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An Analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr's Critique of Martin Luther's Two Kingdom Doctrine

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AN ANALYSIS
OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S CRITIQUE
OF MARTIN LUTHER'S TWO KINGDOM DOCTRINE

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of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. LUTHER'S "DEFEATISM" IN SOCIAL ETHICS	1
II. LUTHER'S TEACHING ON TWO KINGDOMS	3
III. NIEBUHR'S CRITIQUE OF LUTHER	24
IV. CONCLUSION	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY	42

CHAPTER I

LUTHER'S "DEFEATISM" IN SOCIAL ETHICS

In one section of his book, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Reinhold Niebuhr constructs a critique of the Lutheran Reformation, and particularly of Martin Luther's theology as the formative theoretical base of Lutheran Reformation theology.¹ One of Niebuhr's specific charges was that the Lutheran Reformation was explicitly defeatist when confronting the problems of realizing justice in the collective life of man.² Niebuhr lays a great deal of the blame for this "Lutheran defeatism" on Luther's formulation of the two kingdom doctrine and his application of it to legitimize the suppression by the government of the peasant revolt of 1525.³

Without describing the theological basis upon which Niebuhr stands in leveling his critique against Luther's position, we nevertheless wish to examine the charge that Luther's two kingdom teaching, as Luther himself formulates it and applies it, is indeed defeatist in realizing justice in the collective life of man.

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), II, 185-198.

²Ibid., p. 192.

³Ibid., pp. 192-5.

In order to do this, we shall first examine Luther's two kingdom teaching as he himself formulates it and applies it, looking also into some of the historical circumstances which surrounded its development. Following this, we shall examine Niebuhr's portrayal of Luther to see if it is fair and adequate, or, if not, in what ways it is deficient. Finally, we shall try to assess what validity there is in Niebuhr's critique, and on what basis.

CHAPTER II

LUTHER'S TEACHING ON TWO KINGDOMS

Luther's basic teaching of the two kingdoms can be found in his Sermon on the Mount (1521) and in Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed (1523). Luther then applied this teaching in response to the peasant revolt in his writings Admonition to Peace (1525) and Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525). The question will be raised whether Luther consistently applied the teaching he first espoused to the historical situation as it was presented to him.

Luther, in his commentary on Matt. 5:38-42, taken from The Sermon on the Mount, makes an explicit statement of his doctrine of the two kingdoms. Luther says that this text (which talks about not returning evil for evil, about turning the other cheek, etc.) is falsely interpreted by those who fail to distinguish between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world, between the secular and the spiritual.¹ Luther here constructs his doctrine in antithesis both to the Roman Catholic legitimation of the pope and his realm, which "has developed into nothing

¹Martin Luther, The Sermon on the Mount, in Luther's Works, Vol. XXI, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 105.

more than a secular dominion, so dreadful that the world has had to submit to him," and to the argument of Muenzer and his peasants, who used the passage as a legitimation for trying to take over the government.²

According to Luther, Christ in this passage is not dealing with government affairs. Rather

He is teaching his individual Christians how to live personally, apart from their official positions and authority. They should not desire revenge at all.³

Thus God does not want this ethic utilized for governing the world:

It is the duty and obligation of those who participate in this earthly regime to administer law and punishment, to maintain the distinction that exists among ranks and persons, to manage and distribute property. This way everything will be in good shape But the Gospel does not trouble itself with these matters. It teaches about the right relation of the heart to God, while in all these other questions it should take care to stay pure and not to stumble into a false righteousness. . . . Christ is talking about a spiritual existence and life and that He is addressing himself to His Christians. He is telling them to live and behave before God and in the world with their heart dependent upon God and uninterested in things like secular rule or government, power or punishment, anger or revenge.⁴

Luther then draws out the implications of his teaching for the individual Christian:

Now, if someone asks whether a Christian may go to court or defend himself, the answer is simply no. A Christian is the kind of person who has nothing to do with this sort of secular existence and law. He

²Ibid., pp. 107-8.

³Ibid., p. 106.

⁴Ibid., p. 108.

belongs to a kingdom or realm where . . . mutual love and service should prevail.⁵

To the question of whether or not a Christian may then serve as a secular official, such as a ruler or a judge, Luther replies,

Yes; God Himself has ordained and established this secular realm and its distinctions, and by His Word He has confirmed and commended them. For without them this life could not endure. We are all included in them . . . but only according to our outward life and our physical existence.⁶

Luther then makes a distinction between a Christian "as regards his own person," which he has already described and to whom Christ's word in Matt. 5:38-42 applies, and the "Christian-in-relation," which he proceeds to describe:

A Christian has to be a secular person of some sort. . . . outwardly, according to his body and property, he is related by subjection and obligation to the emperor, inasmuch as he occupies some office or station in life or has a house and home, a wife and children; for all these are things that pertain to the emperor. Here he must necessarily do what he is told and what this outward life requires. . . .

. . . we are talking about a Christian-in-relation: not about his being a Christian, but about this life and his obligation in it to some other person Here it would be a mistake to teach: "Turn the other cheek, and throw your cloak away with your coat."⁷

⁵Ibid., p. 108.

⁶Ibid., p. 109.

⁷Ibid., pp. 109-10.

Luther draws out the implications of this teaching for the Christian-in-relation:

Thus you are not forbidden to go to court and lodge a complaint against injustice or violence

•••••
 Certainly we are not compelled or obliged to let every insolent person run rampant all over the place . . . without doing anything about it--not if we can follow orderly procedure in defending ourselves.⁸

Luther further points out that it is possible for the Christian to act with a pure heart, not only as an individual, but also as a secular person:

A Christian may carry on all sorts of secular business with impunity--not as a Christian but as a secular person--while his heart remains pure in his Christianity, as Christ demands. This the world cannot do⁹

Luther summarizes his distinction thus:

A Christian should not resist any evil; but within the limits of his office, a secular person should oppose every evil. . . . In short, the rule in the kingdom of Christ is the toleration of everything, forgiveness, and the recompense of evil with good. On the other hand, in the realm of the emperor, there should be no tolerance shown toward any injustice, but rather a defense against wrong and a punishment of it, and an effort to defend and maintain the right, according to what each one's office or station may require.¹⁰

Luther recognizes that there are "rogues and rascals" who occupy public office and who administer unjustly.

⁸Ibid., pp. 111-12.

⁹Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁰Ibid.

Luther offers those Christian who suffer such unjust treatment this advice:

most often this happens to pious Christians. The world hates them regardless, and it takes pleasure in tormenting them. Therefore Christ tells them beforehand that in the world they ought to expect this sort of thing and ought to yield to suffering. Especially if it happens on account of that which makes them Christians, that is on account of the Gospel and the spiritual realm, they should be prepared to take punishment and to lose everything. We have to suffer anyway, since as individual persons we have no power or defense against the government if it should set itself against us. But where this is not the case you can use the law to defend and protect yourself against some violence to you or yours, then it is your right and your duty to do so.¹¹

Luther's advice to those suffering injustice is that they must bear it. The phrase in his last sentence "where this is not the case" refers to where it is not the case that there are unjust rulers, not to the transition from the case of the individual to that of a group suffering injustice. Luther here does not recognize the possibility of a just revolution. Further, he regards governmental injustice in terms of unjust office holders rather than of unjust laws or unjust governmental structures.

In his treatise, Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, Luther even more clearly states his two kingdom teaching in opposition to the enthusiast view that the world could be ruled according to the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, and also against the scholastic

¹¹Ibid., p. 115.

doctrine that the absolute demands of Christ made in the Sermon on the Mount were to be regarded as "counsels of perfection" binding only on a small number of elite Christians.¹² The result of this latter teaching was that temporal authority was ascribed to the pope, and that rulers under his influence would,

order the people to put away books, and to believe and keep what they prescribe, In this way they presumptuously set themselves in God's place, lord it over men's conscience and faith, and put the Holy Spirit to school according to their mad brains.¹³

In contradistinction, Luther says,

We must divide all the children of Adam into two classes; the first belong to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world. Those belonging to the kingdom of Christ are all true believers in Christ and are subject to Christ. . . .

.
All who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law.¹⁴

The purpose then of the worldly government is to preserve order:

For this reason these two kingdoms must be sharply distinguished, and both be permitted to remain; the one to produce piety, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds; neither is sufficient in the world without the other. For no one can become

¹²Martin Luther, "Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," in Martin Luther, ed. by John Dillenberger (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961), p. 364.

¹³Ibid., pp. 364-5.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 368, 370.

pious before God by means of the secular government, without Christ's spiritual rule.¹⁵

Luther comes to the conclusion that since the government was instituted to restrain evil, and since Christ's teachings apply to all Christians, if all people on earth were Christian, then there would be no need of government, for Christ would rule by His Holy Spirit alone, without law.

Luther does not forget, however, that the Christian is both saint and sinner. Thus, on the one hand, even though Luther does not emphasize this point, yet he recognizes that,

Since . . . no one is by nature Christian or pious, but every one sinful and evil, God places the restraints of the law upon them all, so that they may not dare give rein to their desires and commit outward, wicked deeds.¹⁷

On the other hand, Luther says the Christian willingly submits to the government for the sake of his non-Christian neighbor:

Since, however, a true Christian lives and labors on earth not for himself but for his neighbor, therefore the whole spirit of his life impels him to do even that which he need not do, but which is profitable and necessary for his neighbor. Because the sword is

¹⁵Ibid., p. 371.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 372.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 369.

a very great benefit and necessary to the whole world, to preserve peace, to punish sin and to prevent evil, he submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays tax, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to further the government, that it may be sustained and held in honor and fear.¹⁸

Luther ultimately arrives at a conclusion very similar to that expressed in his commentary on Matt. 5:38-42:

In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the Gospel and suffer injustice for yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns others and belongs to them, you govern yourself according to love and suffer no injustice for your neighbor's sake; this the Gospel does not forbid, but rather commands in another place.¹⁹

Luther summarizes:

From all this we see what is the true meaning of Christ's words in Matthew 5, "Resist not evil," etc. It is this, that a Christian should be so disposed that he will suffer every evil and injustice, not avenge himself nor bring suit in court, and in nothing make use of secular power and law for himself. For others, however, he may and should seek vengeance, justice, protection and help, and do what he can toward this. Likewise, the State should, either of itself or through the instigation of others, help and protect him without complaint, application or instigation on his part. When the State does not do this, he ought to permit himself to be robbed and despoiled, and not resist the evil as Christ's words say.²⁰

It should be noted here that in his "Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants," Luther gives the example where a person with wife and children is attacked

¹⁸Ibid., p. 373.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 375.

²⁰Ibid., p. 379

by a thief or murderer. In such a case, Luther says in effect that the man should consider himself as a Christian-in-relation and not as one suffering injustice only personally. Such a person has the right of self-defense.²¹

This raises the question, what kind of situation would Luther consider to be that of a Christian individual suffering injustice alone and not as one in relation. Luther's qualification here would seem to limit such situations.

In a further point, underlining that the state is a divine service, Luther says that a Christian can serve in a public office and perform all its duties without peril and without sinning.²²

It is evident that the first section of the treatise, from which the above several quotes were taken, was formulated in contrast to the enthusiasts' teaching, in an effort to outline what Luther saw as the legitimate and God-directed way for Christians to relate to secular government.

²¹Luther's Works, ed. H.T. Lehmann and J. Pelikan (St. Louis and Philadelphia, 1955--), XLVI, 71. Hereafter cited as LW.

²²"Secular Authority," p. 381.

In the second part of the thesis, in which Luther examines how far secular authority extends, Luther is formulating his teaching in contrast to Roman Catholic teaching. That Luther considers this second section the main part of his treatise²³ is significant. It shows that however much Luther at this time considered the enthusiasts' teaching a threat, he considered the Roman Catholic aberrations much more dangerous. Luther's position is clear:

Human ordinance cannot possibly extend its authority to heaven and over souls, but belongs only to earth, to the external intercourse of men with each other, where men can see, know, judge, sentence, punish and acquit.²⁴

Luther believed that temporal authorities had no right to govern regarding spiritual matters and that it would be legitimate for subjects to resist when the government would attempt to govern in these areas. Speaking to the temporal lord, Luther says,

Dear Lord, I owe you obedience with life and goods; command me within the limits of your power on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe, and to put away books, I will not obey; for in this case you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, and command where you have neither right nor power, etc.²⁵

²³Ibid., p. 382.

²⁴Ibid., p. 387.

²⁵Ibid., p. 388.

In the third section of his treatise Luther gives advice to rulers as to how they should govern. For one thing they should rule by the spirit rather than by the letter of the law:

Therefore a prince must have the law in hand as firmly as the sword, and decide in his own mind when and where the law must be applied strictly or with moderation, so that reason may always control all law and be the highest law and rule over all laws.²⁶

Does Luther envisage any situation in which it would be legitimate to resist the government in temporal matters? Luther is ambiguous here. In one case, he says that government must not be resisted by force, but in another case he seems to allow for civil disobedience:

One must not resist the government with force, but only with knowledge of the truth; if it is influenced by it, well; if not, you are innocent, and suffer wrong for God's sake.²⁷

But when a prince is in the wrong, are his people bound to follow him then too? I answer, No, for it is no one's duty to do wrong; we ought to obey God Who desires the right, rather than men. How is it, when the subjects do not know whether the prince is in the right or not? I answer, As long as they cannot know, nor find out by any possible means, they may obey without peril to their souls.²⁸

²⁶Ibid., p. 393.

²⁷Ibid., p. 398.

²⁸Ibid., p. 399.

Luther applied his two kingdom doctrine to the peasant revolt of 1525 in two writings, "Admonition to Peace" and "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants." The first document was written in late April, 1525, in response to "The Twelve Articles," a document drawn up by the peasants protesting their grievances and demanding fairer treatment of the princes. In "Admonition to Peace," Luther appealed to both the peasants and the princes to settle their differences and suggested arbitration as a means to that end. Luther hoped that his appeal would help avert bloodshed and strife, which had already broken out in some places, from becoming widespread. Before the "Admonition to Peace" could be published, however, insurrection, arson, pillage, and murder did become widespread.²⁹ In response, Luther wrote "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants" in early May, 1525, condemning the peasants and enjoining the rulers to use every means to suppress the rebellion.³⁰

Niebuhr bases a major part of his critique of Luther's two kingdom teaching on Luther's application of that teaching in these two documents. At least two issues

²⁹LW, XLVI, 6-8

³⁰Ibid., p. 48.

need to be clarified. Did Luther consistently apply his two kingdom teaching, as espoused in his commentary on Matt. 5:38-42 and in "Secular Authority," to the peasant revolt? If not, what are the historical circumstances surrounding the peasant revolt and Luther's reaction to it which might shed light on the situation?

In "Admonition to Peace," Luther showed that he considered the imminent peasant rebellion,

a great and dangerous matter. It concerns both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. If this rebellion were to continue and get the upper hand, both kingdoms would be destroyed and there would be neither worldly government nor word of God, which would ultimately result in the permanent destruction of all Germany.³¹

Luther's fear of the breakdown of law and order is more understandable when seen in light of the fact that Luther felt that he was living in the last times, and that the apocalyptic signs of the end of the world as described in Mt. 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, were being fulfilled in his time. The fallout between Luther and Erasmus on the question of the bondage of the will, the disturbances of the peasants, the threat of invasion by the Turks, the opposition of the pope and the emperor to the gospel, as well as certain destructive occurrences in

³¹Ibid., p. 18.

the world of nature, seemed for Luther to be signs of the approaching end of the world and the indication of increasing opposition and conflict between the devil and God's will. Luther's letters reflect this mood. This state of affairs "made it all the more important to Luther that law and order be maintained and the gospel preached."³²

It is significant that Luther blamed the rebellion totally on those in authority, both political and religious:

As temporal rulers you do nothing but cheat and rob the people so that you may lead a life of luxury and extravagance. The poor common people cannot bear it any longer.³³

Luther saw the imminent rebellion of the peasants as the judgment of God upon the rulers, even though at the same time he encouraged the peasant not to rebel but to be obedient.³⁴

Luther noted that many of the requests made by the peasant in the twelve articles were right and just, and should be dealt with by the rulers. Further, the presence of selfish elements in the articles were only brought on by the rulers not responding to earlier peasant requests.

³²Ibid., n. 3.

³³Ibid., p. 19

³⁴Ibid., pp. 20-21.

Luther stated that "rulers are not appointed to exploit their subjects for their own profit and advantage, but to be concerned about the welfare of their subjects."³⁵

At another point, when addressing the peasants, Luther writes:

It is not my intention to justify or defend the rulers in the intolerable injustices which you suffer from them. They are unjust, and commit heinous wrongs against you.³⁶

The fact that Luther put the blame for the rebellion on the princes and their unjust treatment is not brought out by Niebuhr in his critique of Luther.

Addressing the peasants, Luther said that they should be careful to take up their cause justly with a good conscience. "No one, by his own violence, should arrogate authority to himself."³⁷

Luther notes further,

the fact that the rulers are wicked and unjust does not excuse disorder and rebellion, for the punishing of wickedness is not the responsibility of everyone, but of the worldly rulers who bear the sword.³⁸

Moreover, the fact that they were unwilling to suffer any wrong was not only contrary "to Christian law and the

³⁵Ibid., pp. 22-23.

³⁶Ibid., p. 32.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 23, 25.

³⁸Ibid., p. 25.

gospel, but also to natural law and all equity."³⁹ Luther said that the rulers did wrong by oppressing the peasants, but that the peasants would do a greater wrong by rebelling and overturning authority. Moreover, Luther saw this offense as so serious, that those who engaged in such rebellion would lose their body, property, and soul for all eternity.⁴⁰

In his critique, Niebuhr takes this quote from Luther's "Admonition to Peace":

You will not bear that anyone inflict evil of injustice upon you, but you want to be free and suffer only justice and goodness. . . . If you do not want to bear such a right [the right of suffering] you had better put away your Christian name and boast of another name in accordance with your deeds or Christ himself will snatch away his name from you.⁴¹

In the context of this quote, Luther is reminding the peasants that the peasants claimed to be Christians since the name of their organization was "Christian Association." Luther then goes on to add that Christ's word to Christians demanded a stance of non-resistance and the enduring of suffering. Luther argues,

The Christian law tells us not to strive against injustice, not to grasp the sword, not to protect ourselves, not to avenge ourselves, but to give up life and property, and let whoever takes it have

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 26-28.

⁴¹Niebuhr, p. 194, n. 16.

it. . . . Suffering! Suffering! Cross! Cross! This and nothing else is the Christian law.⁴²

Luther proposes that the peasants should follow the example of Christ who did not resist injustice when he was being tried and crucified.⁴²

In his "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants," Luther condemned the peasants with three charges. One, they had broken their oaths of loyalty and obedience to their rulers. "God wants people to be loyal and to do their duty." Two, they had started a rebellion and were violently robbing and plundering. For Luther, this gave anyone the right to "smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly" to quell this "great fire." Three, they had cloaked this sin with the gospel, and thus blasphemed God's name. For these crimes, Luther said, they deserved death in body and soul.⁴³

The question may be raised whether or not Luther here applies his own two kingdom teaching in a way that is inconsistent from the teaching as he first espoused it. In both his commentary on Matt. 5:38-42 and in "Secular Authority" Luther taught that the Christian who suffers injustice affecting himself alone should allow himself to be despoiled, but that the Christian not only may but must

⁴²LW, XLIV, pp. 28-30.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 49-51.

seek justice, protection, and help for his neighbor. To be sure, Luther expected that this appeal to redress grievances would take place in an orderly fashion, through proper channels. But, as was indicated, Luther did not leave out the possibility of a form of civil disobedience. At one time, in fact, Luther gave his approval to certain soldiers who had deserted the army of Joachim of Brandenburg because they felt the war they were to be fighting was unjust.⁴⁴ Further, as was indicated above, it was only shortly after the peasant revolt, in his "Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants," written in July, 1525, that Luther made an important qualification that limited those situations in which a Christian suffered only personally and not "in-relation."

But to the peasants, Luther says:

To sum it up You want power and wealth so that you will not suffer injustice. The gospel, however, does not become involved in the affairs of this world, but speaks of our life in the world in terms of suffering, injustice, the cross, patience, and contempt for this life and temporal wealth. How, then, does the gospel agree with you?⁴⁵

Referring to the matters of the freedom to hunt game animals and birds, to catch fish, to use wood from the forest, the peasants obligation to provide free labor,

⁴⁴Roland Bainton, Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther (New York: Mentor, 1950), p. 189.

⁴⁵IW, XLVI, 35-36.

the amount of their rents and taxes, the death tax, etc., Luther said,

These things do not concern a Christian, . . . he cares nothing about them. He lets anyone who will rob, take, cheat, scrape, devour, and rage--for the Christian is a martyr on earth. Therefore the peasants ought properly to stop using the name Christian and use some other name . . . For obtaining their rights as Christians would mean they should keep quiet about all these matters and complain only to God when they suffer.⁴⁶

Here Luther does not seem to recognize, as he had before, the validity of Christians defending others for the sake of justice. In this regard, it should be noted that Luther does not seem to argue from the point of view that the peasants were each suffering as individuals and that because they were not Christians-in-relation, they could not justly revolt. This line of reasoning does not seem to appear. Instead, Luther argues over and over again, that since the peasants claimed to be Christians, and since Christ said that Christians should expect to suffer, that the peasants should bear their grievances.

The fact of the matter was that Luther, in trying to give advice in this situation, was caught in an awkward and inescapable dilemma. James Preus describes the dilemma well:

the ethical conflict for the concerned Christian in face of the peasant's oppression and revolt can be

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 39-40.

seen as a clash between these principles: the obligation to defend the neighbor against injustice on one hand, and the obligation to obey legitimate authorities on the other. What, in short, was to be done when the authorities themselves were the ones who were oppressing one's neighbors?⁴⁷

The fact that after more than a hundred years of peasant struggle,⁴⁸ both the peasants and the princes had come to take unyielding and opposing positions, left Luther with having to make a choice of the lesser of two evils. He supported the rulers in squelching the revolt, because he saw the alternative in extremely dire terms. He writes at one point:

If the peasants happen to gain the upper hand (God forbid!) . . . to destroy all rule and order and cast the world upon a desolate heap, as a prelude to the Last Day, which cannot be far off . . .⁴⁹

But in actuality, Luther felt that the rulers were just as culpable as the peasants. If the peasants would be destroyed and lost eternally because of their rebellion, the rulers would suffer no lesser fate for their injustice. In anticipation of an ensuing revolt and its suppression, Luther writes of the rulers in "Admonition to Peace:"

The lords would be fighting to strengthen and maintain their tyranny, their persecution of the gospel,

⁴⁷ James S. Preus, "The Political Function of Luther's Doctrina," Concordia Theological Monthly, XLIII (October, 1972), 597.

⁴⁸ LW, XLVI, 5

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 54.

and their unjust oppression of the poor, or else to help that kind of ruler. That is a terrible injustice and is against God. He who commits such a sin must be lost eternally.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 42.

CHAPTER III

NIEBUHR'S CRITIQUE OF LUTHER

Specific aspects of Niebuhr's critique of Luther now need to be examined. It will be asked, first of all, whether Niebuhr accurately portrays Luther, either in terms of Luther's espoused two kingdom teaching, or in terms of Luther's application of it during the peasant revolt. Secondly, it will be asked in what respect Niebuhr's critique is valid.

Describing his own position, Niebuhr asserts:

The Kingdom of God and the demands of perfect love are therefore relevant to every political system and impinge upon every social situation in which the self seeks to come to terms with the claims of other life.¹

Niebuhr then quotes the following from Luther's Commentary on Galatians, 1535, to show that Luther explicitly denies this relevance:

The way to discern the difference [between law and gospel] is to place the gospel in heaven and the law on the earth: to call the righteousness of the gospel heavenly, and the righteousness of the law earthly and to put as great a difference between them as God hath made between heaven and earth. . . . Wherefore if the question be concerning the matter of faith and conscience let us utterly exclude the law and leave it on earth. . . . Contrariwise in civil policy obedience to law must be severely required. There nothing must be known

¹Niebuhr, p. 192.

concerning the conscience, the Gospel, grace, remission of sins, heavenly righteousness or Christ himself; but Moses only with the law and the works thereof.²

The context of this Niebuhr quote is Luther's commentary on Galatians 2:14, where Luther comments on Paul's reprimanding of Peter, Barnabas, and other Jews who were acting insincerely toward the Gentiles. Luther then goes into an excursus on the value and art of distinguishing the Gospel from the Law. Luther's purpose for making the sharp distinction he does in the passage quoted is to keep the Gospel pure, as Luther notes:

Peter had confused this distinction between the Law and the Gospel, and thus he had persuaded the believers that they had to be justified by the Gospel and the Law together.³

The basic problem with Niebuhr's analysis here is that he picks up just one pole of a dialectic which Luther developed in his two kingdom teaching. When Luther speaks of the gracious justification by God of the sinner for the sake of Christ, which he was doing in the Galatians passage, Luther jealously separates out any element of the person's living in accordance with the law as a causative factor in God's justifying action upon that person. The resultant **righteousness**, as Luther puts it in his tract

²Ibid.

³LW, XXVI, 115-117.

"Two Kinds of Righteousness," 1519, is an alien righteousness, that is, the righteousness of Christ, instilled from without.⁴

But this does not mean that the Christian does not do good works. Indeed, there is another kind of righteousness which is the product of the alien righteousness: "that manner of life spent profitably in good works."⁵ This is "our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness."⁶ Moreover, this proper righteousness expresses itself in three ways, "in slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self, . . . in love to one's neighbor, . . . in meekness and fear toward God."⁷

In "The Freedom of the Christian Man," Luther expresses the overflowing of good works that results when a person in faith truly experiences this "alien righteousness: "

Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or

⁴Dillenberger, p. 86.

⁵Ibid., pp. 88-89.

⁶Ibid., p. 88.

⁷Ibid., pp. 88-89.

blame, of gain or loss. For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligations. He does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has . . .⁸

Nor is this overflowing of good works manifested only in personal relationships, but it expresses itself in the political realm as well:

Of the same nature are the precepts which Paul gives in Rom. 13, namely, that Christians should be subject to the governing authorities and be ready to do every good work, not that they shall in this way be justified, since they already are righteous through faith, but that in the liberty of the Spirit they shall by so doing serve others and the authorities themselves and obey their will freely and out of love.⁹

By contrast, for Niebuhr, one of the great motivators for realizing justice in the collective life of man is man's "uneasy conscience." Thus "men ought to be driven by an uneasy conscience" to "all the possible extensions of justice."¹⁰

Franz Lau describes Luther's dialectic very succinctly: "Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms belongs inseparably together with his doctrine of justification, and in this regard particularly with his concept of the gospel." The sinner

⁸Dillenberger, pp. 75-6.

⁹Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁰Niebuhr, pp. 190, 192.

is justified by grace, for the sake of Christ, through faith. Thus,

the gospel is about what God has done for us, not with what he requires from us. It deals with the love with which he loved us, not with the love which he wants to see or arouse in us. The gospel must be purely proclaimed and not be mixed with legalistic elements. Faith may not be confused with the love through which it is active, nor with the obedience of faith. That the realm of the gospel and its proclamation is singled out as a particular kingdom, and as the preferred kingdom "on the right hand" at that, is the expression of the jealous watchfulness that the gospel of the Reformation not become corrupted by legalism. Works and love do not belong to the kingdom of faith. Luther can, in fact, talk about the two kingdoms as those of faith and of love. In contrast to the spiritual kingdom of the gospel, or of faith, there is the earthly kingdom of law, or of works, or of love. Thus Luther's distinction between the two kingdoms coincides almost exactly with the distinction between law and gospel.¹¹

Thus Niebuhr's charge that Luther denied the relevance of love for the social and political life of man is simply unfounded. After quoting Luther's Galatians passage, Niebuhr states his criticism in a different way, "Here we have the complete severance between the final experience of grace and all the proximate possibilities of liberty and justice, which must be achieved in history."¹²

Iau is again relevant here:

It would seem at first that Luther develops his ethics from the point of view of the political use of the law

¹¹Franz Iau, "The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," Lutheran World XII (1965), p. 361.

¹²Niebuhr, p. 193.

(usus politicus legis), but actually he begins with the "proper" or theological use of the law (usus proprius sive theologicus sive elenchthicus legis). Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms and his understanding of the law belong together insofar as he proceeds from the radical nature of ethical demands. The law requires so much that it makes clear to the sinner how far he lags behind its demands. The consequence of this is that no human merit is possible and the idea of merit is completely purged from theology. The law demands unconditional love of God (with renunciation of all self-love), unconditional fear of God (with renunciation of all fear of men and political powers) and unconditional trust in God (with renunciation of all trust in self), and turns on the basic sins of praesumptio and superbia. The doctrine of the two kingdoms does, however, procure for man, who in this sense is completely incapable of good, the possibility of doing relative good, of attaining civil righteousness, of acquiring merits coram hominibus, which perhaps may even avail before God--though never for man's justification. Thus, on the one hand, the law apparently precludes the possibility of a system of ethics; on the other hand, through Luther's interpretation of the law, with the aid of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, a concrete ethic is made possible.¹³

Unfounded also is Niebuhr's claim that in Luther, the Kingdom of God is not relevant for the social and political life of man. For Luther, the worldly kingdom is indeed part of the Kingdom of God:

We must firmly establish secular law and the sword, that no one may doubt that it is in the world by God's will and ordinance. The passages which establish this are the following: Romans 13 Likewise I Peter 2¹⁴

¹³Lau, pp. 361-2.

¹⁴"Secular Authority," Dillenberger, p. 366.

For Luther, the State is,

God's peculiar work, ordinance and creation. . . . it is God's work and creation, it is good, and so good that every one can use it in a Christian and saving way [the state is God's servant and workman to punish the evil and protect the good.]¹⁵

Luther, indeed, maintains a double link between Christ's kingdom and the worldly kingdom: objective and subjective. Objectively, the state is assigned the function of maintaining and preserving human life in order that the Gospel might have an opportunity to be preached. God thus assigns the State a function within salvation history.¹⁶ Subjectively, those who hold office are under the law of love:

Thus a prince should in his heart empty himself of his power and authority, and interest himself in the need of his subjects, dealing with it as though it were his own need. Thus Christ did unto us; and these are the proper works of Christian love.¹⁷

Luther can even say that such acts as killing in war or using the sword to quell a rebellion are really the exercise of love:

in such a war it is a Christian act and an act of love confidently to kill, rob, and pillage the enemy, and to

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 377-8.

¹⁶Helmut Thielicke, Theological Ethics, Vol. I: Foundations (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 376.

¹⁷"Secular Authority," Dillenberger, p. 394.

do everything that can injure him until one has conquered him according to the methods of war.¹⁸

Referring to the squelching of the peasant revolt by the secular authorities, Luther says that the Scriptures see the temporal ^{sword} aright. "They see that out of great mercy, it must be unmerciful, and from utter kindness, it must exercise wrath and severity."¹⁹

Thus, contrary to Niebuhr's charge, Luther's teaching makes a very strong connection between love and the Kingdom of God and the social and political life of man, both for the individual citizen and for the public office holder.

Another criticism Niebuhr makes of Luther is with regard to Luther's treatment of the peasant rebellion:

He [Luther] places a perfectionist private ethic in juxtaposition to a realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic. He demands that the state maintain order without too scrupulous a regard for justice; yet he asks suffering and nonresistant love of the individual without allowing him to participate in the claims and counter-claims which constitute the stuff of social justice. The inevitable consequence of such an ethic is to encourage tyranny; for resistance to government is as important a principle of justice as maintenance of government.²⁰

Enough of Luther's teaching regarding the two kingdoms and his application of it to the peasant revolt has been

¹⁸Ibid., p. 398.

¹⁹LW, XLVI, p. 73.

²⁰Niebuhr, pp. 194-5.

presented to show that Niebuhr's charge represents a serious misunderstanding and distortion of Luther's position. Luther did demand that the state have a serious regard for justice. He did allow the peasants to participate in claim and counter-claim with the government in that he did recognize the legitimacy of their requests. Even when rebellion was imminent, Luther proposed arbitration as a way for the peasants and princes to settle their dispute and arrive at a solution.²¹

Moreover, Luther's seemingly extreme demand of the peasants that they adopt an ethic of suffering and non-resistant love was a position adopted in an extreme situation where the only alternative seemed to be wholesale rioting and pillage. Luther chose the lesser of two evils, but in his justification of this choice supported it with an application of his two kingdom doctrine which really represented somewhat of a distortion of his own position. Luther's two kingdom teaching as earlier espoused was much more flexible and allowed for more interplay between subject and emperor than would seem evident from Luther's application in 1525 during the peasant revolt. Nor was Luther's expectation of the possibility of a subject's interchange and counter-claim

²¹"Admonition to Peace," LW, XLVI, 42-3.

with the government unrealistic. Peasants generally,

had the right of appeal. Feudal society was graded, and every lord had his overlord. If the common man was wronged, he might address himself against the lord to the overlord, all the way up to the emperor.²²

In certain cases, Luther even allowed for civil disobedience.

But the historical circumstances involved in the peasant uprising seemed not to allow for such distinctions so that Luther's position could be justified on a pragmatic basis. In what he says, does Niebuhr suggest that more good than harm would have come had the pillage and rioting of the peasants been left to continue and increase unabated?

There is another charge which Niebuhr makes, however, which is related to the above, and which has within it the seeds of a substantial and legitimate criticism of Luther's two Kingdom teaching. Referring to the peasant revolt, Niebuhr says of Luther's position:

evidently no obligation rests upon the Christian to change social structures so that they might conform more perfectly to the requirements of brotherhood. In his attitude towards the peasant revolt Luther rigorously applied this separation between the "spiritual kingdom" and the "worldly" one; and met the demands of the peasants for a greater degree of social justice with the charge that they were confusing the two. He took a complacent attitude towards the social inequalities of feudalism and observed that on earth there will always be masters and slaves.²³

²²Bainton, p. 189.

²³Niebuhr, pp. 193-4.

In substantiation, Niebuhr quoted Luther's "Admonition to Peace" to the effect that the peasant demand for the abolition of serfdom,

would make all men equal and so change the spiritual Kingdom of Christ into an external worldly one. Impossible! An earthly kingdom cannot exist without inequality of persons. Some must be free, others serfs, some rulers, others subjects."²⁴

The context shows that Niebuhr's quote from Luther is a fair summary of Luther's position at this point.²⁵

The issue depends on what Niebuhr meant by the "obligation . . . upon the Christian to change social structures." If Niebuhr means to say that Luther did not try to change circumstances within the feudal system itself, we have already shown that Luther did not deny the legitimacy of such action but in fact encouraged it. If, however, Niebuhr also means to say that Luther never really questions the structure of the feudal system itself, and possible inherent injustices within that structure, but instead tended to legitimate such configurations, then the charge stands.

Thielicke makes this point explicitly:

At this point the question becomes urgent whether Luther does not lose sight of an essential element

²⁴Niebuhr, pp. 193-4, n. 15.

²⁵LW, XLVI, 39.

in the Sermon on the Mount, namely, the fact that the Sermon actually calls in question this whole aeon. We have seen that Luther does in fact apply the commandment of love to the sphere on the left hand. But the suspicion still remains that in this sphere a variety of ways are prescribed for fulfilling the commandment, and that here the commandment as such is no longer able radically to call in question. Luther clearly overlooks the fact that the significance of the commandment is not limited to its meaning within the orders, but goes beyond that to show how questionable the orders themselves really are, failing as they do to measure up to the radicalness of the divine requirement. The commandment in effect characterizes the orders as "emergency" or "interim" solutions. Luther obviously does not perceive the problem posed by the fact that the commandment of love is modified by "the form of this world," that this is a symptom of sickness, and that when God allows for any kind of "fulfillment" within the compass of this reality called "world" this is a sign of his patience and forbearance with our hardness of heart.²⁶

By contrast Thieliicke describes what he considers to be the New Testament view regarding "two kingdoms:"

In the New Testament the temporal kingdom and the kingdom of God are sequential in point of time, and the kairos, the "acceptable time," is the plane where the two aeons intersect. In Luther, however, the two kingdoms stand side by side, . . . Luther is concerned primarily not with two time continuums but with two spheres of reality. . . .

When the two kingdoms are regarded as succeeding one another, however, and the eschatological tension remains, then there is none of this putting oneself at ease, . . . the coming aeon "breaks in upon" this present aeon like a "disturbing fire."

. . . all peaceful coexistence between the two aeons is thereby ruled out. To be sure, I must de facto pay

²⁶Thieliicke, p. 378.

tribute to the world and its order, and I can do so quite willingly and gladly, knowing of the divine patience and the saving purpose of these orders. But this does not mean that I can therefore acknowledge the various spheres and orders as "laws unto themselves." For I am constantly reminded that the laws which are native and proper in this world, e.g., the laws of jurisprudence and politics, are really strange and alien so far as the kingdom of God is concerned.²⁷

Gerhard Ebeling's analysis of the relation of the two kingdoms seems to be similar to that of Thielicke here. Ebeling describes the worldly kingdom as being in a state of "self-contradiction," "a contradiction between the creatureliness of the world and the autocratic behavior of a world that denies its being created."²⁸ This self-contradiction places the worldly kingdom in a relation of agreement and of disagreement with the kingdom of Christ:

the relation of disagreement between the regnum mundi and regnum Christi is in the end the outbreak of the contradiction between the fallen creature and the Creator. And the relation of agreement between the regnum mundi and regnum Christi is the dawning of agreement between creature and Creator. The twofold relation between the regnum mundi and regnum Christi has thus to do with being a peccator and being iustus, since of course the peccator is the man who disagrees with the Creator and the iustus is the man who agrees with the Creator.²⁹

²⁷Ibid., pp. 380-1.

²⁸Gerhard Ebeling, "The Necessity of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," in Word and Faith (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 398.

²⁹Ibid., p. 399.

Werner Elert also points out this relation of agreement and of conflict between the two aeons:

The conflict between the two aeons is the clash of two reigns. The kingdom of Christ is opposed by the kingdom of Satan and evil.

Still, the cosmos which is identical with the present aeon is not exclusively the domain of Satan. It is also God's realm. . . . as creation it is God's work . . .

The result is that we cannot withdraw totally from the present aeon though we already belong to the reign of the future aeon. We cannot evade our responsibility to oppose evil by secular means within the present order in accordance with the will of God. Consequently we must distinguish between two aspects of the reign of God.³⁰

By contrast, we again note that Luther seems to place the two kingdoms side by side. Since both are God's ordinance, both are legitimate, and there seems to be little sense of tension between them:

In this way, then, things are well balanced, and you satisfy at the same time God's kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly, at the same time suffer evil and injustice and yet punish evil and injustice, at the same time do not resist evil and yet resist it. For in the one case you consider yourself and what is yours, in the other you consider your neighbor and what is his.³¹

Though Luther is aware that the worldly kingdom is passing, he does not seem to draw out the consequences in

³⁰Werner Elert, The Christian Ethos (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 291.

³¹"Secular Authority," Dillenberger, p. 375.

terms of the ambiguity which this places on the worldly kingdom. He notes in his commentary on Mt. 5:38-42:

Just learn the difference between the two persons that a Christian must carry simultaneously on earth, because he lives in human society and has to make use of secular and imperial things, the same way that the heathen do. For until he has been transferred bodily from this life to another one, his flesh and blood is identical with theirs; and what he needs to provide for it does not come from the spiritual realm but from the land and soil, which belongs to the emperor. Now, with this distinction of the boundary between the province of the Christian person and that of the secular person you can neatly classify all these sayings and apply them properly where they belong.³²

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined Reinhold Niebuhr's charge that Luther's two kingdom doctrine is defeatist when confronted with realizing justice in the collective life of man. Following is a summary of the findings of this study.

With regard to Luther's position, an adequate distinction needs to be made between Luther's formulation of the two kingdom teaching in his Sermon on the Mount and in "Secular Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Obeyed," and his application of it during the peasant rebellion. Further, the historical circumstances which surrounded Luther's formulation and application of the two kingdom doctrine needs to be taken into account. Thus, it will be seen that Luther's position with regard to the peasants was one taken in an extreme situation in which Luther took an uncompromising stand against the peasants only because it represented the lesser of two evils; and further that Luther then supported his position with an application of his two kingdom formulation which really represented a distortion of his earlier position, which had allowed more room for interplay between the

subject and the government and which had even allowed, in some cases, for civil disobedience.

Niebuhr, in his critique of Luther, presented only Luther's extreme application of the two kingdom teaching to the peasant rebellion and in doing so, failed to take account of some of the historical circumstances which surrounded the peasant revolt, and further failed to bring out that Luther put the full blame for the rebellion on the princes and their unjust treatment of the peasants and that Luther suggested arbitration as a way to settle their differences.

Moreover, in his critique of the passage in Luther's commentary on Galatians, Niebuhr failed to perceive Luther's rigorous attempt to keep the proclamation of the Gospel free from any legalistic element. This example is illustrative of Niebuhr's general failure to show that Luther indeed makes very basic connections between the Kingdom of God and the demands of perfect love on the one hand, and the social and political life of man on the other. There are indeed dimensions of Luther's two kingdom doctrine which allow and even demand action for improving the social and political life of man.

Thus Niebuhr's charge of Luther's defeatism in social ethics is severely undercut by Niebuhr's own failure to

accurately and adequately portray Luther's position. Yet Niebuhr correctly perceived that Luther's perspective did not lead him to question the structure of the social and political arrangement itself. For this reason, there is a sense in which Niebuhr's charge of "quietism" on the part of Luther in realizing justice in the social and political life of man is justified. Luther seems to trace sin in the structure of the worldly kingdom to the non-purity of heart of those who hold office rather than that the whole configuration of the governmental structure may embody elements which contradict the law of love and which therefore fail to live up to the radicalness of the divine requirement. Luther does seem to place the two kingdoms side by side, with little tension manifested between them, rather than to regard the worldly kingdom as being succeeded by Christ's kingdom, thus making for a degree of "eschatological tension" in which the present order is always radically called into question.

One of the questions which remains unanswered by the study in the light of Luther's seeming adumbration of an eschatological perspective is whether this inadequacy is a natural consequence of Luther's theology or whether it is simply a manifestation of the fact that Luther failed to draw out the implications of the Christian individual's

simul-iustus-et-peccator existence into the Christian's social and political life as well. This issue is beyond the scope of this study, however.

At the same time, it must be realized that Luther's two kingdom formulation developed basically out of theological rather than social or political considerations. On the one hand, Luther was trying to forge a middle way in antithesis to both the Roman Catholics and to the radical reformers. On the other hand, Luther's basic purpose in formulating the doctrine of the two kingdoms was to preserve the purity of the gospel.

In conclusion, however, we may say that Luther's two kingdom theology is far from defeatist when confronting the problem of realizing social and political justice. On the contrary, rightly understood, it allows and even demands such activity.

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