superficial" doctrines of sin and grace of British and American Protestant Christianity, which, ironically, lead to more activism in the political sphere.
11. *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 53.
12. Forell, *Faith Active in Love*, 86.
13. Forell, *Faith Active in Love*, 122ff.
14. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 73.
15. Luther expounded the Decalogue in both the Small and Large Catechisms as a guide to the Christian life. It is very interesting how he moves from the mostly negative prohibitions of the second table of the commandments through exhortations to mutual love (love your neighbor as yourself), and finally to more "second mile" actions that represent *agape* love. But in no case do these second-mile actions contradict the commandments. At the same time, Luther recognizes that it is impossible to stipulate the call of a dynamic *agape* love in specific injunctions or rules. So, while many Lutherans have shied away from a third use of the law to guide the life of the redeemed, they in fact have such a use in a dynamic and expansive view of the commandments.
16. Bonhoeffer is particularly instructive in elaborating this notion of "conformation" with Christ. The Christian is conformed to Christ incarnate, crucified, and resurrected. See his *Ethics*, 17ff.
17. Billing is very interesting on this point. He argues that the Lutheran idea of the calling is concretely focused on daily duties. We live out our

callings with the hope that they will contribute to God's reign. "We can never foresee the results of our acts, least of all when the goal is the kingdom of God. To maintain that our feeble deeds do serve this infinite goal is and remains a matter of faith. Our day's work lies ahead of us. It seems small and inconsequential. But God who gave it to us must also know its value, so go to it" (*Our Calling*), 26.

18. Luther, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, 1521.
19. Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 569-76.
20. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2:184-98.
21. Foremost among them is the distinguished evangelical scholar, Mark Noll, in his "The Lutheran Difference," *First Things* 20 (February, 1992): 31-40.
22. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 99ff.
23. As reported by Carl Braaten in his *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 124.
24. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 124.
25. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 135.
26. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956).
27. The concepts of the "exalted individual" and "destiny" are developed admirably by Glenn Tinder in his *The Political Meaning of Christianity*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 19ff. Tinder's key categories are modern articulations of Reformation ideas.
28. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2:318.