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MODULE 7

Two Kingdoms and Two Regiments: Eschatological Identity and Historical Existence

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Objective and Content

The objective of this module is to understand the political and public nature of Luther's theology as expressed through the hermeneutical frame of the "two kingdoms and two regiments" doctrine. In doing so you will evaluate the reaches and limitations of such a doctrine for contemporary church and society, compare it with other political-theological frames, and explore the contextual implications for Christian discipleship, vocation and relations with the 'powers', communities and institutions in the world.

Some General Guidelines and questions for reflection

1. I start with Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms and the three estates.

On the one hand, one should not separate the secular and the spiritual as two spheres that coincide with certain institutional arrangements (Church and State, for example). He is referring mostly to two different ways in which God relates to humanity, especially considering the realities of love and power --righteousness, justice and sin

On the other, it is imperative to maintain a distinction between them, as we learn that the tasks and mediations of these two kingdoms are different, and how love interacts with power.

I find it helpful to think about the Two Kingdoms as God's twofold strategy, address, relation, with the human being as a total and social, wholistic being, that lives in situations of injustice and is called to a moral responsibility. God addresses us 'spiritually', that is, through words, signs, sacraments, stories, songs, community, that re-

frame our entire existences and identities. Luther often employs the term 'conscience' as the place where the 'spiritual' initially manifests itself, the reality of faith. The mediation is the Word and the Holy Spirit.

But as we know, there are no consciousness without bodies, and this is the 'secular' aspect that Luther also includes in his theory of the two kingdoms: God also addresses the conditions that make possible our existence as creatures in time and space, in society and history, namely through politics and economics, families and education, housing and health care, science and art, and so forth. Here, the mediation is power and its configurations.

So the spiritual is not a sphere separated from the secular, but is thoroughly intertwined with it. Hence 'secular' does not entail a reality that is far from God, or devoid of spirituality, but it refers to a dimension of our social and historical existence that relates to the production and reproduction of life.

2. As to the three orders or estates (church, authorities and family, which will be more developed in Altmann's reading), Luther of course is having in mind medieval sociological configurations. But it is helpful to understand that at bottom he is speaking about the three 'spheres', always overlapping, in which our human life takes place: religion, politics and economics.

We cannot be creatures, or fully creatures, when one of these is missing, falters, is abused, or destroyed. Thus our call as Christians to be for one another (and for others) not only in the realm of the church, but in the world as well. I like to see it as the 'wholistic' call and address of a 'whole' (triune) God embracing the whole of life.

Thus regarding the language with which Luther deals with God and world, spiritual and secular matters, church and state, etc., he employs a double set of categories: two kingdoms (regiments) and three estates. The consensus today is that Luther spoke more about the three estates than the two kingdoms.

As I mentioned, it is helpful for us today to understand these notion of estates not in a medieval-hierarchical sense (for example, Luther had no notion of democracy, and was very suspicious of popular movements), but as the spheres in and through which we realize our vocation as human beings. We cannot be creatures without these. And what is revolutionary in Luther is that God addresses the whole of human existence: a wholistic God addressing the whole of life.

If one has as a starting point this notion, then we can see that the spiritual and the secular are not confined to separate institutions (like church and state), but permeate every sphere. Our 'spiritual' life is also lived through the mediation (masks) of politics and economics.

Thus politics and economics are areas for human and Christian vocation. Politics, in particular, is an area of human transactions that is brought forth in order to both curtail the effects of sin, as well as to create the necessary space where humans can live together in relative justice and peace, in other words, in order to thrive.

Neither economics nor politics are the final bearers of God's kingdom; but the Kingdom of God is not devoid of the mediation of politics and economics.

3. What is the role of the church? Does it have anything to play in the realm of economics and politics? It is one of the tenets of Luther's theology that the church is not directly an economic or political agent/institution. For that we have the economic and political mediations. We cannot rule the world through the gospel, he repeatedly says.

However, the message, proclamation and practice of the church has always 'economical' and 'political' dimensions, in the sense that it conveys the promises of God to a wounded and broken creation. And therefore as Christians we seek to actively support institutions, movements and laws that are just and promote the flourishing of human beings and the environment, always in dialogue and partnership with other sectors of society. We are not a sect.

We cannot be creatures, carriers of God's image, without just and fair arrangements pertaining to the production and reproduction of life. How do we see the church today engaging these realities that mediate also God's activity in the world? This is something that I encourage you to focus in your responses.

I hope you find these texts inspiring, and I am looking forward to interact with you and your post during this week. All the best! God bless!

Further reading:

- Luther, Martin; "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed," in Walther Brandt, ed., *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962, pp. 75-129.
- Altmann, Walter; "The Reign of God in Church and State" in: *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*. Revised and Expanded Second Edition, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.
- Guillermo Hansen, "Economy and Grace: A Lutheran Approach to Money, Religion and Debt" in: *Global Perspectives on the Reformation. Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics*, A. Burghardt, S. Sinn (eds.), LWF Documentation No 61, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig, 2016, pp. 69-84.

