

## THE REVOLT AND THE WEDDING

An Essay on Social Ethics in the Perspective of  
Luther's Theology

by

Gerhard Forde

In 1525 Martin Luther did two things which introduce us dramatically and swiftly into the problem of social ethics in the perspective of the Reformation. He took a brutally uncompromising stand against the Peasant's Revolt and he got married. Neither of these actions were, at the time, popular. As a matter of fact they very nearly wrecked Luther's cause. On the one hand, the peasants, unjustly oppressed and exploited for years by the princes, were quite naturally embittered and crushed by Luther's explosive rejection of their cause. And on the other hand, many of Luther's own followers did not think it seemly or opportune for the ex-monk to betake himself to the marriage bed right in the middle of all the uproar. Subsequent history too has not been able to complete favor on these actions — at least not on both of them. Though the passage of time has brought a somewhat grudging approval of the marriage (such approval coming rather belatedly, however, from some of his latter-day colleagues!), it has brought only increasing antipathy to the stand on the Peasant's Revolt.

It is not going to be my purpose in this essay to attempt a defense of these actions of Luther's — certainly not to defend his final action against the peasants. What I would like to do, however, is to use these actions to get at the principles behind Luther's decision — to discover, if we can, how his theology influenced his decisions in the sphere of social ethics. I have chosen these two actions quite deliberately. For in the first place, it would seem that a man would have to be impelled pretty strongly by principle to act in a way which seemed contrary to the best interest of his own cause. And in the second place, the very fact that the actions are ambiguous and even rather embarrassing should warn us to approach with caution and prevent us simply from idolizing the Reformation and attempting to repristinate it wholesale today. We can learn a lot from the Reformation, but we can't simply imitate it; we can't transfer its insights to our problems today without really knowing what we are

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Dr. Gerhard O. Forde, Department of Church History, Luther Theological Seminary. B.A., Luther College; B.Th., Luther Theological Seminary; Th.D., Harvard University. Additional study in Luther research at Tübingen University. Teaching posts at St. Olaf College, Luther College and Luther Seminary. Member, board of directors and the editorial council of *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*. Author of book reviews and articles in *Theological Perspectives and Dialog*.

about. Thus, it is imperative for us to get behind the actions to the **principles** which informed them.

## I

The revolt and the wedding. History has damned Luther for his part in the one and praised him for the other. It has not generally been known, however, that the theological reason for both actions was the same, odd as that may seem. One does not usually get married for the same reason that one puts down a revolt! But the very oddity of it indicates that in spite of all the publicity Luther has gotten he still remains one of the least understood men in history. Why did he, the champion of Christian Liberty, the leader of a protest against centuries of ecclesiastical tradition, suddenly turn against the oppressed peasants? They could have turned the Reformation into a popular revolt against the entire "establishment," as we call it today. Was it because, as was said of him at the time, he was a "toady of the princes"? I think not. Anyone who does much reading in Luther soon discovers that he had neither love for nor fear of the princes as such. Why then? Because he was simply against revolt? That might come nearer to the truth. Quite naturally, as a medieval man, Luther believed in the authority of the **office** of the Prince and the Emperor and he simply had no confidence in a revolt led by the common man. There was, I suppose, no precedent for it and he simply could not fathom what it could mean. We who live in a world where Marx has made revolt a household word don't understand that, I suppose, and it is here where we today, no doubt, would raise our most vigorous criticisms. But more of that later.

But even the horror of revolt does not, it seems to me, get at the heart of Luther's actions in the matter. For that is really only a kind of political prejudice and not a **theological** principle as such. Indeed, when we look carefully at what Luther said and wrote about the Peasant's Revolt, we soon see that there is another theme which pulsates through it all and appears to be the theme which really drives him to act. That theme is what we today would call the eschatological. Luther believed that the end was near and that the Kingdom of God was about to break in. He believed that since, through the Reformation, the Gospel had been proclaimed abroad in the land, Satan was now launching a last and desperate attack to pervert that Gospel before the end came. And he saw in the Peasant's Revolt a manifestation of this Satanic attack, an attempt to pervert the Gospel once again into a system of tyranny.

For the fact is that the revolt, however just its cause, had gotten mixed up with various sorts of popular biblical piety. Some looked upon themselves as God's avengers sent to exterminate the godless. Many seemed to think they were going to bring in the Kingdom of God by force and set up once again a theocracy, like David of old.

Others seemed to have some sort of "New Jerusalem" in mind. But Luther saw this just as another variant of the medieval system he had been fighting. The Pope had claimed authority over temporal government so now also the peasants were taking up the sword in the name of the Gospel to set up their "Kingdom." They were using the Gospel to gain political advantage. For Luther this was of the devil. Satan, the old arch-enemy, was launching his most diabolical counter-attack to destroy everything for which the Reformation stood. Because of this and other things Luther thought the end was near.

Something more was at stake than simply politics. The Kingdom of God was about to dawn! Therefore his basic plea was for both parties, peasant and prince, to cease their senseless raging and repent before it was too late. It is true, he did call for the princes to put down the rebellion in what can only be called needlessly brutal language. But that has often obscured the fact that he also pleaded with the princes to stop their tyranny and act justly and reasonably toward their subjects. He even told them, on the eve of the revolt, that it was not merely peasants that were coming against them, but **God himself** who was resisting them in order to visit their raging upon them. The real point for Luther was that since the end was at hand, no one should be caught in an embarrassing or damning posture. The Princes should not be tyrannizing the people and the peasants should not be found with a sword at the throat of their brothers. We today are tempted to smile at this kind of naivete. But for a country which is living under the threat of riot perhaps the advice is not so bad. Do what you ought to be doing before it is too late!

It becomes quite evident to one who looks at his writings that in his attitude to social problems Luther was "listening to a different drummer." He did not have his gaze fixed in the first instance merely on **this** world and its problems. There is another Kingdom, the eschatological Kingdom of God, which also comes into view and which must be taken into account in making one's decisions on social and political issues.

But what does this mean? Does it mean that Luther must be classed as one of those "other-worldly" types so loudly lamented in Christian circles today? What does it mean to have your decisions in social ethics affected by that "other world," that "other" Kingdom? Here we should look at the other action of Luther's we have singled out for attention as a kind of parable of the way Luther responded. For what did he do when he thought the end was near? He got married! Now of all the ways to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God that is certainly not one which would occur to most! One would think that one should hasten off to Church or

perform some act of spiritual sublimation or something awfully pious to impress the deity when he shows up. But Luther got married! Why? Because, he reasoned, if God is coming, then a man ought to be found living as God intended him to live **on this earth**. He ought to be found being a human being, doing human things and taking care of the earth as God intended — not acting as though he were some sort of minor league God. He got married precisely in those tempestuous times because that was one of the ways he thought he could give his old enemy the devil fits. He could complete the movement from the monastery to the world and refuse to parade as the pious fraud everyone expected him to be. "I shall take care," he said in a letter to John Ruehel at Mansfeld (June 15, 1525), "that at my end I shall be found in the state for which God created me with nothing of my previous papal life about me. I shall do my part even if they [i.e., princes, parsons and peasants] act still more foolishly up to the last farewell." His marriage, he expected, would make the angels laugh and the devils weep. (Letter to Spalatin, June 16, 1525).

One should note carefully the direction in which Luther is moving. At the very time when one would expect him to be going in the other direction — from the "secular" to the "sacred," from this world to the next — he is in fact moving more and more into this world! And those who don't understand that, he would insist, just don't know what it means to believe. "It pleases me, . . .," he said, "to have my marriage condemned by those who are ignorant of God." The fact of the other Kingdom and even the threat of its nearness did not drive Luther into the **other** world, it drove him all the more surely into **this** world. This is the reason for the story often attributed to Luther to the effect that if he knew the world was to end tomorrow he would go out into his garden and plant a tree. For the idea is that when God comes, man ought to be found doing what God intended him to do — taking care of "the garden."

Thus, the theological reason for the marriage is the same as for the reaction to the revolt. Precisely because of that other eschatological Kingdom on the horizon men ought to be about their business as human beings. Both prince and peasant ought to be about their proper business in justice and love. And in view of the coming end, one must put an end to all pretension, pious or otherwise, and live as the good Lord intended. For Luther personally that meant completing the movement from the monastery to the world, i.e., his marriage.

## II

Now there is certainly no need for us to absolutize these two decisions as such — no need, certainly, to say that a Christian is one who is against revolt and for marriage! That is hardly enlightening!

But it is important, I think, to see the principle behind the actions and how it functions. In Lutheranism this principle has been known traditionally as the "Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms." This is the basic principle behind Luther's view of social ethics for it is in the light of the interaction of two Kingdoms, this age and "the coming age," that Luther made all his ethical decisions. The idea is, for Luther, that God administers the affairs of this earth through a kind of two-fold rule, through two Kingdoms; the one is most appropriately called, I think, the secular or political kingdom, and the other, the eschatological. Both of these Kingdoms, note, are God's: both the secular and the eschatological. The only ultimate enemy is Satan. But it is in the secular where man now lives and must engage himself socially and politically. The eschatological Kingdom comes as the end or limit to the secular when and where God wills.

Those names, the secular and the eschatological, are not the names Luther used for the two Kingdoms. I have chosen them, however, because I think they convey better in our time what is at stake. For the fact is that when we come to talk about the two Kingdoms today we must exercise extreme caution. We have tended to understand them far too statically and the sins that have been committed and still are being committed in the name of the two Kingdoms are legion. The Doctrine has been identified, for instance, with the separation between church and state conceived as static entities, an idea which has been used to justify all sorts of social crime and injustice. On the one hand it is used to excuse the Church and Christians from social activity and on the other, to prevent the Church from exercising a prophetic role in society. It was used, for instance, in Nazi Germany by some to excuse Christians for their inactivity when millions of Jews were slaughtered. It has been and still is being used today to sanction a separation between Church and state which forbids the Church, its members or its spokesmen, to exercise a prophetic role in protesting the social ills of our nation. For this reason the very idea of a doctrine of two Kingdoms has come under heavy theological attack in our time. And rightly so. For if we are to use this principle today we must understand what we are about. Frankly, I am one who believes that to be a Christian involves one necessarily in the kind of tension in which Luther found himself — in a tension or dialectic between this age, this **saeculum**, and the next, God's eschatological Kingdom, — and that therefore it is impossible to avoid some sort of two Kingdoms doctrine. But if that is so, then we must take extreme care so that all know what we are doing.

That is why I have chosen to call the two Kingdoms the secular and the eschatological, this age and the next. But that means their interaction must be conceived in a much more dynamic manner.

Note carefully: it is not state **versus** church (although some such separation may be a **consequence** of the two Kingdoms doctrine). Nor is it the earthly **versus** the heavenly; nor the worldly **versus** the spiritual; not even the secular **versus** the sacred. For when we look at Luther's actions in the revolt and the wedding it becomes apparent that the doctrine of the two Kingdoms as Luther conceived it is not the kind of idea one would ordinarily hit upon. Luther's understanding of the matter is entirely controlled by his belief in God's eschatological action. God's eschatological Kingdom is a Kingdom entirely of grace. There is nothing men can do on their own to bring in or break into that Kingdom. One participates in the reality of that Kingdom only by faith and anticipates it by hope. And it is only because of that faith and that hope that one even begins to see two Kingdoms at all. In other words, it is only because of the eschatological Kingdom that one begins really to see the secular kingdom, and to see it for the first time as God's other kingdom where one must now live and act.

Before faith, the secular was hidden and ambiguous. It was always contrasted unfavorably with "the sacred," a realm which was **really** supposed to be the object of man's striving. Before the advent of eschatological faith we don't know whether we have a right to live secular lives. That is why Luther's marriage is such an interesting parable of what is involved. Because of his eschatological faith he was driven back into the secular and it is the secular that **becomes** the sacred. As he said in a letter to Spalatin (June 16, 1525), "The world and its wise men have not yet seen how pious and sacred marriage is, but they consider it impious and devilish in me." The world and its wise men are not even aware of the sacredness of the secular. Because without faith, they believe that man's task is to be on his way to some other world. It is only the eschatological which lights up the secular and reveals its sacredness. That, it seems to me, is the real bite of the doctrine of the two Kingdoms and it is that which stands behind Luther's view of social ethics.

### III

When we see this secular-eschatological dialectic it becomes apparent, I think, why we get into trouble so often trying to understand and apply Luther's doctrine of the two Kingdoms. The problem does not lie where most critics attempt to locate it. The problem does not lie in the **fact** that Luther made a distinction between two Kingdoms. The problem lies rather in the fact that the world already has a whole variety of two Kingdom doctrines of its own with which the reformation view almost inevitably gets entangled and confused. The world, for instance, already has its own view of the secular versus the sacred. The world already has its own ideas about the material versus the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, the real

and the ideal and so on endlessly. The world has its own ideas about how religious people ought to act. And our inevitable tendency is to get sucked in by one of the doctrines all ready-made by the world. And that holds whether we **plan** to be religious or not.

What vitiates our efforts in the sphere of social justice more than anything else is precisely the "two Kingdoms" doctrine which we already hold — a doctrine which is really pseudo, a fake. It is our dream of some better place, our longing for a "utopia" (in the Greek: ou-topos, no-place!). And we think we are going to reach this other place, this other Kingdom by the application of some magic formula, something like *laissez faire*, perhaps, or "free enterprise and individual initiative," or even a "proletarian revolution." We are always going someplace else. We are heading towards a world "safe for democracy," or a "classless society." Always it is not taking care of people, human beings, that is important, it is the myth, the piety, for which we can, if need be, sacrifice and slaughter millions. What is going on in Vietnam today if it is not to a large degree simply the sacrificing of thousands daily on the altars of our mythologies? Not only that but here at home we tyrannize our fellow men, shut the black man out of our society, beat down the underprivileged, tear up the earth, deface it and turn it into one vast garbage dump. Why? Because of our myths! The answer we get is some muttering about free competition or states' rights or individual initiative — even ideas which once worked become ideologies, myths, with which we attempt to cover our sins. Caring for human beings or for this world is not our aim. We are always on our way to some "better world" under the cover of our mythologies. And if we can top this all off either by drawing the Church into it or by stilling the voice of prophetic criticism by saying that the Church has nothing to say in such matters, then we will "have it made."

But this is precisely what a real doctrine of two Kingdoms refuses to allow. Its great contribution to the problem of social ethics is exactly to strip men of their mythologies. For the very fact that it insists that whatever other Kingdom there is, the eschatological, comes solely and absolutely by God's power alone means that the only real task for men is to repent, to turn around and take care of this world as best they know how — without myth, but with reason, love and justice; to be pragmatic: to solve problems concretely. The eschatological vision makes it clear that the secular is our sacred task. It tears the mask from our pretensions and bids us become human beings. That, I think, is the real significance of Luther's resistance to the Peasant's Revolt, whatever we may think of his final action. He saw quite clearly that if one is to apply this principle, then there could be absolutely no exceptions. Not even those who undertake revolutions for the sake of so-called "Christian

iples" can be excepted. Nobody, Prince, Peasant, Preacher,udent or what have you, carries out a revolution or a politicalram in the name of Christ. That is so first of all because Lutherorically refused to allow Christ to become a club with whichat anyone (a "New Law" as he called it), and secondly becauseutions and political programs can be carried through only in thee of humanity without appeal to either myth or religion. Lutherns that quite radically. You don't need Christ, or even the Bible,ssarily, to tell you what to do in social matters. You have aon, use it! That is why he told the peasants that if they mustilt, then they must not do it under the name of Christ but ratherer the name of nature and reason. If they did not surrendername of Christ, Luther said he would be their implacable foe.

The real battle, it is essential to see, is for true secularity, thestence that social problems must be worked out without myth,ording to what is the human thing to do. The eschatological visionects us to our human task. And it really does not matter whether, Luther, we expect this Kingdom momentarily or later. The taskhe same: to be human, to care for human beings and to take carehis earth.

This means that the Christian and the Christian Church as aole has a mandate of the highest order in the realm of socialjustice. We must watch over the care of human beings — not justurch people, or Lutherans, or white people, but human beings. e Church's task is to "keep the faith" with this *saeculum*, thise, this world, until the end. That means that wherever political,conomic, or social processes or institutions become inhuman theurch has the duty to protest — not, to be sure, because it wantspropose some kind of "Christian" program, or to confuse Churchd state — not, that is, in the name of Christ, — but rather becauseits faith and hope in Christ and His Kingdom in the name ofmunity.

The Church must be vigilant and sharp-eyed in order to spy outd expose the mythologies we use to tyrannize our fellow men. his, it seems to me, is the way Luther tried to operate in the realmf social ethics. There is absolutely no warrant in Luther's thoughtor the idea that the Church should keep silent on matters of socialjustice. Anyone who reads him will discover that. He may have hadis faults, but keeping silent was not one of them! He may not always have been right nor even edifying (usually entertaining, howver!) but he generally had something to say. And always, it seemso me, he attempted to expose the pious pretensions, to destroy theynth which threatened to tyrannize man. This, incidentally, is theoint at which the Church in Nazi Germany should have resisted thesacrifice of the Jews. For that certainly was an overt case of sacri-

ficing human beings for the sake of a mythology — the "purity ofthe race" and the "Thousand-year Reich," a deliberate paraphrase ofthe eschatological Kingdom of the Bible.

#### IV

It is at this point too before we close the matter that we mustmake some criticisms of Luther himself and raise some questionsabout some of the mythologies which Luther himself did not quite succeed in getting rid of. He saw quite clearly that revolt in the name of Christ is not permissible and in this he gave us a principle which should never be forgotten. But coming out of the middle ages he did not see clearly enough, I think, that such a principle cannot be extended to a blanket condemnation of all revolt. He did not see clearly enough that one can make a mythology out of the status quo as well which can become fully as oppressive and tyrannical and that it simply won't do to identify God's authority as closely with the existing political authorities as he did in the case of the Princes. He did not see clearly enough how the existing authorities can cleverly twist religion to their own advantage and use it to sanctify their own tyranny. It simply was not enough, as history has shown, to exhort the Princes to cease their tyranny, because they too were possessed by a mythology, the mythology of their own "divine right." In short, Luther did not realize that there are times when a revolt may be the human thing to do. If he had, perhaps his final judgment on the Peasant's Revolt would have been more charitable.

But this would only mean, it seems to me, that one would be using Luther's own principle to correct one of his own blind spots — extending it, so to speak, to cover a mythology he did not discern. For he did suffer from a rather massive mythology of the status quo. And it is of utmost importance to see this today, especially for those who consider themselves his disciples or who wish to follow in his steps. For this has been an affliction from which we have suffered too long and we simply must get rid of it. It is, more than any other, the disease from which our country is suffering today. It must be expunged.

In the perspective of the theology of the Reformation, therefore, the goal is to discover what it means to act and live in a truly human and secular fashion. Talk of "the secular" is, I realize, all the rage in theological circles today. It might seem, I suppose, as though this essay represents just a kind of me-tooism — an attempt to help Luther and the Reformation onto the contemporary band wagon. No doubt there is some of that. But I think nevertheless that the original impetus to such "secularization" can be seen quite clearly to have come from Luther himself and I believe that when all the

fadism has disappeared it will be a theology like Luther's which continues to support and press the issue. Quite frankly, I have no confidence in the many so-called radical and secular theologies which are dressing ecclesiastical shop-windows these days. They will pass. For it takes faith to live a truly secular existence, faith in that "other" Kingdom which comes when and where God wills. It takes a faith strong enough to turn us around and make us look into the eyes of our fellow human beings, strong enough to make and to keep us human. And that is the point. For if it seemed useful to God to try that way, to try becoming truly human, perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea for us to try it too.