

Sermon Luther 1.5 [presented by Keith Barton at BFC on 02-04-2018]

Scripture: Romans 13:1-7, Mt 20:25-28.

Mt 20:25-28 [²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His [ⁿ]life [as] a ransom for many."]

Romans Chapter 13, verses 1-7. It is worth pointing out that the book of Romans was written in about the year 55, near the beginning of Nero's reign. One wonders if Paul would have modified it, had he known that (according to some sources) Nero would issue the order to have Paul killed about 12 years later. I have shortened this reading a bit. Paul writes:

Romans [13:1 **Every** [^a] **person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except** [^b] **from God, and those [governments] which exist are established by God.** ² **Therefore** [^c] **whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God;** and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ³ **For rulers are not a cause of fear for** [^d] **good behavior, but for evil.** Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴ for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. ⁵ **Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for [the sake of] conscience.** ⁶ For because of this you also

pay taxes, **for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.** ⁷ [So] render to all [authorities] what is due [to] them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

[The children can now leave.]

This is the 6th message devoted to the Reformation and the 5th and final segment focused on Martin Luther. Even so, we can never forget Luther altogether; he may keep reappearing over the next months.

There is a tremendous amount of material on Luther to cover, but I am primarily interested in features that will illuminate the distinctive aspects of our own Quaker denomination, which started toward the end of the Reformation period in northern England. My hope is that by understanding the Reformation, we will come to understand our own denomination's identity with more clarity and gratitude.

Previous sermons have explored two bedrock doctrinal slogans of the Reformation that were utilized by Martin Luther: *Sola Fide* and *Sola Scriptura*. In brief, Luther maintained that only faith and only scripture provide a secure foundation for Christian development. If you missed these sermons, they are available in a written format upon request.

Today, I want to examine two more doctrines that Luther promoted in his construction of the Reformation: *Simul justus et peccator* and "two kingdoms." Both doctrines are closely related to *Sola Fide*. "*Justus*" is the anthropology that grows out of *Sola Fide* while "two kingdoms" is the political application of *Sola Fide*.

I want to introduce *Justus* only briefly today, because it will come up again with John Calvin. If you ask most Lutherans today about the meaning of “*Justus et peccator*”, they will usually say, “A Christian is both saint and sinner.” That sounds realistic. After all, we all have a mix of good and bad qualities, strengths and weaknesses, so what could be more obvious than “both saint and sinner”? Perhaps God will accept our good qualities and forgive the bad ones at the final judgement. However, that’s not what Luther meant by the phrase *Justus et peccator*. Actually, for Luther – and even more emphatically for John Calvin – humans really have no good qualities whatsoever. In their view, we are all thoroughly wicked and depraved, and the only good thing we can do is to acknowledge our depravity. Many seemingly good qualities are a form of self-delusion and even to recognize our sin and depravity requires God’s grace. Given this perspective, it would be better to translate *Simul justus et peccator* as “simultaneously acquitted and depraved.” This is also closer to the meaning of the Latin words. We are intrinsically depraved, due to Original Sin, but nevertheless, we are acquitted in the final judgement through faith in the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to deliver us from sin. I’m sure that you have heard this doctrine before, and I will not attempt to go into great depth here.

This doctrine of human depravity comes, of course, from the apostle Paul, expressed most clearly in the book of Romans. If you want to examine this topic in more detail, come to the Bible study on Tuesday evenings, where we are under the tutelage of NT Wright, an Anglican bishop. NT Wright has some new ideas to bring to bear on the doctrine of human depravity in the letters of Paul. And that’s as far as I will go today with the doctrine of

"justus et peccator." Hopefully, we will return to this topic when we soon turn our attention to John Calvin.

The text from Romans, Chapter 13, that I read today is a key text for Luther's doctrine of "two kingdoms," and the gospel reading from Matthew supports the idea that Christians should treat each other differently than do the citizens of secular governments. What happens, however, when Christians actually run the secular government? That's a situation that Paul, certainly, never anticipated, but it is something that Luther confronted on a daily basis, and he formulated the doctrine of "two kingdoms" to resolve the tension between secular authority and Christian brotherhood. How did this work out in practice?

Luther maintained that the Kingdom of God co-exists with the secular kingdom of this world, represented by the governing authorities, who are instituted by God. For Luther, these two kingdoms operate by different rules, even though they occupy contiguous social spaces. In fact, every Christian participates in both kingdoms but has different roles to play in each. The kingdom of God is under direct control of God and is infused with God's grace, whereas the kingdom of this world is authorized by God, but it utilizes punishment and the sword to punish evil-doers, and it frequently resorts to warfare to achieve political goals. Whether they recognize it or not, most Christians today play by this same game-plan, and in some sense, it is unavoidable. Again, I am not trying to evaluate this doctrine in detail; I am simply describing it in the context of the 16th C.

As we noted previously, Luther recognized that the Reformation was completely dependent upon the support of the German princes to counterbalance the Pope and the Emperor. Without the support of these German magistrates, Luther himself would

have been carted off to Rome and burned at the stake for challenging the Church of Rome. We don't know how much this fact influenced Luther's doctrine of "two kingdoms," but aside from his personal risk in leading the Reformation, Luther was clearly dedicated to breathing new life into Christianity. Luther knew that the Reformation of the church would collapse without the support of governing authorities. The German princes in turn, needed Luther to formulate a theological argument for separating from the Church of Rome, which was extracting enormous wealth from northern Europe through the sale of indulgences. Were it not for this drain on the German economy, the German princes would not have exerted themselves on Luther's behalf; and Luther knew this. This generated a strong bond between Luther and the governing authorities. So it is not surprising that Luther's doctrine of "two kingdoms" granted the German secular authorities a great deal of discretion in governance. In fact, Luther placed virtually no restrictions on military force or state violence provided it was exercised by established authority. Luther did not invoke the Just War Doctrine as promoted by Augustine; he simply did not oppose war initiated by secular authority. On the other hand, Luther did maintain that the church should not engage in warfare; Luther condemned the Church of Rome for organizing the Crusades. Luther went so far as to oppose involvement by the church in the defense of Christian cities from invasion by the Ottoman Empire. However, Luther did not oppose the Emperor's efforts to organize military resistance to the Turkish invasion. While this distinction between the religious realm and the secular realm must have been perfectly clear to Luther, the doctrine of "two kingdoms" may seem arbitrary and artificial, since it gives contradictory advice to two groups of people, and many people belong to both groups. This also underscores Luther's penchant for paradox and dialectical tension.

The doctrine of "two kingdoms" was put to another test quite early in the Reformation during the Peasant War of 1524-5, and it reveals Luther in a decidedly different light. The German farmers and peasants were inspired by the Reformation to seek greater autonomy. They also had access to the New Testament, courtesy of Martin Luther and the Elector of Saxony. They could read for the first time what Jesus said, that Christians were not to exercise dominion over one another but were to serve one another. This created a powerful democratic impulse that swept over the German countryside, led in part by a minister, Thomas Muenster. This led to defiance of both aristocratic government and to clerical authority. Luther very soon had a full-fledged revolution on his hands, a mere seven years after he had posted the 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. And some people were blaming Luther for the rebellion. The outcome was that Luther decided to support the aristocracy against the peasants. With characteristic outrage, Luther wrote a pamphlet titled *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*. Perhaps Luther could anticipate the likely outcome of the rebellion, and perhaps he acted on his own class position. He also did not wish to be perceived as an anarchist, so Luther not only supported the German princes, but he roused them into battle and authorized them to slash and stab the unruly peasants into submission. It is estimated that about 100,000 peasants died in this war and the democratic impulse in Germany vanished until the revolutions of 1848, over 300 years later. But what does this indicate about the "two kingdoms" doctrine? It seems that Luther could cross back and forth between the religious and the secular kingdom whenever he wished.

[Given this history, it is not surprising that the revolutionaries of 1848 were intensely anti-clerical. Some of my own ancestors were refugees from that revolution, which was also brutally suppressed. Many of these German immigrants in the mid-19th C. remained hostile to the church for about 3 generations after they settled in Texas and other parts of the US.]

Even in the 16th C., Luther himself lost significant respect among the working classes of his day as a result of the Peasant's War and Luther's outspoken excitement of the aristocracy in crushing the rebellion. On the other hand, it solidified Luther's bond with the German princes and magistrates. A tight bond between church and state, persists in Germany to this day.

In this regard, Luther exemplified the deference to secular authority that Paul recommends in the 13th chapter of Romans. Like Paul, Luther was convinced that the End Times were at hand and that Jesus would soon return in the flesh. Anticipating the End Times often makes it easier to tolerate the imperfections of the present, if you think the present age won't last much longer.

We can also appreciate that Luther was caught in several predicaments. He had ignited a civil war between Protestants and Catholics which would burn for a century or more, and he had a class war on his hands. He could not afford to alienate the German aristocracy if he wanted to hold on to the Protestant church, and he could reasonably predict that the poorly equipped peasant bands would be no match of the military skills of the German aristocracy. So it is not surprising that he sided with the aristocracy, but he lost credibility by doing so.

But where does that leave us today? As we look back over history, we are neither optimistic about the prospects of armed

revolution nor are we content with the stratification of wealth and political power in our own society in our own era. We can appreciate Paul's admonition to offer deference to secular rulers, but it is not clear what this means if the secular ruler is Nero, Hitler, or a long list of less memorable despots. Moreover, Paul's expectation of a sudden eschaton is hard to sustain after nearly two millennia of non-fulfillment. Does this mean that we need to be willing to challenge secular authority in new and creative ways? Do we need a new vision or is the vision that Jesus offers us sufficient?

In contrast to Paul and to Luther, the early Quakers [and Anabaptists] were intent on advancing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, at least within their own ranks, and whenever possible for the wider society, without waiting for Jesus to return – or perhaps, precisely because Jesus **is already** a reality in this present life. This emphasis on a temporal Kingdom of God, here and now, can arouse strong opposition from other Christians who, like Paul and Luther, expect to see Jesus return in the flesh. Even so, the vast majority of early Quaker testimonies and values have quietly insinuated themselves into American society, without many people seeming to notice that Quakers were the first to promote them. I include here religious tolerance, the end of slavery, the decline of oaths, in particular the oath of allegiance, the obsolescence of hat honor and wearing of swords and insignias, and wider freedom of speech and expression.

This slow cultural transformation is perhaps the sweetest vindication for Quakers, even if it does not make the cover of *Time* magazine. "A little leaven can leaven the entire dough," as Jesus was fond of saying.

By contrast with the magisterial Reformation, as led by Luther and Calvin, which produced religious intolerance and civil war across Europe, the RSF was forged during the English Civil War and led to widespread religious toleration starting in 1689. Quakers had the opportunity to see the futility of war, the dangers of religious bigotry, and the frivolity of aristocracy. They had the advantage of hindsight on the religious wars that racked Europe during the 17th C. and they could appreciate the failure of the magisterial Reformation to improve the lives of ordinary working people. Quakers rejected war, aristocracy and religious narrow-mindedness. They supported each other in building an alternative subculture that attempted to practice the teachings of Jesus. And Quakers are still attempting many of those same things today.
