

ap·ro·pos



The Two Realms
and the
Separation of
Church and State

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Published by Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • cph.org

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Introduction

*E*ach peculiar stream within the great flow of the one Christian faith has at least one or two distinctive teachings or practices particularly identified with that tradition. Calvinism keys on the sovereignty of God and the TULIP markers, Rome centers on ecclesiastical authority and clerical hierarchy culminating in the pope, the Orthodox prize the fathers and liturgical form, and Baptists emphasize the necessity of human freedom and choice. For Lutheranism, the centrality of justification and the distinction between Law and Gospel are typically favorable identifiers within the wider Christian community. Less enthusiastically applauded, but just as distinctively Lutheran, is the distinction between the two kingdoms or realms, which is often treated as a characteristically Lutheran idea. Yet while the terminology and concept may be familiar enough, and while many Christians and most Lutherans will claim an adequate grasp of the basic content of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, an accurate understanding of the actual teaching is far from common, even among those who bear the reformer's name. Part of the problem may be the widespread acceptance of grossly oversimplified and inaccurate presentations of the teaching and a consequent overconfidence in one's mastery of the material. In truth, what is offered as a summary of the teaching is too often not only inaccurate but disastrous. Never was this more tragically evident than in Germany before and during the Second World War.

Raising the Nazi specter in the first paragraph of an introduction may well seem gratuitously overdramatic—and maybe it is;

still, I believe invoking this grim failure of Christian confession is warranted to illustrate the profound significance of holding doctrinal ideas either faithfully or errantly and acting accordingly. This is true specifically with the two realms but also applies more broadly to all doctrinal endeavor. When it comes to doctrine, a great deal is always at stake not only for this temporal life but also certainly, and very often frequently, for the new eternal life fully manifest at Christ's return. And although perhaps not many would rank the teaching of the two realms as a doctrine bearing the weighty significance of eternal salvation hanging in the balance, there is no doubt that a mishandling of the teaching absolutely can result in what amounts to a hell on earth.

It was theological reflection on the horror of the Second World War and the appalling complicity with the Third Reich, which came far too easily for far too many Christians in Germany, that led to the notoriety or perhaps more accurately infamy of what was then christened as the "Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms." As Robert Benne notes, the label was not intended to be positive.¹ The veracity of the charge that the "two kingdoms doctrine" was the root of the problem behind the failure of the *Deutsche Christen* will be considered in chapter 3; for now, it is the term itself that is of interest. Before the twentieth century, the Lutheran teaching on the two realms had not been singled out as necessarily in need of a particular name or label; it was simply part of the church's teaching as outlined by Philip Melancthon in his succinct presentation of the Reformation's core teaching that comprises the first twenty-one articles of the Augsburg Confession.

1 Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Fortress Press, 1995), 78–79.

THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

The first part of the Augsburg Confession follows a smooth narrative arc, recounting the work of God creating the world and then redeeming and preserving it through the mission of Christ and the Spirit-driven activity of His church and finally, at last, fully restoring and glorifying that world at Christ's return. After emphasizing the work of the church through its proclamation of the Gospel and its faithful practice of the Sacraments, in Article 16, Melanchthon confesses the propriety of Christian participation in the temporal realm, or the things pertaining to life in this world. The contents of this article were likely highlighted in an intentional effort to create as much space as possible between the Lutheran reformers and the errant ideas of more radical teachers of the day who were often dismissive of or even hostile toward the material world and its necessary structures. Yet Melanchthon is not exclusively polemic in his presentation, and even without the catalyst of theological error that needed to be called out and condemned, the faithful teaching contained in Article 16 belonged in the church's confession. In his written confession of the Lutheran faith, Melanchthon was bound to affirm the goodness of the created world and its activities and does so at precisely the right place in the story—toward the end of his twenty-one-article, summary confession of the church's correct teaching. In other words, any telling of the *regula fidei* (rule of faith) or the *corpus doctrinae* (body of doctrine) that from the beginning has guided and normed the Christian Church's faithful proclamation and right confession must of necessity always include some articulation of the teaching of the two realms.

In early print editions of the Augsburg Confession, the German text gave Article 16 the title "Concerning Public Order and Secular Government"; the Latin translation was at once more concise and more expansive in scope: "Civil Affairs." The article itself confirms

the accuracy of both titles as it begins with an affirmation of God's role in government but then goes on to indicate that there is more to the affairs of civil life than merely governmental rule and the corresponding obedience of Christian citizens:

Concerning public order and secular government it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God and that Christians may without sin exercise political authority; be princes and judges; pass sentences and administer justice according to imperial and other existing laws; punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers; buy and sell; take required oaths; possess property; be married; etc.

Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things indicated above is Christian.²

Essentially, everything that was denied and shunned by the Anabaptists with their propensity for wholesale disregard or dismissal of the created realm was endorsed and embraced by Melanchthon and the Lutheran confessors.

Melanchthon, though, did not exhaust his vitriol criticizing the mistaken theology of the radical reformers on one side. In the second half of Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession, he leveled a stern rebuke also against the misguided ideas of the Roman Catholic opponents on the other side:

Also condemned are those who teach that Christian perfection means physically leaving house and home, spouse

2 AC XVI 1–3, German. The Anabaptist refusal to condone secular civil authority of any Christian participation in such political ruling stemmed from their conviction that Jesus' command not to take the sword was unequivocal and fully applicable to all areas of life, including that of government.

and child, and refraining from the above-mentioned activities. In fact, the only true perfection is true fear of God and true faith in God. For the gospel teaches an internal, eternal reality and righteousness of the heart, not an external, temporal one. The gospel does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage but instead intends that a person keep all this as a true order of God and demonstrate in these walks of life Christian love and true good works according to each person's calling. Christians, therefore, are obliged to be subject to political authority and to obey its commands and laws in all that may be done without sin. But if a command of the political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings (Acts 5[:29]).³

Article 16 makes clear that, with its monastic obsession, Rome was undercutting the right functioning of the temporal realm and utterly destroying the goodness and beauty of ordinary life with its mundane vocations tied to house, home, and secular occupations. Melanchthon, it is evident, had more on his mind than just politics and government; the scope of his concern in Article 16 ranged out into every corner of regular life in this world. The significance of this emphasis on Christian life fully invested in the realities of the temporal world is critical and will be given appropriate attention in the first chapter. For now, it is important to recognize that the duality of God's two realms should never be thought of as synonymous with concerns related only to issues of church and state.

There is, admittedly, good reason for discussions about God's two realms to narrow down to a restricted focus on the often tense and sometimes conflicted relationship between ecclesial and

3 AC XVI 4–7, German.

political authority. These questions are of keen interest, no doubt, simply because so much is at stake in the give and take between church and state. Questions about the interactions between these two authorities are also interesting as power and control at work in these interactions, whether regnant or ascendent, has shifted back and forth significantly through the centuries. In the early years after the resurrection of Jesus, the church endured the indifference and then hostility of the overwhelmingly powerful Roman Empire; yet, led and fed by the Holy Spirit, the church confidently followed her Lord to breathtaking growth. The explosive impact of Christianity eventuated in the church's surprising triumph in the days of Constantine and the eventual capitulation of secular power to the hegemony of the church achieved in the late medieval world. Luther would boast that he brought this unhealthy situation of churchly domination over secular authority to an end, and in time, modernity eventually brought the tenuous but enduring and familiar rapprochement of church and state expressed in a variety of ways in Europe and the new world. H. Richard Niebuhr famously and iconically described the assorted versions of Christendom as it was manifest in America with his widely known five types or categories presented in his influential book *Christ and Culture*.⁴ In the twenty-first century, church and state questions remain relevant and pressing, but they are shifting again as Christendom atrophies and evaporates along with whatever prestige and influence it once enjoyed. Now we are left with the assorted and unsteady efforts of American Christians to discover or perhaps negotiate the best way forward in a strange new world. The wisdom and success of some of the more noteworthy of these efforts to find a new way will be evaluated in chapter 3.

4 Niebuhr's five types have been variously maligned and attacked but have proven remarkably resilient and useful for thinking about the church and state experience in the United States. His five types are Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper & Row, 1951), xxxvii–lv.

It is apparent already from the confession at Augsburg that the teaching of God's two realms was about much more than a circumscribed interest in questions of church and state. And it is also evident that Melanchthon did not consider his articulation of God's reality with regard to life in the temporal world in Article 16 to be a uniquely Lutheran idea; nor did he present the teaching as a formula or paradigm worthy of its own label. Like the distinction between Law and Gospel (God's twofold message to the world), the distinction between the two realms (God's twofold way of operating in the world) simply functioned as a pervasive presupposition at work beneath the theological endeavors of Luther, Melanchthon, and their fellow reformers. The distinction between the realms was a tool to be utilized in theological work, so it did not achieve the status of being counted among the foundational theological loci (i.e., "common places" for gathering doctrinal content), nor was it elevated with a distinctive title like "doctrine of the two kingdoms." The two realms teaching was merely a taken-for-granted axiom describing God's activity in His creation through two related but very different modes of operation with their corresponding God-appointed institutions of church and state. This means that understanding the teaching of the two realms requires an appreciation for the basic theological approach and undergirding assumptions that drove all of Luther's thinking and the answers he provided to the urgent questions of his day. I will do my best to make these foundational ideas plain as the basic contours of the teaching are taken up more fully in chapter 1.

LUTHER AND LUTHERANISM

Working in Lutheran theology means working in the shadow of Martin Luther. Those of us who embrace Luther's legacy recognize that we do not blindly follow a mere man, nor do we heedlessly yield to his every theological thought, argument, or system.

Yet those who are willing to bear Luther's name typically do so without regret and see his influence and continual presence as a great asset and only rarely as a liability—though those liabilities are, quite frankly, sizable enough. But in the present discussion of the two realms, the presence of Luther and his teaching will be welcomed warmly. Still, it needs to be made clear that this book is not a Luther study but a consideration of the Lutheran way of navigating the interface between the two realms. Luther's thought matters a great deal, of course, and the precedents, commitments, and ways of operating that drove Luther continue to influence Lutherans today. I am certainly eager to be numbered among those happy to have Luther's company and his steady directing hand as I go about my own theological work almost five centuries after his death. All of this is to say that I am not in the least ashamed to be a Lutheran and earnestly follow my namesake's lead into the theological task.

What follows, then, should not be construed as a Luther book much less a historical exploration of what precisely Luther himself taught about the two realms. Indeed, the confessional subscription that binds, norms, and directs me is to the Book of Concord alone, not to Martin Luther or any of his writings beyond his catechisms and Smalcald Articles, which, of course, are contained in the Book of Concord. Rather than endlessly citing Luther or carefully exploring the nuances of his many writings on the topic of the two realms, I will try to follow Luther's method and example and simply present God's truth as confessed by His faithful church in the area of the two realms and their dynamic interrelationship.

KINGDOMS OR REALMS?

This introduction has sought to set the stage by introducing the familiar and probably even standard term "doctrine of the two kingdoms" and then considering the confessional foundation and

expression for this concept found in the normative collection of texts that comprise the Book of Concord. While the second task has been sufficiently fulfilled, something important yet remains to be said about the terminology itself. The popular default designation for the idea of God's continuing twofold reign over His fallen creation is, of course, "the doctrine of the two kingdoms." As noted above, it is good to keep in mind that this label only came into popular usage as a pejorative attack against the teaching. Although Luther himself never referenced a doctrine of the two kingdoms, he definitely used the collection of important ideas that would later be given their own particular label. Nevertheless, it is true that the term that has now become common does fit Luther's use and faithfully captures the idea of two distinct areas over which a sovereign rules, thus two kingdoms.

Beyond the awkwardness of the common moniker's disparaging origin in the aftermath of the Second World War, however, a further and more substantial difficulty arises when it is recognized that the same German word, used by Luther, *Regiment*, that is translated as "kingdom" in reference to God's twofold rule over the world is often also used by Luther and others to refer to the two contending kingdoms of God and Satan. This pair of metaphysical or transcending and undergirding kingdoms absolutely does not align with Luther's twofold distinction between the temporal and spiritual kingdoms of God's reign over the earth. And when a misguided correspondence that seeks to connect God with the spiritual kingdom and Satan with the temporal kingdom is attempted or assumed, confusion and dangerous false teaching inevitably and quickly result. This is the compelling reason for choosing a synonym other than *kingdom* to translate *Regiment*. It also explains my preferred use of the word *realm* rather than *kingdom* when discussing the twofold way that God is at work to rule and guide His creation in both the temporal and the spiritual domains. Other synonyms could also be suggested, of course,

including sphere, jurisdiction, sovereignty, or domain. But among a number of Lutheran writers aware of the potential confusion over terms, *realm* has become the usual choice. Going forward, then, references to two kingdoms should be understood as referring to the two warring kingdoms of God and Satan and not the mutually compatible realms of the temporal and the spiritual; on the other hand, when the idea of God's twofold sovereignty and guidance over His fallen creation is in mind—as will be the case virtually throughout this book—then the term *realm* will be used. Again, this is not to suggest that there is an inherent problem with the term *kingdom* or a preference for *realm*; it is simply a matter of seeking clarity in the use of terminology.

Finally, one last observation needs to be made and fully appreciated before embarking on a presentation of the actual distinction between the two realms. In the twenty-first-century world of the academic community, every topic is deconstructed, atomized, examined, and eventually explained with a theory or what is purported to be a definitive description of some sort. Since few if any steps in that process are capable of true objectivity, competing and often contradictory descriptions and theories flourish, especially in the realm of the soft sciences that suffer from even fewer opportunities for a modicum of objectivity. So it is that when the practitioners of the social sciences try to explain or account for any and all forms of human behavior, whether individual or collective, theories abound. And so it is that in discussions about Luther's teaching, references will often be made to "Luther's political theory" or the "political philosophy of Lutheranism." Using this verbiage, much less entertaining the very idea that one can postulate a "political theory of Luther," can only be deemed as hopelessly and ignorantly anachronistic. Simply put, Luther did not have a political theory. In other words, Luther did not take a look around at his late medieval world of politics with its patchwork of competing feudal fiefdoms, conniving and interfering ecclesiastical lords,

economic and military power games, and monarchical and aristocratic intrigue in the chaotic remnants of a phony Roman Empire and then devise a theory to explain how it all hung together.

Luther's teaching about the two realms did not arise through his careful study and reflection on what he saw going on around him, nor did he simply reprise and repackage the thought of great thinkers whom he admired. Not even Augustine's political writing can be neatly mapped to Luther's thought. In spite of what seems an obvious similarity between Augustine's two cities and Luther's two realms, the two theologians meant very different things with their respective terms. Luther was not a political theorist, and his teaching on the two realms should not be categorized as just one more theory—and a very old, outdated, and mostly irrelevant one at that. To grasp Luther's contribution and the importance of his political ideas, it is critical to recognize that Luther was not trying to explain what he saw, advance an agenda, or reconcile competing claims to authority. He was not driven by what made sense, won intellectual affirmations and friends, or offered a pragmatic reward.

Luther's ideas about God's twofold rule must be recognized as an outgrowth or a mere aspect of his all-encompassing way of seeing and understanding absolutely everything through the lens of Christian theology. Luther read Scripture, learned from the church and her fathers, and completely adopted and internalized a way of understanding human existence and the entire world that was shaped and defined always and only by the *regula fidei* of the church's true and so timeless teaching—precisely the teaching that was outlined in the Augsburg Confession. Luther was not a philosopher, politician, theorist, or even pure academician. Luther was a theologian and a pastor. He sought God's truth and then taught God's truth, nothing more and nothing less. Luther did not hesitate to use the tools and contributions of the academic community along with the newly forming science and technology of his day; but he used all of these resources in the service of theology—that

is to say, the right teaching of God's truth—to which every tool, idea, theory, or fact was made to submit. It is out of this context that Luther wrote about God's way of working in the world in two distinct ways, and it is within this same framework that any faithful Lutheran presentation of the two realms of God's activity must be offered. In precisely this spirit, it is time to present and explore the teaching of the two realms.



Chapter 1

Situating the Two Realms

Sometime in the last years of the second decade of the sixteenth century, Martin Luther's long and tortuous spiritual angst came to a gracious and glorious end. Desperate to find peace with God, the young Luther famously abandoned his university studies en route to life as a lawyer and abandoned himself to the project of securing spiritual perfection through the model course prescribed by the church. The project failed. The spiritual comfort and assurance he craved and sacrificed so much to attain never materialized, and his earnest effort to secure peace with God degenerated into futility. It was when Luther was distracted from his own striving for righteousness and simply doing the job he'd been given to do, preparing his lectures on Romans for his students at the University of Wittenberg, that his spiritual torment unexpectedly came to an end. Ironically, yet necessarily, peace with God did not result from his focused efforts to find and claim it; the peace he so ardently desired came as a bolt out of the blue, a gift, in the course of fulfilling his vocation for the sake of others. Through the words of Paul's letter to the Romans, the Spirit worked on the devout monk, and Luther was utterly astounded, indeed gobsmacked, when the recognition was forced upon him by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit that the "righteousness of God" was not a thing to be earned or achieved but a gift to be received. Nothing would ever be the same again.

The insight and outcome of Luther's tower experience, evangelical breakthrough, or discovery of the Gospel, as the story above has been variously labeled, remains the vital heart of Lutheran

confession. The sinner's justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone is arguably the most important doctrinal expression of the entire Christian faith. This essential declaration captures the truth that captured Luther: a God who finds sinners, claims them, calls them, forgives them, raises them, and fully restores them—a God who does everything for the eternal salvation of His people. Luther staked his teaching, his thinking, his life, and his eternity on the great theological truth of the Gospel. Every faithful Lutheran since has done the same.

The stunning wonder of the Gospel—that no human merits or achieves righteousness before God or gains personal dignity, worth, or identity by individual intention, sincerity, or effort but instead receives all of these things along with life itself, peace with God and with self, confidence in the face of death, and the promise of resurrected life in Christ's eternal kingdom purely as a gift of God's grace—is rightly, and wonderfully, the core of Christian confession. But it is not the whole of Christian confession. The Gospel does not swallow up the entirety of Christian doctrine or even act as doctrinal trump when thinking theologically as if everything, including God's Law, should somehow be "gospelled" and transformed into something different. The Law is not changed by the Gospel—sinners are changed by the Gospel. And the same letter of Paul to the Romans that delivered the Gospel to Luther also gave him a completely new way of understanding his life as a redeemed and transformed sinner in God's creation—a sinner who was now learning to keep and delight in the very Law that had convicted and crushed him. Being declared forgiven by the Gospel is always directly linked to the reality of a return to life lived in the present world according to the will of God, which is but a synonym for the Law.

The final sentence in the preceding paragraph makes two significant claims that both deserve some corroborating evidence. The second idea, that the Law is synonymous with the will of God,

enjoys full confessional support. The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord is explicit: “When we speak of good works that are in accord with the law of God (for otherwise they are not good works), the word ‘law’ has one single meaning, namely, the unchanging will of God, according to which human beings are to conduct themselves in this life.”¹ To put it another way, the Law of God is not an alien set of rules imposed on humanity after the human-wrought disaster of the fall. Rather, the Law is simply the description of the way that God intended His entire creation to work—including the human parts of His creation. What God made perfect, man in his willful sin corrupted and destroyed, and God in His inexplicable grace then reclaimed and restored through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, the Law both pre-dates man in his fallen state and continues to norm and guide him in his redeemed state as a new creature.

This neatly brings us to the first poignant point made in that overloaded final sentence two paragraph’s previous, a point elegantly affirmed by Luther in his Great Galatians Commentary of 1535:

When I have this righteousness within me [the passive righteousness of the Gospel], I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the saddened, I administer the sacraments. If I am a father, I rule my household and family, I train my children in piety and honesty. If I am a magistrate, I perform the office which I have received by divine command. If I am a servant, I faithfully tend to my master’s affairs. In short, whoever knows for sure that

1 FC SD VI 15.

Christ is his righteousness not only cheerfully and gladly works in his calling but also submits himself for the sake of love to magistrates, also to their wicked laws, and to everything else in this present life—even, if need be, to burden and danger. For he knows that God wants this and that this obedience pleases Him.²

This splendid little penultimate paragraph from Luther's introduction to his lectures on Galatians not only clinches the claim made above that the Gospel sends us back into the world to do good works, but it also captures and conveys a host of other critical concepts necessary for a faithful understanding and practice of all right theology and in particular the two realms. Indeed, this single paragraph can serve as a remarkably effective springboard to discuss precisely the driving ideas, categories, and assumptions that were at work in Luther's theology and that were especially significant for his thinking and teaching about the temporal realm and the spiritual realm. With that in mind, it will be altogether fruitful to linger on this passage, and it should be further borne in mind that this snippet from Luther is far from a one-off comment but is faithfully representative of his quite consistent theological thought on these matters.

Notice in Luther's compelling imagery about the rain falling from one kingdom (as noted in the Introduction, I'd prefer the translation *realm*) the tight relationship between what has been delivered as a gift from heaven—that is, in the individual's relationship with God, which is purely passive and grounded fully and wonderfully in God's Gospel of grace—and the life of that same individual lived in another kingdom—that is, the individual's relationships and responsibilities in the present life. This vividly illustrates the irresistible bond between realities in the spiritual

2 AE 26:11–12. Brackets added by author.

realm and the temporal realm. So, while this paragraph explicitly illustrates the two kinds of human righteousness (one passively received before God and the other actively achieved in the world), it also highlights the two realms. It is apparent from this paragraph that the two paradigms or dualities of two kinds of righteousness and two realms certainly overlap with one another, but it is also important to remember that the two kinds of righteousness and the two realms are not synonymous as each duality seeks to answer a different question. Two kinds of righteousness aims at what it means to be fully human in right relationships, and two realms clarifies how God works in His creation in a twofold way.

The two realms aspect at work in this paragraph is further highlighted when Luther begins his seemingly random list of illustrations of humans making the earth fertile through their good works in the earthly realm. Of course, the list is far from arbitrary or serendipitous. Indeed, moving from pastor to father to prince, Luther has deliberately touched on each of three medieval estates that circumscribed all of life for all people: church, home, government. Tacking on the servant at the end of the list effectively fills any potential gaps in application as those in the role of servant abounded in Luther's day essentially in all three estates.³ By intentionally choosing the responsible office-bearer, or one who was held accountable for the right conduct and success of each realm—pastor, father, and prince—as his examples, Luther has reinforced the importance of the work that is done in every vocation in each of the three estates. One is not more holy or godly or God-pleasing than another; even the “minister of the Word” is simply doing his work in the world for the sake of those around him—just like a father and just like a prince.

3 One can also see the addition of the servant as Luther anticipating the move that would become common in the twentieth century when work or labor was split out from the home or household and labeled as the fourth estate or mandate in which human vocations took shape.

Luther's emphasis in this passage on these three offices, each responsible for directing the work of one of the three estates, captures another essential component of a right understanding of the two realms: those who are given the authority of leadership in each realm are established in their office by the direct action of God Himself. As Luther puts it, "If I am a magistrate, I perform the office which I have received by divine command."⁴ Magistrates, or government officials, act authoritatively only because God has authorized them so to act. Since it runs counter to virtually every assumption and idea at work in our modern world, the significance of this concept deserves some deliberate and unhurried reflection to encourage careful digestion. In modernity, social structures and the authority arrangements within them are thought to spring from a myriad host of complicated cultural, physiological, and psychological factors—none of which, naturally, is the omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent will of God. In the modern world, it is a foregone conclusion that authority arises from within the context of the world—from evolutionary developments or social contracts or brute brandishing of power. In line with faithful Christian confession, however, Luther and his trustworthy heirs hold to the conviction that all authority derives from God Himself, who wills and directs all of it as He pleases.

This is precisely the point Luther makes in his Large Catechism explanation of the Fourth Commandment: "Thus all who are called masters stand in the place of parents and must derive from them their power and authority to govern. They are all called fathers in the Scriptures because in their sphere of authority they have been commissioned as fathers and ought to have fatherly hearts toward their people."⁵ God established the authority structures of this world when He established the order and design of

4 AE 26:12.

5 LC I 142.

this world. Adam and Eve were tasked with exercising dominion or authority over the creation. The authority of government and of the church both extend from that initial authority. As Luther summarizes in the Large Catechism, “So we have introduced three kinds of fathers in this commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of a household, and fathers of the nation. In addition, there are also spiritual fathers.”⁶ Each father in each estate functions for the sake of the creation. So, it is that each of the authoritative positions of responsibility and leadership in church, home, and state amounts to an office (or *Amt* in German). No one can act in one of these areas without the appropriate authorization to do so, and that authority comes from God Himself as it is disseminated through the structures and ways of operating that He has established and allowed in His providential ordering of the world. While in modern democratic society the idea of authority vested in an office by God’s decree and action may be held to be of no account or a mere vestige of a mercifully bygone era, in Lutheran thought, the idea of authority grounded in God’s design carries a great deal of weight, and appreciation of this truth is essential if the teaching of the two realms is to be rightly understood.

That same paragraph from Luther’s Galatians commentary, now cited several paragraphs ago, holds two more significant lessons that will help establish a solid foundation for rightly understanding the teaching of the two realms. Notably, Luther embraces the idea of vocations: “Whoever knows for sure that Christ is his righteousness . . . cheerfully and gladly works in his calling.”⁷ Doing whatever vocation God has given a person to do is that individual’s way of living faithfully within the world, or within the temporal realm of this created life. God arranges His creation and His human creatures within it to work together to accomplish His plan

6 LC I 158.

7 AE 26:12.

for the creation. Each human does this work by doing the vocation, or more accurately, vocations, that he or she has been given to do. The second and final lesson that cannot be missed is that once the structure of human life in this world has been established within the framework of the three estates and our vocations within each, it is necessary that humans live within this design. In other words, obedience to authority is essential: “Whoever knows for sure that Christ is his righteousness . . . submits himself for the sake of love to magistrates, also to their wicked laws, and to everything else in this present life—even, if need be, to burden and danger. For he knows that God wants this and that this obedience pleases Him.”⁸ Luther’s conviction about the importance of submission to human authority as being submission to God claimed a significant and consistent place in his thinking about life in the temporal realm, and it must remain an important idea for those who claim his legacy.

Luther did not express these ideas this way merely because he happened to be a product of his time—though he certainly was thoroughly shaped by his time and place in history, of course. It is important to recognize, nevertheless, that Luther’s main cues for his theological thinking about the civil realm and its government did not come from his feudal society or strict upbringing or hierarchical ecclesiastical experience. The foremost influence on Luther’s thinking about the temporal realm was above all else the Bible, specifically the teaching and examples of Jesus, Peter, and Paul. Luther thought the way he did about the structures of life in this world because he read and believed the Bible. No doubt, he read within and through the context of the gestalt of his place and time, but he also read in the context of the apostolic *regula fidei*—the standard teaching of the church that had been passed