

**Martin Luther on Secular Authority:  
The Powers of Princes versus the Obligations of Subjects**

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In 1523, Martin Luther drafted his treatise, *Secular Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Obeyed*, in which he presented what scholars have dubbed “The Two Kingdoms Doctrine” because of Luther’s interpretation of how God rules over the world in two different ways. Luther published the treatise on secular authority just three years after his *Address to the German Nobility* (1520), in which, following canon law, he had issued an appeal to the German nobility to initiate ecclesiastical reform because the religious establishment had failed to heed Luther’s calls to do so and now had forfeited its right to be obeyed. In doing so, he argued that the two powers were separate but equal by recognizing secular authority as divinely ordained while rebuking papal overreach in secular matters. He also put forth the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, which in essence made secular princes the spiritual equals of ecclesiastical authorities. Not only is the pope not the sole interpreter of Scripture; he also should not be the only one who could summon a church council to initiate reform.

Luther’s 1523 treatise on secular authority builds upon the arguments in his *Address to the German Nobility*. In Luther’s evolving thinking, God rules His earthly kingdom by means of secular and churchly governance; thus the role of secular authority is to protect the righteous and punish the wicked, including church leaders, through positive law and by compulsion from the sword. As explained by Baylor University Professor David Whitford,<sup>1</sup> “God has given the secular prince the power of the sword for the maintenance of order and justice. That calling itself is a high and worthy office. The magistrate—whether king, duke, burgher, or father—should devote himself to that calling and leave the proclamation of the Word and the disposition of souls to God and the church.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, God rules His Heavenly Kingdom through gospel and grace. Thus the absolute sovereignty of God remained at the core of Luther’s understanding of both kingdoms.

One of the main points of Luther’s argument in the Two Kingdoms Doctrine is the belief that in an ideal Christian world, secular, worldly government would not be necessary. In his treatise on *Secular Authority*, Luther observed, “[T]hese people [that is, the people of the kingdom of God] need no secular sword or law. And if all the world were composed of real Christians, that is, true believers, no prince, no king, lord, sword, or law would be needed. For what would be the use of them, since Christians have in their hearts the Holy Spirit who instructs them and causes them to wrong no one . . .”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the reality of his day was quite

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<sup>1</sup> David Whitford is a Religion Professor at Baylor University and the editor of the *Sixteenth Century Journal*. He has published several works, including *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition*.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Secular Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Followed*, trans. C. M. Jacobs, in *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1930), 225-273 at 241.

different. Thus Luther wrote, “Here the other proposition applies, that you [as a Christian] are under obligation to serve and further the sword by whatever means you can, with body, soul, honor or goods. For it [meaning government] is nothing that you need, but something quite useful and profitable for the whole world and for your neighbor.”<sup>4</sup>

Again, in *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, a collection of notes and essays compiled by students of Luther during dinners at his home (which took place from 1531-1544), we find a conversation recorded that seems to contradict the idea that secular government is not necessary. Here Luther is reported to have asserted, “The magistracy is a necessary state in the world, and to be held in honour . . . . Temporal government is preserved not only by laws and rights, but by divine authority . . . .”<sup>5</sup> Again, as he stated during another dinnertime conversation, secular authority was necessary, given the warlike nature of humanity: “Government is a sign of divine grace, of the mercy of God, who has no pleasure in murdering, killing, and strangling. If God left all things to go which way they would, as among the Turks and other nations, without good government, we should quickly despatch [dispatch] one another out of this world.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, then, Luther believed that following a strong secular government and its laws were in the best interest of his fellow Christians and that their participation in a sovereign state helped them carry out the teachings of the Apostle Paul by protecting Christians.

At the core, then, despite what theoretically might have been possible, Luther believed that secular government was in fact necessary, and that secular authorities and religious authorities should not co-mingle with each other. While secular authorities, as priests before God, might have the right to reform the church as much as a religious leader, it was especially crucial that the secular authority not interfere with Christian practices of their subjects by commanding violations of godly law. Luther wanted the separation of the spiritual and worldly estate and believed that the Pope’s issuances of edicts that the German Princes were compelled to follow did not fit with his idea of the divinely-ordained structure of government.

The distinction of the separate estates (or Kingdoms) is so important to Luther because not everyone on earth or even under the rule of one prince or Lord or emperor is Christian. Secular government, to Luther, made it easier for Christians and non-Christians to intermingle (or not). Some are not even “true believers [these were those in the Lutheran camp]”<sup>7</sup> according to Luther. As Luther said, if everyone were a true believer, there would be no need for government, but because there are non-Christians and non-true believers, there is a need for secular government. “. . . God has provided a different government for non-Christians, outside the Christian estate and God’s kingdom. He has subjected them to the sword so that, even though they would do so, they cannot practice their wickedness; and if they do they may not do it without fear.”<sup>8</sup> This all may seem frivolous, but to Luther this was the difference between those

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<sup>4</sup> Luther, *Secular Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Followed*, 235.

<sup>5</sup> William Hazlitt, ed. and trans., *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 309.

<sup>6</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 308.

<sup>7</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 308.

<sup>8</sup> Luther, *Secular Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Followed*, 232.

who had the authority to rule over him and those who he “must resist them at least with words.”<sup>9</sup> Luther believed that those in government who did not interfere with his beliefs and that those who did not support the Pope as Romanists had the right and divine authority to rule absolutely over him and the people collectively.

Some might expect that Luther would not be too fond of secular rulers based upon his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, but this is simply not the case. However, Luther was an opportunist and held some princes in quite high regard. In fact, in *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* there is a recounting of a dinner where Prince Ernest of Luneburg and Prince William of Mecklenburg ate at the home of Martin Luther. “I invited to dinner, at my house at Wittenberg, prince Ernest of Luneburg, and prince William of Mecklenburg, who much complained of the immeasurable swilling and drinking kind of life at courts; and yet they will all be good Christians.”<sup>10</sup> This recount shows a friendly but political dinner between Luther and the princes and should dispel any thoughts that Luther did not hold some secular rulers, especially Lutheran princes, in the highest regard. The rulers with whom Luther took the most issue with were those who sought to suppress his beliefs or overstepped their legitimate authority such as the Papacy as well as those Luther felt were not sufficiently courageous. In his *Table Talk*, Luther is said to have stated that “Governors should be wise, of courageous spirit, and should know how to rule alone without their counsellors.”<sup>11</sup> This is a crucial sentence in understanding a second layer of discontent for those Luther referred to as Romanists. Luther’s belief that governors (that is, those who govern) should be wise and of courageous spirit also may be found in his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, where he issues a call for the German princes to act prudently and through petitions for God’s help. “Let us act wisely, therefore, and in the fear of God. . . . The popes and the Romans have hitherto been able, by the devil’s help, to set kings at odds with one another, and they may well be able to do it again, if we proceed by our own might and cunning, without God’s help.”<sup>12</sup> The lack of courage of the German nobility to stand up to the overreaching Papacy to date is in part what had prompted Luther to write the *Open Letter* in the first place. Beyond this, however, Luther needed the support of at least some of the German princes to protect him and promote his reform movement. In 1520, Luther had been declared a heretic by Pope Leo X, and the following year he had been placed under imperial ban by Charles V. Thus he desperately needed protection. And Luther also needed the support of secular leaders to further his Reformation in Germany and beyond.

Robert Kolb, professor emeritus at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, has pointed out another aspect of Luther’s thoughts on government by discussing Luther’s thinking in the years leading up to the Peasants’ War. “Luther’s fears of public disorder, coupled with his eschatological convictions that Satan was using rebellious peasants to disrupt the spread of the

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<sup>9</sup> Luther, *Secular Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Followed*, 229.

<sup>10</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 312.

<sup>11</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 309.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, trans. by C.M. Jacobs, in *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), 61-164 at 64-65.

Gospel, led him to fierce opposition to peasant revolts in 1524–6.”<sup>13</sup> As revolt began spreading across Germany, Luther quickly began to realize that peasants were misinterpreting what the Bible, or at least not interpreting the Bible in the way that believed they should do. Not only were the peasants misinterpreting the Bible, in Luther’s view, but they also were misinterpreting the ideas espoused by Luther in his treatises *On the Freedom of the Christian* (1520), in which Luther, following St. Paul, had written about spiritual freedom in Christ (but not freedom from the earthly obligations due to their secular lords), and *On Secular Authority*, in which Luther argued that, since secular authority is divinely ordained, one should never rise up in revolt against his overlord or prince, but at most passively disobey a command to violate godly law.

Thus in his treatise, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, Luther wrote, “Since, then, these peasants and wretched folk have let themselves be led astray, and do otherwise than they have promised, I too must write of them otherwise than I have written, and begin by setting their sin before them, as God commands Isaiah and Ezekiel, on the chance that some of them may learn to know themselves. Then I must instruct the rulers how they are to conduct themselves in these circumstances.”<sup>14</sup> Tom Scott writes that “in the summer of 1524 on the southern fringes of the Black Forest near the River Rhine and the border with the Swiss Confederation, according to contemporary accounts, the Peasants’ War, which was to convulse the whole of southern and central Germany and the Austrian lands over the following two years, broke out.”<sup>15</sup> The Peasants’ War showed Luther that the way peasants had been interpreting the Bible was completely wrong and he began to make concessions in his beliefs that everyone should have access to the Bible. The uprising also allowed Luther to realize that the German nobility were his allies and that he needed them in order to continue to preach his reformation. Luther needed their protection, support, and sometimes even their funds. Luther also began speaking highly of those in the German nobility who helped swiftly end the Peasants’ War and lowly of the peasants, as recorded in his *Table Talk*. “To the business of government appertain, not common, illiterate people, or servants, but champions; understanding, wise, and courageous men, who are to be trusted, and who aim at the common good and prosperity, not seeking their own gain and profit, or following their own desires, pleasures, and delights . . .”<sup>16</sup> This commentary also shows that Luther wanted to legitimize the princes and nobles in the eyes of the people. His position here, however, cast a long, dark shadow upon his reputation as a Reformer and advocate for the common man.

Luther also began making friends among the princes, the most famous of such friends was Frederick, Prince Elector of Saxony. Kolb observes that “. . . the process of indigenizing reform had been advancing at court and in the German countryside during the 1520s. [Thus]

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Kolb, “Martin Luther and the German Nation,” in *A Companion to the Reformation World* ed. R. Po-chia Hsia (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 39-55.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, 1525, in *Martin Luther (Documents of Modern History)*, ed. and trans. by E. G. Rupp and Benjamin Drewery (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), 121-6 at 123.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Scott, “The Peasant’s War,” in *A Companion to the Reformation World* ed. R. Po-chia Hsia (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 56-69.

<sup>16</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 310.

Elector Frederick hid Luther after his stand at Worms in his castle, the Wartburg.”<sup>17</sup> Luther could thank his prince for protection from his enemies, and this no doubt caused him to gain further respect for other German princes who seemed inclined to support his reforms.

Although he supported Luther and appears to have been supportive of his reforms, Elector Frederick did not see eye-to-eye with Luther on every aspect of religion. Elector Frederick kept a large, prized collection of religious relics while Luther railed against the emphasis that the Pope and other Catholics placed on relics. Opportunism was mainly the cause for Luther’s newfound dependence on secular rulers as he also indirectly challenged Elector Frederick’s reliance upon relics. In the eyes of Luther, Elector Frederick was courageous, wise, and self-controlled. As he reportedly stated in a dinner conversation, “I could well wish that Scipio, that much-honoured champion, were in heaven; he was able to govern and overcome himself, and to curb his mind, the highest and most laudable victory. Frederick, prince elector of Saxony, was another such prince; he could curb himself, though by nature of an angry mood.”<sup>18</sup> These were high praises from Luther who likened Elector Frederick to the resourceful general Scipio Africanus, who had commanded the Roman army in the defeat of Hannibal and the Carthaginian Army at the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE.

Aside from his need for protection and support of his reforms, why did Luther side with the princes against the peasants? Just what was at stake in the Peasant’s War? For Luther, the Peasant’s War clearly jeopardized nearly everything he had achieved in his quest to reform the Catholic Church. Luther rejected the claims that the peasants were making all things are free and common. As Luther explains in *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, “It does not help the peasants, when they pretend that, according to Genesis 1 and 2, all things were created free and common, and that all of us alike have been baptized. For under the New Testament Moses does not count; for there stands our Master, Christ, and subjects us, with our bodies and our property, to the emperor and the law of this world, when he says, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.’”<sup>19</sup> Secular authority had been sanctioned by Christ! Luther understood that, in order to preserve his reformation, he needed to honor Christ’s command and thereby preserve the order that stemmed from secular rulers.

Thousands of peasants were killed in the end as a result of the Peasant’s War, and Luther sanctioned these killings. He wrote, “I will not oppose a ruler who, even though he does not tolerate the Gospel, will smite and punish these peasants without offering to submit the case to judgement. For he is within his rights, since the peasants are not contending any longer for the Gospel . . . .”<sup>20</sup> Because the peasants were no longer “true believers,” Luther argued they should feel the wrath of the sword like other religious dissident. Beyond anything else, Luther knew that order bred a viable environment for his reformation and that with the Peasant’s War, that reformation had been placed in a vulnerable position. Thus, beyond his personal stance on

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<sup>17</sup> Kolb, “Martin Luther and the German Nation,” 46.

<sup>18</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 310.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, 124.

secular authority, Luther reluctantly called for the deaths of the peasants in order to maintain order and breed a favorable environment for his reformation to continue.

Even still, Luther was not beyond criticizing princes when he saw fit. “Princes, now-a-days, have no order in the administration of their household. Four imperial towns spend more in luxuries and junksettings in one day, than Solomon spent, throughout all his kingdom, in a month. They are poor creatures, these princes, well entitled to our compassion.”<sup>21</sup> Aside from princes who decided to interfere in the religious beliefs of their people (whom Luther disavowed), Luther also believed that any ruler was susceptible to corruption and that the people should pray for their rulers. “The magistracy is a necessary state in the world . . . ; therefore we ought to pray for magistrates, who may easily be corrupted and spoiled.”<sup>22</sup> Luther still recognized, at least in private, that those governing were corruptible. “Honours alter a man’s manners, and seldom for the better. The prince who governs without laws, according to his own brain, is a monster, worse than a wild beast; but he who governs according to the prescribed laws and rights, like unto God, who is an erector and founder of laws and rights.”<sup>23</sup> Kolb has further unpacked Luther’s point here: “He [Luther] affirmed that God effects everything in the realm of faith, the realm which involves the relationship between God and human creatures, while human love acts in the earthly realm, in required obedience to God when sin does not interfere.”<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, because the separation of the two kingdoms was the driving force behind Luther’s core belief that a government which stays out of the people’s religious affairs is a good government, at least to a certain extent. This assumes, of course, that religious leaders are doing their jobs properly and that the people are following them as well as their secular leaders. As seen during the Peasant’s War and also earlier in his *Address to the German Nobility*, however, Luther did see the need for secular government to become involved in religious affairs whenever it came to protecting the “true believers” and quelling an essentially heretical as well as anarchical uprising from the peasants. But the Two Kingdoms argument makes it a little harder to understand where Luther sees the role of God in secular government. Of course, as a devout Christian, Luther wants God at the center, although initially it seems as though he advocates for a complete separation of the two kingdoms. A passage from Luther’s treatise on temporal authority helps settle the waters, though:

It is to be noted first that the two classes of Adam’s children—the one in the God’s kingdom under Christ and the other in the kingdom of the world under the governing authority, as was said above—have two kinds of law. For every kingdom must have its own laws and statutes; without law no kingdom or government can survive, as everyday experience amply shows. The temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul. Therefore, where temporal authority presumes

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<sup>21</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 313.

<sup>22</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 309.

<sup>23</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 309.

<sup>24</sup> Kolb, “Martin Luther and the German Nation,” 47.

to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads souls and destroys them.<sup>25</sup>

Luther was putting forth a nuanced train of thought. In Luther's mind, secular government plays a vital role, but always takes a back seat to the larger picture involving God's Kingdom. God created the earth and everything therein, including secular government. This means that God's laws govern everything, including government. But some rights are reserved only for God so that he may properly rule over the soul of men. Here Luther was arguing against governments' enacting laws that might limit God's ability to rule over the soul and thus in turn affect a person's religious faith. "When a man-made law is imposed upon the soul to make it believe this or that as its human author may prescribe, there is certainly no word of God for it."<sup>26</sup> God is the ultimate spiritual authority and yet he is also the reason for secular law. No government should restrict him by imposing laws on the human soul, and no government should be without God's words in mind and heart when writing, enacting, and enforcing them.

Martin Luther was a controversial figure in his time; he pushed for religious reformation against a Catholic Church that he felt had lost touch with God's will. Luther was not just a religious figure; he was much more in the eyes of the commoner who helped Luther craft his mantra of being a man of the people, even when he was not advocating for the best interests of the commoners. Over the years, Luther's outlook on secular government changed from something that was important, but at least theoretically was not absolutely necessary, to something that he deemed absolutely essential and critical for the protection of God's people here on earth and the expansion of religious reform. The events that took place leading up to and during the Peasants' War of 1525 made Luther realize that he needed sovereign princes and nobles on his side in order to further his goals of church and religious reform.<sup>27</sup> In the end, however, in typical Luther fashion, he left everything up to God: "God deals with great potentates, kings, and princes, even as children with playing cards. While they have good cards, they hold them in their hands; when they have bad, get weary of them, and throw them under the chair; just so does God with great potentates: while they are governing well, he holds them for good; but so soon as they exceed, and govern ill, he throws them down from their seat . . ."<sup>28</sup> Thus the absolute sovereignty of God remained at the core of Luther's understanding of the Two Kingdoms.

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, trans. J. J. Schindel, rev. Walter I. Brandt, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, ed. and trans. Walter I. Brandt and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 81-129, at 105.

<sup>26</sup> Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, 105.

<sup>27</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 312.

<sup>28</sup> Hazlitt, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, 314.