

ON CHURCH AND STATE

Two Kingdoms, One Lord: How God Governs His World

The Two Kingdoms Doctrine in Confessional Lutheran Perspective

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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There is no Lutheran teaching more frequently invoked and more thoroughly misunderstood than the doctrine of the two kingdoms. It gets pressed into service to prove that Christians should keep quiet about politics, or that the church should baptize a party platform, or that faith is a private matter with no business in public life. Each of these is a distortion, and each of them misses the point so badly that a person could hold it while sincerely believing he was being a good Lutheran.

So it is worth going back to the sources and saying plainly what the doctrine actually teaches. At its heart, the two kingdoms doctrine is not about the separation of church and state, and it is not a strategy for Christian withdrawal. It is a confession about **God** — about how the one true God governs the whole of His creation. Rightly understood, it is one of the most liberating and clarifying teachings in all of Scripture, because it tells the conscience where to look for its comfort and where to render its obedience, and it keeps the two from being confused.

Two Governments, Not Two Gods

Begin with the deepest error to avoid. The two kingdoms doctrine does not divide reality into a religious half that belongs to God and a secular half that runs on its own. It does not hand the world over to autonomous reason while reserving the sanctuary for the Spirit. Both kingdoms are God's. Both are how the living God rules. The distinction is not between what God governs and what He does not; it is between **two ways** that the same God governs the same world.

Luther spoke of the government of the **right hand** and the government of the **left hand**. With His right hand God rules spiritually, through the Word and the Holy Spirit, forgiving sins, creating faith, and gathering His church unto eternal life. With His left hand God rules temporally, through law and reason and the civil sword, restraining evil, ordering society, and preserving His creatures in this life. The right hand deals in the Gospel; the left hand deals in the law. The right hand grants; the left hand demands. But both hands belong to the same God, and neither is godless.

This is why the Lutheran will not concede the state to secularism as though earthly authority were merely a human contrivance or a necessary evil. The magistrate, the judge, the police officer, the soldier, the parent, the employer — each of these offices is, in Luther's striking phrase, a **mask of God** (*larva Dei*), a station behind which God Himself is at work preserving the world. When a farmer brings in a harvest, God is feeding His people; when a court restrains a violent man, God is protecting the innocent. The left-hand kingdom is not a Sunday-school kingdom, but it is no less God's for that.

A Necessary Clarification: Kingdoms and Governments

Before going further, one distinction repays careful attention, because a great deal of confusion arises from collapsing two different things under the single phrase “two kingdoms.”

In one sense, Scripture speaks of **two kingdoms** in sharp antithesis: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, the reign of Christ and the reign of the devil. These are not two ways God rules; they are enemies. One is light and the other darkness; one is being redeemed and the other is passing away. This is the conflict in view when our Lord says, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36), and when Paul writes that God “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13). Here the two kingdoms are at war, and the Christian belongs wholly to the one and renounces the other.

In another sense — and this is what the phrase most often means in our tradition — we speak of **two governments** or two *regiments* (Luther’s *zwei Regimente*): the two distinct modes by which God governs. The spiritual government and the temporal government. These are not at war. They are not light and darkness. They are the right hand and the left hand of one God, working together for different ends.

Keeping these two senses apart prevents a serious mistake. The temporal government is **not** the kingdom of the devil. The state is not Satan’s realm that the church must escape. To confuse the *antithesis* between God’s kingdom and Satan’s with the *distinction* between God’s two governments is to end up either despising civil authority as demonic or expecting it to be the church. When this essay speaks of “two kingdoms,” it means the two governments, the twofold reign of the one God.

The Government of the Right Hand

God’s spiritual government is the reign of Christ through the means of grace. Its currency is the Gospel; its instrument is the preached Word and the administered Sacraments; its subjects are those in whom the Holy Spirit has kindled faith. In this kingdom there is no coercion, because faith cannot be commanded or compelled. “Faith is a free work, to which no one can be forced,” Luther wrote. The Gospel does its work by persuasion and creation, not by the sword.

The righteousness of this kingdom is a righteousness of the heart, received by faith and reckoned by grace. It is not earned, legislated, or improved by effort. It is Christ’s own righteousness, given freely to the sinner who trusts the promise. This is why Article XVI

of the Augsburg Confession is careful to say that the Gospel “does not overthrow civil authority” but “teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart.” The right-hand kingdom does not make you a better citizen by act of parliament; it makes you a child of God by the forgiveness of sins.

Here is the great comfort of the doctrine: in the kingdom of the right hand, the conscience is set free from the law’s accusation. Before God the Christian stands not on his performance but on Christ’s finished work. No earthly ruler can grant this, and no earthly ruler can take it away.

The Government of the Left Hand

God’s temporal government is His rule over the outward, bodily life of all people — Christian and non-Christian alike — through the structures of family, work, and civil order. Its currency is the law; its instrument is reason and, where necessary, the sword; its subjects are all human beings, since all live in society and all need to be governed and protected.

The righteousness of this kingdom is **civil** righteousness — outward, external, achievable in some measure even by those without faith, and concerned with justice, order, and the good of the neighbor. A pagan judge can render a just verdict. An unbelieving father can provide for his children. God does not require the Gospel to run a courtroom; He requires competence, honesty, and the restraint of evil. This is why Lutherans have always insisted that the civil realm is governed by law and reason, not by the Gospel — you do not administer a nation by the Sermon on the Mount as though it were a legal code, nor do you abolish prisons because Christ forgives.

The sword belongs to this kingdom. Romans 13 is unambiguous: the governing authority “does not bear the sword in vain,” for it is “the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:4). To wish the sword away in the name of the Gospel is to confuse the kingdoms and, in the end, to abandon the neighbor to the violent. The Christian magistrate wields the sword not in contradiction to his faith but as a service of love toward those the law protects.

The Witness of the Confessions

This is not merely Luther’s private opinion; it is confessed doctrine. Two articles of the Augsburg Confession set the two kingdoms in their proper relation, and they are worth reading closely.

Article XVI, “Of Civil Affairs,” teaches that “lawful civil ordinances are good works of God,” and that Christians may rightly hold public office, serve as judges, decide cases by law, punish evildoers, wage just wars, serve as soldiers, make contracts, hold property, take lawful oaths, and marry. It then condemns the Anabaptists, who forbade these offices to Christians, and equally condemns any teaching that locates evangelical perfection in *forsaking* civil callings rather than in the fear of God and faith. The Christian does not achieve holiness by fleeing the world’s stations; he serves God precisely within them. And the article closes with the boundary line: Christians are bound to obey their magistrates and laws “except when commanded to sin; for then they ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

That final clause is essential. Obedience to earthly authority is real and God-commanded, but it is not unlimited. When the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, the Christian’s obedience to God overrides his obedience to the magistrate — not by revolution, but by faithful refusal and, if need be, by suffering the consequences. The two kingdoms doctrine is not a recipe for passivity before tyranny; it is a defined obedience with a defined limit.

Article XXVIII, “Of Ecclesiastical Power,” guards the boundary from the other side. The power of the church — the power of the keys — is “a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer Sacraments.” It is exercised only through the Word, and it confers eternal, not temporal, goods. Therefore, the Confession insists, ecclesiastical power must not invade the office of the magistrate: it must not transfer worldly kingdoms, abolish civil laws, dissolve lawful obedience, or intrude upon civil government. “The two powers,” the article says, “are not to be confounded.” The bishop as bishop wields the Word; where a bishop also holds temporal jurisdiction, he holds it by human arrangement as a prince, not by divine right of his spiritual office.

Read together, these two articles do exactly what the doctrine requires. Article XVI keeps the Christian from despising the earthly kingdom; Article XXVIII keeps the church from usurping it. The one forbids withdrawal; the other forbids theocracy.

The Christian Lives in Both at Once

Here we reach the practical heart of the matter. The Christian is not asked to choose a kingdom. He is, at every moment, a citizen of both. Before God he is righteous by faith, a member of the spiritual kingdom, awaiting the resurrection. Before the world he is a father, a neighbor, an employee, a voter, a soldier perhaps — a member of the temporal kingdom, bound to serve. He lives, as the tradition puts it, under **two kinds of righteousness** at the same time.

Coram Deo — before God — his righteousness is passive, received, alien, the gift of Christ. He does nothing here but believe. Coram mundo — before the world — his righteousness is active, worked out in love toward the neighbor through the callings God has given him. And these two never compete, because they operate on entirely different planes. Good works do not justify before God; faith does not plow the field. The Christian is simultaneously perfectly free before God and perfectly bound in service to his neighbor.

This is where the doctrine of **vocation** flowers. Because God governs the left-hand kingdom through ordinary human stations, the Christian serves God not by inventing spiritual-seeming works but by faithfully doing the plain duties of his callings. The mother changing a diaper, the electrician wiring a house, the councilman debating an ordinance — each is serving God and neighbor in the temporal kingdom, and none of it is beneath the dignity of faith. The two kingdoms doctrine dignifies ordinary life by revealing it as the very place where God's left hand is at work.

Distinguish, but Do Not Separate; Distinguish, but Do Not Mingle

The whole art of this doctrine lies in a single discipline: **distinguish the two kingdoms without either separating them or mingling them.**

To *separate* them is to imagine that faith has nothing to do with public life, that the Christian leaves his conscience at home when he enters the voting booth or the boardroom. But the same man lives in both kingdoms, and his faith forms the character with which he serves in the temporal realm. The Lutheran does not privatize religion. He renders to Caesar what is Caesar's *and* to God what is God's (Matthew 22:21) — and it is the same person doing both.

To *mingle* them is the opposite error: to run the state on the Gospel or to run the church on the sword. When the church takes up the sword, it becomes a tyrant and loses the Gospel; when the state takes up the Gospel as its governing principle, it becomes a persecutor and corrupts the faith. History is littered with the wreckage of both confusions. The genius of the Lutheran distinction is that it refuses both at once.

If this sounds familiar, it should. The two kingdoms doctrine is nothing other than the **distinction of law and Gospel** applied to how God governs the world. To confuse the kingdoms is, at bottom, to confuse law and Gospel — to make the Gospel into a new law for society, or to make civil law into a means of salvation. The pastor who has learned to divide law and Gospel rightly already holds the key to the two kingdoms.

Where the Doctrine Gets Distorted

Because the balance is delicate, the doctrine has been pulled out of shape in predictable directions. It is worth naming a few.

Quietism. Some have taken the two kingdoms to mean that Christians should stay silent while the temporal kingdom does as it pleases — that the church has no word to speak to the state and the believer no calling to resist injustice. This is a caricature, and a dangerous one, since it was invoked to excuse silence before real evils. But Article XVI already refutes it: the Christian is *actively* engaged in the earthly kingdom, and his obedience stops at the command to sin. The church, for its part, always proclaims God’s law, which binds rulers as much as ruled. Distinguishing the kingdoms is not the same as muzzling the conscience.

Transformationism. From the Reformed side comes the impulse to Christianize the civil order — to build the kingdom of God through cultural and political conquest, to make the Gospel the operating principle of the state, or in its sharper forms (theonomy, reconstructionism) to install God’s civil law as the law of the land. The Lutheran demurs. The left-hand kingdom is not the kingdom of God arriving through legislation; it is God’s provisional ordering of a fallen world by law and reason. We do not usher in Christ’s reign by seizing the levers of the state. The kingdom of the right hand comes by the Word alone.

Anabaptist withdrawal. At the other extreme stands the refusal of civil office, the oath, and the sword, and the attempt to live only in the spiritual kingdom as though the temporal were off-limits to the faithful. This is precisely what Augsburg XVI condemns. The Christian is not too holy for the courtroom or the battlefield; God has stationed him there for the neighbor’s good.

Roman conflation. The medieval “two swords” arrangement subordinated the temporal sword to the spiritual, granting the church authority to depose kings and bind the civil order to its will. Article XXVIII was written in part against exactly this — the mingling of ecclesiastical and civil power in one hand. The church’s authority is the Word, not the world’s dominion.

Modern secularism. Finally, the doctrine is often confused with the American constitutional separation of church and state, as though the two kingdoms meant that religion belongs only to the private sphere. But the two kingdoms doctrine is a claim about *God’s* twofold rule, not a claim about keeping God out of public affairs. Both kingdoms are His. The Christian citizen brings his whole conscience into the public square; what he does not do is confuse the courthouse with the chancel.

One Lord Over Both

For all the talk of two, the doctrine is finally about **one** — one God, one Lord, over both kingdoms. Christ is not the king of the church only. He reigns over the temporal kingdom as well, though in a hidden way, through providence and law and the sword He has ordained, until He returns to make His reign visible over all. There is no square inch of creation outside His dominion; there is only the distinction of how He presently rules each part.

This guards against the last and subtlest error — the deist temptation to think the left-hand kingdom runs on its own while God attends to spiritual things. He does not. The same Christ who forgives sins through the Gospel upholds the magistrate's authority through the law, and He will call every ruler to account. The two kingdoms are not two Gods, nor even two lords. They are the two hands of the one Lord who made and governs and will judge the world.

Freedom and Faithfulness

What does the doctrine finally give the Christian? Two things, and they correspond to the two kingdoms.

It gives **freedom** — the freedom of a conscience that knows its righteousness before God does not depend on the state of the nation, the outcome of an election, or the success of any earthly cause. The believer whose citizenship is in heaven can labor in the temporal kingdom without despair when it goes badly and without idolatry when it goes well, because his hope was never lodged there.

And it gives **faithfulness** — a clear-eyed, unromantic devotion to the neighbor through the ordinary stations of this life, doing justice, keeping order, providing, protecting, and serving, precisely because these are the works God has given the left hand to do. The Christian does not withdraw from the world in the name of the Gospel, and he does not divinize the world in the name of the kingdom. He serves, freely and faithfully, in both.

Two kingdoms, then. But one Lord over both — the crucified and risen Christ, who rules the church by His Gospel and the world by His law, and who holds the whole of it in His pierced and reigning hands.

Soli Deo Gloria.