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# Our Role In God's Rule: Lutheran And Mennonite Views On Moral Agency

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## Introduction

This article is a comparative study of Lutheran and Mennonite ethics, viewed from a Mennonite perspective. Instead of engaging in a general survey we have focused attention on the respective understandings of moral agency, believing this to be the area of greatest ethical divergence between the two confessions. In other words, we want to address primarily the question of the Christian's place and role in doing the will of God, as understood by Lutherans and Mennonites, respectively.

A recent Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue in Germany confirms this choice of focus.<sup>1</sup> It identifies the areas of baptism and ethics as those of greatest divergence between the two confessions. Within the realm of ethics, the dialogue isolates the ethical relevance of the humanity of Jesus (*die ethische Relevanz des Menschseins Jesu*) as the central area of tension. Mennonites have responded to the tension between the lofty teachings and example of Jesus on the one hand, and the sinfulness of the world on the other, with a call to *imitatio*, or immediate discipleship (*Ethik der unmittelbaren Nachfolge*). Luther, and Lutherans after him, have consistently responded to that tension by way of the two kingdoms doctrine. In other words, they have responded to the question "How does the Christian act as the agent of God's will?" with the prior question: "In what context or office? Are we speaking of the Christian in his or her private capacity, or of the Christian acting in a public office, such as magistrate, prince, parent, teacher, etc.?" If the former, then Luther also accepted the radical demands of

discipleship as relevant; if the latter, he pointed to a different mode of ethical agency, a mode relevant to the temporal kingdom. We agree with this analysis of the locus of ethical tensions between the two confessions.

One could possibly even sharpen the focus of these ethical tensions. For both Lutherans and Mennonites the starting point in their ethical quest has been Scripture exclusively (*sola scriptura*), but for both confessions one particular text, the Sermon on the Mount, has functioned as the touchstone for ethics. For Mennonites, this text has epitomized the call of Jesus to a life of discipleship (*Nachfolge, imitatio*) distinct from this world. For Luther, it was the struggle with the Sermon that led to the development of his particular version of the two kingdoms doctrine.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the Anabaptists/Mennonites, however, he did not establish this scriptural text (and similar lofty ethical demands elsewhere) as the touchstone for Christian behaviour. Instead, he struggled with the tension between the Sermon (and similar texts) and such other texts of Scripture in both Testaments as Romans 13, 1 Peter 2:13–14, Genesis 9:6, or Exodus 21:14, 22ff, texts that affirmed for Luther the divine calling to a different ethic than that of the Sermon.<sup>3</sup> The result was his two kingdoms doctrine, a doctrine, to be sure, that he also found to conform to the state of the world and to human reason. If the understanding of the Sermon functioned so centrally in setting divergent ethical tracks for Lutherans and Mennonites, it might well become the starting point for seeking a better understanding, if not full agreement. We will therefore return to the Sermon and the respective understandings of its claim below.

Unfortunately, these theological differences have seldom been addressed in non-pejorative, non-maligning dialogue. Instead, the interaction between the two confessions has, throughout the centuries, been marked by mutual caricaturing. It is necessary to address this impediment of caricaturing first, before we can proceed to a search for convergence.

Luther himself characteristically referred to the Anabaptists (the forbears of the Mennonites) as “the enthusiasts” (*die Schwärmer*). This points to their central characteristic, as Luther perceived it: they lacked realism. They believed to be possible and God-willed what was neither, namely the establishment on earth, through human efforts (“works”), of a

pure society/church governed by the Sermon. As for the world at large, the Anabaptists were either deluded into believing that it could be governed by the same precepts in a legalistic fashion, or—more often—they abandoned all responsibility for it. It is painful for Mennonite readers that twentieth century Lutheran theologians still use the condescending and pejorative term “enthusiasts” (*Schwärmer*), not only when citing Luther and older sources, but as an apparently adequate descriptive term from their own perspective.<sup>4</sup>

For Anabaptists/Mennonites, on the other hand, Luther has traditionally been the reformer who started well, but then gave in to compromise. They heartily approved of his principle of *sola scriptura* and of his emphasis on salvation by grace through faith, but they perceived his two kingdoms doctrine as a capitulation to the world. Unable to abandon the state church (*Volkskirche*) concept and the support of the princes, he resorted to a dual ethic that—restricting true discipleship to the Christian’s individual and private sphere—left society to run according to its own inherent laws. Gospel became synonymous with cheap grace for the individual, while secular reason and law prevailed in society.

Every caricature contains some truth. It is a moot question for our purposes to attempt to decide to what degree the caricatures presented do in fact reveal dangers inherent in the respective positions, and to what extent they simply misrepresent the confessions to which they are attributed. For a fruitful dialogue, each side must strive anew for a truer understanding of the other. Each must also realize that there is extensive inner-confessional variance and discussion in each group, and that sixteenth century positions—whether true or caricatured—have to be heard as they are understood by their contemporary heirs. Only then can there be a fruitful common search for the greater truth.

A first step in this direction, and in the pursuit of the task of this paper, is for us as Mennonite authors to respond to “Lutheran questions” as we understand them, with contemporary Mennonite thinking. To do so, we must begin by making explicit our best understanding of the relevant points of Lutheran theology. It should be clear that neither of us (the authors of this article) is a Luther-scholar, and that the following summary of Luther’s two kingdoms doctrine is offered

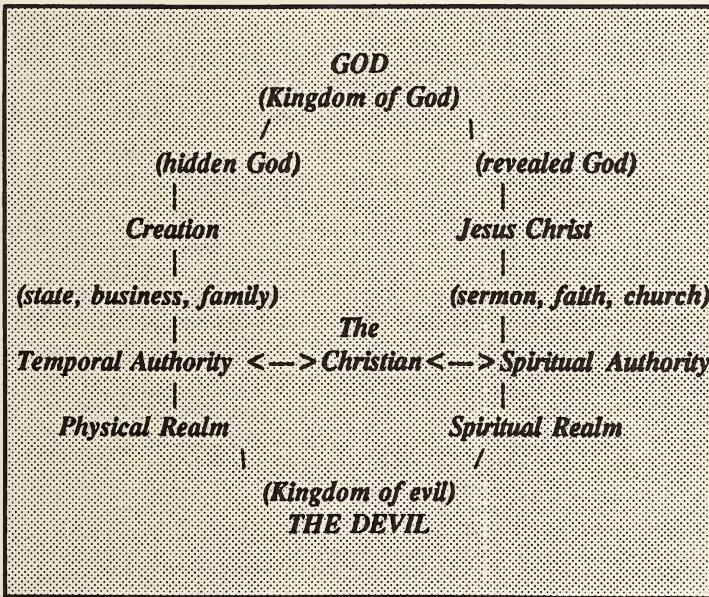
merely to clarify the assumptions on which our Mennonite responses rest.

## Two Kingdoms Theology Revisited

*Luther's Doctrine:* We referred already to the tension perceived by Luther between the Sermon on the Mount on the one hand, and other Scripture passages calling to a different, less radical ethic. He rejected resolutely the medieval Catholic notion of a dual ethic, in which a higher morality was expected of the clergy and monastics, while a lower ethic sufficed for ordinary Christians. He insisted that the Sermon is incumbent on every Christian, but only in the personal sphere. As an individual, the Christian is to practice radical love of neighbour, radical self-denial, and the readiness to suffer in consequence. Such are the marks of citizenship in the spiritual kingdom.

For the public realm, Luther preserved the Sermon's call to love, but saw the mode of its implementation to be indirect (doing God's "strange work"). There, to love means to secure order, extend protection, and advance each sphere of life, each "station" or "office", according to its own inherent principles. To love in one's office or station as parent, for example, might mean to punish a child; to love as a magistrate or prince might mean to execute a criminal or wage war. To act thus as a citizen of the temporal kingdom is not to act outside of God's will, but rather according to the law of God as graciously granted to preserve order in the world during the present aeon. The Christian has to discern at all times whether he or she, in a given matter, ought to act as citizen of the one or the other kingdom. In either case, however, such a Christian would be acting as the agent of God's will. Both kingdoms, or better perhaps, both governments,<sup>5</sup> are agencies of God in the fight against the kingdom of Satan.

Luther's view of the Christian acting in the two kingdoms could be illustrated as follows [see next page].<sup>6</sup> Note, for example, that "the Christian" is under both the temporal and spiritual authorities. This is justified on the basis that both are, after all, under the ultimate authority of God.



Luther's two kingdoms doctrine has received varying interpretations and considerable critique from within and without Lutheran circles. We can refer only to a few points in this discussion, points that have special significance for a Mennonite response. Helmut Thielicke<sup>7</sup> lists three "dangers" contained in Luther's two kingdoms doctrine: First, the danger of a double morality. On Luther's model, the Christian is called to contradictory modes of action, depending on whether he or she acts as a private person or within an office. Second, the danger of understanding the "world" as "a web of autonomous laws" (*ein Gewebe von Eigengesetzlichkeiten*). The public realm, it is said, is withdrawn from the claim of Christ's lordship and from Christian moral accountability. This critique was upheld, among others, by Karl Barth, but also by Roman Catholic critics. Third, the danger of seeing the two kingdoms in a static and harmonious side-by-side existence rather than in a sequence of aeons in which the old aeon (the kingdom of the "world"—"world" here means "fallen world") is constantly challenged by the new (the kingdom of God). Thus the radicality of the demands of the Sermon on the Mount is swallowed up in the harmony of two orders of creation, distinct from each other but equally willed by God.

As we said already, Thielicke acknowledges all three criticisms as real "dangers" in Luther and Lutheranism. He clears Luther himself of the first charge, admitting its justification with respect to some later Lutheran theologians. As to the second charge, he concedes to a high level of liability within Luther's two kingdoms doctrine but provides an alternative interpretation that, he believes, can avert the danger.<sup>8</sup> Regarding the third charge, however, Thielicke admits to a basic defect in Luther's two kingdoms doctrine.<sup>9</sup>

To characterize this defect, Thielicke returns to Luther's understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. Here, at the root of Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, he discovers a oneness, or better, a critical deficiency. The Sermon, for Luther, is certainly meant to infuse the principle of love even into the realm of the temporal kingdom. There, its application takes on a particular mode, as explained already, serving to encourage good government, good parenting, etc., if Christians fulfil their offices properly. But does not the Sermon, asks Thielicke, fulfil a second function, according to the New Testament, namely that of "putting in question the whole present

aeon" (*die...Infragestellung dieses ganzen Aeons*)? Having lived through the Hitler-era, Thieliicke knows that the secular powers, even though they keep order as Luther expected of them, are by no means only upholders of God's orders embedded in creation; they are also very much the expressions of the fallenness of the present aeon. Thieliicke can formulate this defect in Luther's two kingdoms doctrine tersely as "the atrophy of the eschatological dimension" (*der Schwund des eschatologischen Moments*), or simply as the "de-eschatologizing of the Sermon on the Mount" (*die Enteschatologisierung der Bergpredigt*).<sup>10</sup>

We have not presented this third point in Thieliicke's critique of Luther's two kingdoms doctrine because it is in itself more weighty or more generally acknowledged than other criticisms of that doctrine, but because it brings a prominent Lutheran theologian in the second half of the twentieth century to a position that comes very close to an Anabaptist/Mennonite perspective. If Lutherans can think such thoughts, a convergence with Anabaptist/Mennonite theology on at least some aspects of Christian ethical agency seems clearly possible. Before we return to this point, however, we must now present the Anabaptist views of Christian moral agency, views also based on the two kingdoms doctrine, but locating the Christian differently within it.

*The Anabaptists' Doctrine:* The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century were by no means a homogeneous group. There has been much debate in recent times as to who should be included under that name. Those referred to here as Anabaptists will represent, unless otherwise indicated, those "owned" by later Mennonites as their forbears. Although these also held to divergent positions on many points, they were generally marked by insistence on adult baptism, a separated church based on voluntary membership, strict church discipline with emphasis on separation from the world, exercising of the ban as a means of church discipline, refusal to swear an oath, refusal to bear arms, and refusal to hold government office.<sup>11</sup> The last two points are particularly significant for our further reflection.

It is often said, and not without some justification, that these Anabaptists did not develop a coherent theological position; that they, instead, placed all emphasis on obedience to the lofty commands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount



and elsewhere as they understood these from the perspective of "simple biblicists". Whatever truth this characterization may contain, it is also true that their writings show a considerable consistency on a number of points, including the role of Christians as moral agents.

The Anabaptists as defined did have their own two kingdoms doctrine, of which no less an authority than Walter Klaassen can say, "In its basic ingredients it was virtually identical to Martin Luther's."<sup>12</sup> He proceeds to characterize the two kingdoms as follows: "The kingdom of Christ was characterized by peace, forgiveness, non-violence, and patience. The kingdom of the world, or Satan, was strife, vengeance, anger, and the sword which kills. Government belonged to this kingdom of the world."<sup>13</sup> While Klaassen's characterization of the kingdom of Christ agrees indeed with Luther's, that of the second kingdom appears to be very different. For Luther, the worldly kingdom was, as we have seen, one of the two regiments of *God* through which God, albeit by way of law rather than gospel, does battle against the kingdom of Satan. And yet, Klaassen is not altogether wrong. The question is, "How did the Anabaptists regard the 'world'?" Was it, for them, identical with the realm belonging to Satan, or did the Anabaptists conceive of the "world" in some manner closer to Luther, in spite of the power of Satan manifest in it?

The latter is a distinct possibility. This emerges from the fact that the Anabaptists, like Luther, consistently referred to government as instituted by God to protect the just and restrain the wicked (Romans 13). They affirmed their own duty to be obedient to government, except where its demands violate God's will as found in Scripture. How then can government belong to the kingdom of Satan, as Klaassen claims and as many quotations from Anabaptist sources verify, and yet be of God and require rightfully that Christians submit to it? Some Anabaptists may simply have lived with this paradox. Others, it appears, resolved it by emphasizing the Fall (Genesis 3). God had given violent governments to a fallen world as judgment over it. In ancient Israel, already, kingship was permitted by God both as grace and judgment, but government after Christ could only be seen "as a symbol of man's persistent rebellion against the lordship of Christ."<sup>14</sup> Christians, though forgiven, have to submit to it as a form of God's judgment.

A more generally applicable and more adequate account of the Anabaptists' view of the world appears to us to lie elsewhere, however. The starting point is Christ's call to discipleship (*Nachfolge*). For the Anabaptists, this meant not only accepting of forgiveness and the promise of eternal salvation, but also the call to separate themselves from the "world" by becoming an alternative society, the church or the kingdom of Christ.<sup>15</sup> This kingdom is marked by a new order of living together, an order preeminently characterized by the Sermon on the Mount. Life in this kingdom is a truly transformed life, not by human effort ("works"), but by the power of the Spirit.

Although the Anabaptists really and seriously strove to live a new life, and although they loved to speak of "the church without spot and wrinkle", they were well aware of the fact that the kingdom of Christ could be lived out in this world only in a preliminary, less than perfect form. Its perfection would be reached only in the eschatological coming of God's rule.<sup>16</sup> One clear indication of this belief is the provision for disciplining erring members by means of the ban, a provision that would make no sense if perfection in the present church were assumed. In sum, citizens of the kingdom of Christ are those who, through redemption by Christ's atoning sacrifice, have been empowered by the Spirit to enter into discipleship of Christ. Such discipleship is not an individual matter only, but a communal one. Robert Friedmann points out that, in contrast to the separation from the world sought in later Pietism, Anabaptists understood themselves to be called into the kingdom of Christ in which "the brother is *constitutive* to the idea of the kingdom".<sup>17</sup>

Where does this leave the "world"? The Anabaptists would have said, "In the clutches of Satan", and in that sense constituting the kingdom of Satan.<sup>18</sup> It is so only for now, however. Satan's present power over the world is constantly subject to the onslaught of the kingdom of God/Christ; in other words, it is redeemable, just like the individual. But to be redeemed also means the same subjection to the rule of Christ as it does for individuals. In other words, a redeemed government would be one using the "sword of the Spirit" as its only weapon.

Is it practically possible, however, for governments *as we know them* to be redeemed in this sense? In all likelihood, no. Many Anabaptists therefore considered it improper for

Christians to hold government offices. Others, however, allowed that Christians, if elected, should accept such offices, but exercise them according to the law of Christ. That would undoubtedly insure a short tenure, a fact that itself would be a witness to the fallenness of the world.<sup>19</sup> Key to our understanding of the Anabaptists in this matter is the phrase "governments *as we know them*". In it lies the presupposition that the orders of the world, more or less as they have existed throughout much of history, must be preserved, and that any theology that does not ensure their preservation is utopian (that of *Schwärmer*). It is precisely this assumption which the Anabaptists, believing themselves to follow Christ, challenged radically.

This challenge has often exposed them to the accusation that they wanted to rule the world by the Sermon on the Mount. Far from it. They knew clearly that the "world" as we know it is incompatible with—though not unredeemable by—the rule of Christ. To the extent that the world continues unredeemed, it will be governed by the law (Luther) that God has decreed for an unredeemed world. Christians, being a part of that present aeon, have to submit to that law. To the extent that they have become signs of the coming aeon, however, they will not need to be restrained by that law. To that extent they witness to a new and coming kingdom. They did not share "Luther's eschatological reservation in applying to the old world kingdom norms that were intended for the new 'world'",<sup>20</sup> a reservation critiqued by Thieliicke, as we noted above.

Representatives of mainline Protestantism tend to come back at this point to questions like: "But what if everyone believed like them?" "Who would administer society as we know it and preserve its limited good?" The Anabaptist answer here is one of faith: God. God will use human instruments, who may not be aware of it, just as God used Nebukadnezzar or Cyrus in Old Testament times. The Christian's calling, however, is not to maintain the kingdom of the world, but to witness to the coming kingdom of God by establishing signs of it in the form of an embodied different social order. This position has been interpreted as a rejection of responsibility for society. The Anabaptists considered it to be the opposite; to extend to society what it needs most. A somewhat caricaturing analogy



We conclude this section with a non-theological reflection. It is more widely recognized today than it was in the sixteenth century that theology is not, or not first of all, that which shapes religious reality, but often the reflection that follows such reality and attempts to clarify it. If we apply this insight to the debates of the Reformation era, it might help us to see that both Luther and the Anabaptists often spoke and acted from more deep-seated and less articulated wellsprings than their theologies evidenced. For Luther, and many others then and later, the need for order and ongoing stability of society seems to have been axiomatic. Since the Anabaptists rejected much that seemed necessary for the maintenance of such order, they were called “enthusiasts”/*Schwärmer*. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, drew on a deep-seated, axiomatic conviction that the world as it is stands in stark contrast to God’s will as revealed in Jesus Christ, and that the most urgent calling and the most authentic form of responsibility for the world is to witness to the true will of God. If everyone would accept that witness, the present order would indeed be “in trouble”. But ought it to be preserved at all cost? Is it not in deep enough trouble already, in spite of all exercise of “love” by means of the sword?

### **The Social Form of the Church: A Backward Glance**

In addition to the psychological point just made, one should note that the dispute about the social form of the church is, of course, as old as the church itself. And the reason for the difference between Luther and the Anabaptists on this point had partly to do with how they positioned themselves in the larger story of the church. Luther, a monk in the Augustinian order, was in effect giving a much needed Augustinian critique of late medieval theology and life. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, while accepting this critique, thought it necessary to correct Luther’s proposals in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the monastics’ response to Augustine. One cannot simply make the claim, as the Luther scholar Heiko Oberman has, that “the new layman is the old monk”<sup>21</sup> and yet it is also not entirely false. To explain this requires a brief historical digression.

Augustine’s intense struggle with and eventual rejection of Manichean dualism, pushed him to speak about the Christian

life in a new way. Since evil had only a negative reality (it was the absence of good), he felt compelled to explain its origins in terms of the human will. J. Philip Wogaman puts it this way,

To Augustine, there is no evil outside the will. . . Augustine, thus, grounds Christian ethics in the moral will, not in the goodness or evil of objects outside the will. The will is good or bad in accordance with what it worships and loves. A will directed by its love for God is good, while a will directed by love of self and lesser goods is evil—even though these lesser goods are not, in themselves, evil.<sup>22</sup>

This is why for Augustine humility (openness beyond self) is good and pride (love of self) is the core of all evil. In other words, a good will is a will directed to God; a bad will is a will directed away from God. This allowed Augustine to say, *dilige, et quod vis fac* (“Love and do what you will”).<sup>23</sup>

Augustine’s discussion of the will is important for Christian ethics. At first blush one wonders whether he really means that evil stems only from a bad will and nothing else. Is it not proper to enquire what causes the will to be bad? Can the will’s being badly trained or misinformed not be the cause of it acting badly? For Augustine, apparently not! Speaking about wicked people, he says: “If the further question be asked, What was the efficient cause of their evil will? there is none. For what is it which makes the will bad, when it is the will itself which makes the action bad? And consequently the bad will is the cause of the bad action, but nothing is the efficient cause of the bad will.”<sup>24</sup>

This way of speaking about why people do good and bad things has two important consequences: First, it leaves little role for the virtues in Christian ethics because the main job of the virtues is to train the will to perform good acts; and second, it drives a wedge between the internal (will) and the external (act) in a way that depreciates the moral relevance of the latter. It is now possible to do something that has the external appearances of evil (e.g., killing, lying, stealing) and justify it in reference to an acceptable inner disposition such as love. That is, inner invisible factors (feelings, attitudes) alone justify our actions. A similar way of thinking also informs Augustine’s view of the church. Since the authenticity of a Christian can only be determined internally, and hence by God, the true community of Christians (the church) is not publicly visible. Hence there can be no specified social form of the

true church. That church cannot exist as a moral community capable of moral agency.

It is precisely this inner/outer distinction resulting in the impossibility of the church to function as moral community which the monastic tradition, especially the coenobites, found unacceptable. And in so doing, they felt compelled to form a counter community based upon discipleship training and renunciation of the world. They did not reject the distinction between the inner and the outer; they merely found the incongruity intolerable. Take for example, St. Benedict (ca. 480–550), who left the university at Rome, “distressed by the debauched life of his fellow students”.<sup>25</sup> Instead he started an alternative monastic community where renunciation, separation and discipline were the watchwords. For him the outer act was far from morally irrelevant for the Christian. In fact the whole point of the Christian life is the harmony of the inner and the outer—love of God and love of neighbour.<sup>26</sup> The point of the Christian community was to be an alternative. Benedict explicitly emphasizes the unity of the internal and the external in his elaboration of the twelve steps of humility. He says, “The twelfth step in humility is if a monk not only be humble in heart, but also always in his very body evince humility to those who see him.”<sup>27</sup>

It is through the Thomistic synthesis that the Augustinian dualisms of inner/outer and will/action are normally thought to come together.<sup>28</sup> Thomas believed that the doctrine of divine creation implied that everything is created for a specific purpose or end (*telos*). Since this is so, whether something is good or not is determined by whether it fulfils its *telos*. This is so in spite of original sin. Sin only requires that the way of knowing *telos* and our way of attaining it must include divine revelation and grace. The object of our knowledge and action has not changed. He puts it thus: “Now there is but one supreme good, namely God.. Therefore all things are directed to the highest good, namely God, as their end....Therefore the supreme good, namely God, is the cause of goodness in all things good. Therefore he is the cause of every end being an end, since whatever is an end is such in so far as it is good.”<sup>29</sup>

This is not the place to expound the details of Thomism, yet for understanding issues of Christian ethics relating to the

Reformation it is important to state briefly especially two differences between Augustine and Thomas. First, regarding the human will. Augustine's view of the autonomy of the will is flatly rejected by Thomas.<sup>30</sup> Will does not determine act and being, but being and the virtues determine act and will. For example, the *telos* of human beings—happiness (*eudaemonia*), which Thomas says consists in "contemplating God" or alternatively, "the contemplation of the truth"—cannot be realized simply through the act of willing. It requires careful training (by practicing the "theological virtues" of faith, hope and love) in order to become who we truly are (being). This relates to the second difference. For Augustine the human being is seen in his/her individuality before (an angry) God and not in his/her social and political context. For Thomas, the individual cannot be conceived of apart from the *polis* which alone sustains life. This gives the church the moral significance of shaping human beings into good people which it could not have for Augustine.

Luther saw this "moral significance" as a very dangerous function of the church. And in part he was right. The church cannot make anyone good (justified) before God. We are justified by God's grace alone. Yet it is the teaching of the church and the structuring of a life of response to God's graciousness that alone can sustain even the biblical teaching on justification by grace through faith. The world around us knows nothing about this concept. It literally screams "by your works you are saved". To put the tension between Thomas and Luther differently, Thomas could not imagine the sustainability of the Christian faith without an emphasis upon a well defined tradition which would ensure that the church would not be swept up with the winds of popular heretical beliefs, while Luther saw primarily the evils of a corrupt Christian tradition. And in part they are both right.

The Anabaptists were to Luther what the monastic movement (and to some extent, Thomas) was to Augustine.<sup>31</sup> They could not accept the notion of the invisible (and therefore non-ethical) form of the church. Being Christian required renunciation and separation, because it required the visible integration of the external (act) and the internal (will). However, while the monastic tradition could not be for all Christians, primarily because of its insistence on voluntary poverty and celibacy (it literally had no future), the Anabaptists believed that all



Christians should live as they did (that is, they believed that they were the future of the church). The church ought not to consist of both the faithful ones as well as the “less faithful”, as Medieval Catholicism had taught, nor could it sometimes follow Christ and at other times “follow the prince” as the Lutherans were teaching. The church was to be the eschatological community, the symbol of that reality which is God-willed for the entire world. Its refusal to obey non-Christian authorities when in conflict with the rule of Christ was not rooted in a belief that such a way of life would justify it before God; rather, this was simply the way of life that flowed from justified people. That is, the internal *was* externally visible. The church as sign was thought to be an act of God in the world.

The Anabaptists therefore were never happy to be labelled by what has come to be called “sectarianism”. They rejected the response by both the Catholics and the mainline reformers that they were a threat to the stability of society because they refused to participate in certain “essential functions of society”, like the military and other state sponsored violent vocations. On the other hand, they also rejected the notion that their “act as sign” was socially irrelevant. They understood themselves prophetically. They saw their relevance in their testimony to an alternative witness. The central issue between them and both the Catholics and the mainline reformers was the matter of how Christians participate in the saving work of God in this world.

### **An Alternative Paradigm: The Act of the Church is its Being**

Thomas Müntzer can serve as a fulcrum over which we can clarify the matter of moral agency. Mainline reformers generally, and Lutherans particularly, have often associated the Anabaptists with Thomas Müntzer, and hence have charged them with attempting to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Yet it is important to notice that the “real” Anabaptists *along with* the Lutherans have rejected the political theology of Müntzer, albeit, the rejections are rooted in quite different theological assumptions.<sup>32</sup>

*Historical Case Study:* Müntzer and his followers had thought it a God-inspired cause to overthrow the oppressive

political and economic order. Violent revolution was seen as an appropriate way for Christians to participate in God's rule. Since the "establishment of the kingdom of peace and justice" was God-willed, it was assumed that any means of bringing the kingdom of God to fruition was likewise God-willed. The Lutheran discomfort with this type of political theology is rooted in Luther's own response to the peasants' revolt: "Thus, anyone who is killed on the side of the rulers may be a true martyr in the eyes of God...On the other hand, anyone who perishes on the peasant's side is an eternal firebrand of hell...These are strange times, when a prince can win heaven with bloodshed better than other men with prayer!"<sup>33</sup> Luther and his followers believed that Müntzer's political theology represented a confusion of the spiritual and the temporal realms.<sup>34</sup> As an individual Christian one should not kill; as a citizen of the state one ought to do what the state demands. Hence on both counts one cannot rebel against the state. The Mennonite discomfort with Müntzer's political theology has an entirely different base. Its antecedents lie in the Swiss Brethren admonition to Müntzer: "...we beg and admonish thee as a brother by the name, the power, the word, the spirit, and the salvation, which has come to all Christians through Jesus Christ our Master and Saviour, that thou wilt take heed to preach only the divine word without fear...Go forward with the word and establish a Christian church with the help of Christ and his rule...establish and teach only the clear word and practices of God, with the rule of Christ."<sup>35</sup> The Swiss Brethren and their followers believed that true Christians were called to be the kind of people who evidenced salvation by living according to the rule of Christ, both as private Christians and as citizens. This included loving your enemies. Hence Christians could not be engaged in violent revolutions such as Müntzer's.

Perhaps it is helpful to schematize the three models of moral agency highlighted by the Müntzer story. First, since Luther believed that God brought about the kingdom through both the temporal and the spiritual realms, it was the Christian's task to participate in both as agents of the kingdom of God. This put Luther at odds with Müntzer and the Swiss Brethren who rejected the government's direct agential role in the establishment of God's kingdom. Second, Müntzer believed that the kingdom was to be brought about only by God's faithful,

for they alone knew its nature. Moreover, this had to take place over against the government since it (the government) was outside the perfection of Christ and rejected God's lordship. Such a political theology legitimated revolt against the state. And third, the majority of the Anabaptists/Mennonites agreed with the Swiss Brethren in arguing that the Christian's role is not to take charge of ruling the world. We are called to have a part in this rule, namely, to bear witness to the rule of Christ. We are not to impose the kingdom of God on the world as Müntzer attempted nor are we to give the temporal authorities allegiance when in conflict with the spiritual authorities as Luther suggested.

This three-way distinction regarding our role in God's rule has important implications for understanding the social form of the Christian life. For example, it means that Mennonites cannot answer the question which they are often asked, namely "How will bearing witness to the rule of Christ solve the large problems of the world?" The reason we cannot answer this question is because we do not think that it is ours to answer. Our agency in establishing the kingdom is a "partnership-with-God-as-major-actor" agency. In fact, we believe that it is exactly the assumption that this question requires an answer by us that misrepresents the biblical (Christian) view of moral agency. The compulsion to answer this question assumes that we know more than we in fact do, and that we have more power than we in fact have. Hence, this question is not central in determining how we ought to live as Christians. Traditionally the problem has been that our self-confessed inability to answer this question has been misconstrued to rest in a lack of concern for the world. But this is quite false. The political theology expressed here is not a withdrawal ethic. Rather it is an affirmation of the faith that transformation, even of society, is grounded in God's grace and not fundamentally in our works.

*Contemporary Theological Reflections:* Mennonites are still alternately accused of either withdrawal from society's woes, in order to be a pure community unto itself (sectarianism), or of believing that they have an especially effective technique—non-violence—which can cure all of society's ills (ruling the world by the Sermon on the Mount). Although both views may well be represented among us, neither, according to the

authors of this essay,<sup>36</sup> is promising Mennonite (or biblical) theology. We believe that proper theological ethics arises from the biblical faith that all of life under the reign of God is life understood as gift (grace). Hence, we believe that the relationship between all our actions and the rule of God is *gratia*, and not *causa*. At this point we believe we are, ironically, more Lutheran than Luther. Luther was right in his teaching that salvation comes by the grace of God; he just was not consistent in its application to both the personal and the social aspects of life. We notice, for example, that biblical stories such as the Exodus story, the Gideon story, the conquest story, the cross-resurrection story, all teach us that *sola gratia* applies not only to personal salvation but also to social salvation. That is, just as our "works" do not merit our own salvation, so they do not produce God's kingdom. Christian pacifism is therefore incorrectly understood either as a clever tool to defuse violence or as an irresponsible reply to evil. The practice of Christian pacifism is a sign that violence is sin; it is not the way to salvation. Hence we see Christian participation in war (the belief that it is *necessary* to kill our enemies for the sake of the kingdom of God) as a form of works righteousness.

The list of contemporary Mennonite, as well as other scholars who espouse this view of the Christian life, is growing.<sup>37</sup> John Howard Yoder is perhaps the foremost among the Mennonite writers. In his *The Politics of Jesus* he gives strong biblical support for a similar model of understanding our participation in God's reign. One way he expresses the argument is by suggesting that the relationship between the cross and the resurrection is the model for expressing our role in God's rule. He says:

...the triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of causes and effects, nor because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.<sup>38</sup>

When we inquire about the relationship between cross and resurrection as the Bible tells the story, we notice that we again get back to the blessing or grace of God. That is to say, neither Jesus' faithful obedience nor his willingness to suffer death produced the resurrection; the resurrection was a free gift from

God. However, this does not make the faithfulness of Jesus irrelevant. That Jesus' death was unearned is a very important part of the story, at least according to the Apostle Paul. The life, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus are an intertwined event of God which is broken apart only at great peril. Hence, unless we simultaneously acknowledge a place for the reality of God's blessing together with our feeble efforts at faithfulness, it is something other than the biblical notion of moral agency. While we have no handles on God's blessings, God wants to (has promised to) bless our work.

Hence the very act of being an alternative witness, symbolically participating in enterprises that we know are from God and therefore will neither perish nor fail, is a significant act indeed. Yet it is an act of an unusual kind. It is what we have already called an eschatological act. It is not eschatological in that it is preoccupied with teachings about the second coming of Christ. Rather it is grounded in the conviction that the one who is to come has already profoundly come and is present among us. Hence eschatological being at once points to all that will pass away and all that will endure. It is both judgement and promise. The embodied announcement of the presence of God among us—already but not yet fully—is the task of the church.

It is not our suggestion that the Mennonite church, through the years, has been a faithful expression of the view of moral agency articulated in this essay. In our adherence to pacifism (insofar as we have adhered) we have not always known what it was (theologically speaking) that we were doing. But we have believed it to be the call of Christ, and therefore to be of God. In our theological discussions with other confessions we are forced to become more theologically self-conscious, not in order that we may prove ourselves defensible, but in order mutually to come to see the truth more clearly. In the final analysis, we need to remember that the truth of the Gospel is spoken of as a *way*: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6)—the ongoing process of integrating theory and practice.

## Conclusion

Mennonites are sometime accused of emphasizing discipleship at the expense of worship and spirituality. These accusations are at times hard to deny. The model of moral agency

proposed in this essay arises partly out of a felt need to accept this criticism. The church of Jesus Christ is called to be that body which submits itself to a life marked by an integration of worship and practice. This integrated *practice* is the alternative paradigm of life in Christ. We are not the body of Christ because we are sinless. *Simul justus et peccator* (we are both saved and sinner) is undeniably correct Christian theology. Sin is everywhere, but the presence of God through Jesus Christ is faithful and able to vanquish its power, both in our own lives as well as in the world. To this assurance we are called to bear witness.

The authors of this essay have worshipped in Lutheran churches on regular Sunday mornings for a combined total of over six years. We have learned much and have had rich experiences in this ecclesial setting. We have also come to accept much Lutheran theology; even some of its criticisms of our own tradition. Some of our own convictions have been strengthened, namely that all knowledge of God comes from God; it is not figured out on the basis of human wisdom, regardless of how brilliant the scholar who endeavours the task. Hence the stance of the theologian ought to be one of humility. We heartily agree with Luther and Lutherans that the biggest challenge for theology specifically and the Christian life generally is *to let God be God*.

However, while applauding this and other Lutheran emphases like *sola gratia* and *sola scriptura*, we are nevertheless convinced that the theological battle cry to let God be God implies another, namely, to *let the church be the church*. Why? Because for Christians belief in God implies a commitment to walk with Jesus—literally embodying the way of Christ. We believe that we cannot know God unless we follow Christ. And therefore we find it impossible to accept that Christians can justify their involvement in acts such as violence and killing under certain circumstances. On this point our two confessions have sadly remained at odds.

We invite our Lutheran readers to contemplate a modification of Luther's two kingdoms doctrine in two respects. The first is to recognize that there is continuity between the individual Christian and the two or three gathered in Christ's name. Since, according to Luther, an individual Christian can and should act as disciple of Christ and citizen of the spiritual

kingdom, why should not two or three or more join together in such citizenship? Why not, even if they farm or trade with each other? In other words, cannot “temporal affairs“, when conducted by Christians, remain—at least up to a point—within the realm of the spiritual kingdom, as a witness to the world? To grant this would by no means constitute an attempt to rule the world by the Sermon on the Mount; it would, however, strengthen the church’s corporate impact on society by way of the gospel, rather than the law. The second modification is in line with Thielicke’s critique of Luther presented above. It involves the clearer recognition of the demonic in the temporal realm, and consequently the biblical call to the church to offer—however imperfectly, and not as a meritorious “work”—an alternative paradigm of being human in community.

Luther himself once identified the matter of moral agency as a basic problem for Christians:

Now, if I am ignorant of God’s works and power, I am ignorant of God himself; and if I do not know God, I cannot worship, praise, give thanks or serve Him, for I do not know how much I should attribute to myself and how much to Him. We need, therefore, to have in mind a clear-cut distinction between God’s power and ours, and God’s work and ours, if we would live a Godly life.<sup>39</sup>

This essay has attempted to show that Mennonites have seen the work of Jesus Christ as a model for how to distinguish between “God’s work and ours”. Yet we readily confess that it has been a struggle holding together two basic elements of the Christian faith—grace and good works. Since biblical times these two components have tended to come apart, despite the clarity of the biblical injunction to hold them together.

For by grace are you saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand to be our way of life (Ephesians 2: 9–10).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Das lutherisch-mennonitische Gespräch in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” *Texte aus der VELKD [Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands]*, Nr. 53 (März 1993) 1–13.
- <sup>2</sup> This point is made by Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, translated and with a Foreword by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia:

Fortress Press, 1972) 43–46, 62–78; Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: Der Mann und das Werk* (Munich: List Verlag, 1982) 219f.; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in the Context of His Theology*, translated by Karl H. Hertz, Facet Books, Social Ethics Series 14 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 30; Helmut Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik, 1. Band: Dogmatische, philosophische und kontrovertheologische Grundlegung* (2. ergänzte Auflage; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1958) 589–594.

<sup>3</sup> Althaus, 43–46.

<sup>4</sup> Thus Althaus, von Loewenich, Thielicke, Bornkamm, *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> German: *Regimente*, a term allowing the two modes of God's government to be seen as separate but parallel, rather than as distinct realms/kingdoms.

<sup>6</sup> This illustration is adapted from Jürgen Moltmann, *Following Jesus in the World Today: Responsibility for the World and Christian Discipleship*, Occasional Papers No. 4 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1983) 23.

<sup>7</sup> Thielicke, 594–610.

<sup>8</sup> As a student of Paul Althaus in Erlangen in the early 1930s, Thielicke had heard Althaus' emphasis on "orders of creation" (*Schöpfungsordnungen*). He had also observed how an insistence on such orders, understood somewhat statically as givens, could easily play into Hitler's ideology of different races. This recognition made him very cautious towards the related concept of *Eigengesetzlichkeit*.

<sup>9</sup> Thielicke, 606–610; cf. von Loewenich, 227.

<sup>10</sup> Thielicke, 608; cf. von Loewenich, 222, 226–227.

<sup>11</sup> The publication of Harold S. Bender's presidential address to the American Academy of Church History in December of 1943, entitled "The Anabaptist Vision," ushered in a generation of Anabaptist studies often called summarily "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision". Bender drew a picture of "mainstream biblical Anabaptism" similar to the one just presented in briefest summary. The existence of others not fitting this picture, such as the Münsterites, was acknowledged, of course, but they were considered peripheral to true Anabaptism. In more recent times, perhaps initiated by the work of James M. Stayer, the trend has changed, and Anabaptism has come to be seen by various younger scholars as consisting of a broad spectrum of historically rather diverse elements, lacking the central vision posited by Bender. As we see it, Bender's error was not the recognition of a group of Anabaptists holding the vision he prescribed; it was, instead, to give that group *historical* centrality in the sixteenth century. Instead, we believe, Bender's Anabaptist Vision points to a different truth. It characterises those elements in the diverse historical Anabaptist movement which have acquired a sort of *canonical* function for later Mennonites. In other words, it summarizes that from within sixteenth century Anabaptist which later Mennonites have come to "own" as their spiritual heritage.



- 12 Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Kitchener, Ont./Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981) 244.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Clarence Bauman, "The Theology of the 'Two Kingdoms': A Comparison of Luther and the Anabaptists," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 38 (1964) 47.
- 15 See *ibid.*, 37–49. Bauman states: "The Anabaptist identification of the kingdom of God with their own *Kerngemeinde* [lit.: core congregation] implied a realized eschatology in the sense that higher values were realized within the *sanctorum communio*" (47f.).
- 16 Robert Friedmann points out that this did not lead the Anabaptists (with some exceptions) to a preoccupation with the future, with the Book of Revelation, etc. He speaks of their "restrained eschatological outlook". Robert Friedmann, "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender*, ed. Guy F. Herschberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957) 114.
- 17 Friedmann, 116.
- 18 Bauman, 45.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans., Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 131.
- 22 *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 51, 53.
- 23 Quoted from Vernon J. Bourke, *History of Ethics*, Volume One (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1968) 83.
- 24 *The City of God*, Bk. XII, Ch. VI. Quoted from "St. Augustin's City of God," trans. Rev. Marcus Dods. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. II. Ed. Phillip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 229.
- 25 C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1984) 19.
- 26 Here is how Benedict puts it: "In the first place, to love God with the whole heart, the whole soul and the whole strength. Then one's neighbour as if oneself. Then, not to kill. Not to commit adultery. Not to steal. Not to covet. Not to utter false witness. To honour all men. To do as one would be done by. To deny oneself that one may follow Christ. To chastise the body. Not to embrace delights. To love fasting. To relieve the poor. To clothe the naked. To visit the sick. To bury the dead. To help in tribulation. To console the sorrowing." Quoted from Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1973) 153.

- 27 Quoted from Beach & Niebuhr, 157.
- 28 Thomas' reliance upon a pagan philosopher—Aristotle—created serious problems for Luther. Luther believed that this turned theology into philosophy where the Bible is irrelevant. However, there is new research being done which argues that Thomas' ethic is not primarily about natural law. It is first of all a theory of ends and a theory of the virtues. This puts the Thomistic enterprise in a profoundly different light than is often assumed. It means that Thomas participated in a God-given vision (kingdom of God) with specified ends and specific virtues to attain these ends. In other words, his was not merely an explication of what would make sense to every rationally endowed individual. His was the elaboration of a distinctly Christian (biblical) reason. See esp. Daniel Mark Nelson, *The Priority of Prudence: Virtue and Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas and the Implications for Modern Ethics* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), who argues for the priority of the virtues, especially prudence, over natural law in understanding Thomas Aquinas.
- 29 *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, Ch. XVI. Quoted from *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), vol. II, 27.
- 30 He says, for example, "The suggestion put forward...that the will is a higher power than the intellect, as being the latter's motive power, is clearly untrue. Because the intellect moves the will first..." (Ibid., 51).
- 31 The argument here is not that the Anabaptists were consciously attempting to emulate the monastics in their effort to be faithful to the call of Jesus Christ, but rather that theologically speaking the similarity can be seen as emanating from the same quest to hold the internal and the external together. Only in recent times have Anabaptist scholars begun to explore the theological relationship between Catholicism and Anabaptism.
- 32 See Harold S. Bender, "The Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XXVII (1953), 3–16 for the argument that Thomas Müntzer and Anabaptism are theologically and historically unrelated.
- 33 Quoted from Jürgen Moltmann, "Reformation and Revolution," in *Martin Luther and the Modern Mind: Freedom, Conscience, Toleration, Rights*, ed. Manfred Hoffmann (Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985) 179–180.
- 34 Ibid., 178.
- 35 Quoted from Bender, "The Zwickau Prophets..." 15.
- 36 For other studies see, e.g., Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), and Harry Huebner and David Schroeder, *The Church as Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics?* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1993).
- 37 Two non-Mennonite theologians frequently associated with this view of Christian ethics are Stanley Hauerwas (Methodist theologian at Duke

University) and James McClendon Jr. (Baptist theologian at Fuller Theological Seminary). Examples of their work are: Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), and *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986). An example from a source perhaps somewhat further afield, is the well known American Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (Duke University). He recently responded to a question about whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about where the West was going, by saying: "I think the great disaster has already happened. I think the West is already gone. What we have to do is find means of constructing and sustaining local forms of community through which we can survive this age. When I was a Marxist, I devoted my time and energy to thinking about how one might overthrow the political and economic order. I now see that this was not merely misdirected and wrongheaded energy; in fact, the existing order is so good at destroying itself, it doesn't need any help. What we have to do is withdraw from it, and not get involved in its disasters. And the pursuit of conventional success, as it is understood in our culture and society, involves people in participation in enterprises which are doomed to failure." "Kinesis Interview with Professor Alasdair MacIntyre," *Kinesis: Graduate Journal in Philosophy*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1994), 42.

- 38 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 232.
- 39 Martin Luther, "Bondage of the Will" in John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections From his Writings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1961) 179.