

# A TALE OF TWO KINGDOMS: SOME CRITICS OF THE LUTHERAN DOCTRINE OF TWO KINGDOMS<sup>1</sup>

*by J. Mark Beach*

## 1. Introduction

A PORTION OF this essay first saw life as a speech under the title, “The Two Kingdoms: A Lutheran or a Reformed Idea?” Of course, the question posed in that title holds little suspense as such, for anyone familiar with the rudiments of Luther’s and Calvin’s theologies knows that each Reformer taught a doctrine of the two kingdoms.<sup>2</sup> The suspense, if we may call it that, has to do with the content each writer poured into the doctrine. Even a casual perusal of the secondary literature on Luther’s and Calvin’s thought reveals that whereas there is an abundance of resources that examine Luther’s doctrine of “the two kingdoms,” by comparison, there is a paucity of materials that explore Calvin’s understanding of this subject. Certainly there is no lack of books and articles that treat Calvin’s understanding of church and state, along with the role and responsibility of the civil magistrate—all of which note that Calvin clearly taught a doctrine of a twofold government of God, by means of which God through the state orders human life in general and through the church governs believers in their life of faith in particular. Consequently, in broadest outline, Luther’s and Calvin’s doctrines of the two kingdoms overlap at numerous points and similarly address many common issues. Nonetheless, a doctrine of “two kingdoms” comes to something different in Luther’s thought than it does in Calvin’s. The implications of a doctrine of two kingdoms, as formulated by Luther, also functions differently in the whole of his theological project than what we find in Cal-

---

1. This article is a revision of a portion of a speech given at the Alumni Conference at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on April 8, 2014 under the title “The Two Kingdoms: A Lutheran or a Reformed Idea?”

2. It is without controversy to affirm that Luther and Calvin both affirm that God rules under a twofold government, a rule by Word and Spirit for the church and another rule, by means of coercion, through the state. That agreement, however, does not mean that the Reformed and Lutheran traditions understand these concepts in the same way, with the same import and implications; neither does it mean that the doctrine of the two kingdoms has the same effect within their respective traditions.

vin's thought. Likewise, what the Christian life involves in the public sphere is different for Luther than for Calvin. These differences have subsequently revealed themselves in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions respectively.

Indeed, as has been frequently noted, an unforeseen implication of the Lutheran understanding of the two-kingdoms doctrine emerged with Hitler's rise to power and the ideology of National Socialism. The German Christians, accustomed to a Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, readily capitulated to *Der Führer* and accommodated the church to function in support of the state. However, the confessing church viewed matters quite differently. This difference was aptly expressed in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words of resistance, when he said: we must deny "that there are God-willed autonomous spheres of life which are exempt from the lordship of Christ, and do not need to listen to this Word. What belongs to Christ is not a holy sacred district of the world, but the whole world."<sup>3</sup>

Bonhoeffer's statement is exactly to the point. He gets at the nub of the matter, for *the scope of the lordship of Christ* is the point at issue. Here we need to be clear. The issue isn't the scope of God's kingship as the triune God—his providential sovereignty over all things. The issue is the scope of Jesus Christ's kingship as the incarnate Mediator, who, as *the Christ*, bears the office of prophet, priest, and king. Bonhoeffer's point is that there is no part or parcel of life exempt from his lordship, no realm or sphere which is excused from the directive of his Word, for life may not be split between sacred church-turf and secular world-turf, as if Christ's kingship lays claim to the church while the world proceeds independent of him.

The salient features of the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms, with its weaknesses, have been examined by a variety of theological voices—some sympathetic to the Lutheran view, others quite critical of it.<sup>4</sup> This essay aims to listen to four such voices in order to spot-

---

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Werke* 11, p. 331, quoted from Heinz Eduard Tödt, *Authentic Faith: Bonhoeffer's Theological Ethics in Context*, trans. David Stassen and Ilse Tödt, ed. Glen Harold Stassen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 123. For a comprehensive treatment of these issues, see Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962).

4. Besides the sources we will consider below, a select list, amid the vast literature that treats Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, includes Jaroslav Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric: The Sermon on the Mount as Message and as Model in Augustine, Chrysostom, and Luther* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001); F. Edward Cranz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society* (1959; repr., Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1998), 113-178, especially 159-173; William J. Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism*, Texts & Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, ed. Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 314-324; David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 112-125; Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 111-129; Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther:*

light the particular characteristics of this doctrine and to expose the hazards to which it is prone. For this purpose we will examine four renowned thinkers and their respective assessments of the Lutheran perspective, namely Reinhold Niebuhr, Helmut Thielicke, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Herman Bavinck.

In what follows, I will sketch the views of these critics, noting that each offers a distinct accent of censure. I have labeled Niebuhr a *severe* critic, Thielicke a *reluctant* critic, Pannenberg a *sober* critic, and Bavinck a distinctly *Reformed* critic. This analysis is followed by a brief summary/synthesis of concerns and problems that plague the Lutheran conception of two kingdoms.

An *addendum* is attached to this essay: a portion of a speech by Herman Bavinck entitled “The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations.” That essay, though dated in various ways, further explores specific weaknesses of the Lutheran approach to social ethics, with its abridged conception of Christ’s royal lordship.

## 2. Critics of the Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms

### 2.1. Reinhold Niebuhr—a severe critic

Karl Barth, with the outbreak of World War II, blasted Luther’s ideas on political authority for being the source of Hitler’s tyranny, “the bad dream of the German pagan who has been Christianized in Lutheran fashion.”<sup>5</sup> While Barth was Swiss, ousted from Germany under Hitler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was German, and he accused Luther of giving us a political covenant between church and state that resulted in a “minimal ethic of inner-worldliness.”<sup>6</sup>

An equally sharp critic of Luther’s social ethics, and thus his understanding of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, was the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>7</sup> He regarded Luther’s doctrine as of-

---

*An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 175-209; Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon, vol. 2 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 515-576.

5. Barth wrote this in a letter to a French pastor in 1939, printed in *Eine Schweizer Stimme*, 113, quoted from Gritsch, *Martin—God’s Court Jester*, 112.

6. From *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928-1936, The Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 324. Quoted in Gritsch, *Martin—God’s Court Jester*, 112.

7. See especially Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Volume Two—Human Destiny* (1943; repr., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 184-198. On Niebuhr’s life and thought, see Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); Charles Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); and Hans Hofmann, *The*

fering a “curiously perverse morality,” centered in a “perfectionistic private ethic in juxtaposition to a realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic,” a distinction which encourages tyranny.<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr recognizes that Luther’s ethic is motivated by love and gratitude to God. Said Luther: “Thus from faith flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a cheerful willing free spirit, disposed to serve our neighbour voluntarily, without taking into account any gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. Its object is not to lay men under obligation, nor does it distinguish between friends or enemies ... but most freely spends its goods, whether it loses them through ingratitude or gains goodwill.”<sup>9</sup> It is Christian *agape* that motivates Luther’s ethic here. Luther is not allergic to good works, not at all—his passion is to banish good works from our justification, not from the Christian life.<sup>10</sup> The role of the love commandment is far more pronounced in Luther than in Calvin.<sup>11</sup>

Niebuhr warmly endorses Luther’s ethic at this point; nonetheless, his “quietistic tendencies” soon surface, so that “without works” in the matter of justification devolves into “without action” in matters of social justice in the political sphere.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, all ethical activity runs the danger of trying to reach up into heaven as works-righteousness; but the Reformers knew that danger was better than monastic sequestering of the self from the world. Indolence isn’t a holier option than action.<sup>13</sup>

Neighbor love, argues Niebuhr, ought to press us to social concern, to wider circles of life, to live out the golden rule, which means we recognize injustice in social situations, and this precisely because of our justification and sanctification. Such love is integral to the life of grace. A sense of moral “ought,” born of grace and new life, is not legalism.<sup>14</sup>

When Luther’s quietism or “inaction” is coupled with his law/gospel paradigm, life is effectively split in two, despite Luther’s neighbor-love ethic. For Luther, and the Lutheran tradition, the kingdom of God and the demands of love are not relevant to the civil kingdom and the temporal government. Thus, neither of these is seen sufficiently to impinge on each and every social situation in the tap-

*Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956).

8. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 186.

9. Luther, *On Christian Liberty*, p. 261; quoted from Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 186.

10. Luther, *On Christian Liberty*, 275; quoted from Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 186.

11. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 186-187.

12. “Quietism,” as used here and elsewhere, has the idea of accepting the status quo, being politically and socially passive, a withdrawal and passivity toward worldly affairs and especially worldly-political affairs.

13. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 188.

14. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 189-190.

estry of human life. In fact, Niebuhr points out, this is something Luther denies explicitly:

“The way to discern the difference [between law and gospel],” declares Luther, “is to place the gospel in heaven and the law on the earth: to call the righteousness of the gospel heavenly, and the righteousness of the law earthly and to put as great a difference between [them] as God hath made between heaven and earth.... Wherefore if the question be concerning the matter of faith and conscience let us utterly exclude the law and leave the earth.... Contrariwise in civil policy obedience to law must be severely required. There nothing *must be known* concerning the conscience, the Gospel, grace, remission of sins, heavenly righteousness or Christ himself; but Moses only with the law and the works thereof.”<sup>15</sup>

“Here,” writes Niebuhr, “we have the complete severance between the final experience of grace and all the proximate possibilities of liberty and justice, which must be achieved in history. This principle of separation leads to a denial that liberty can have any other meaning for the Christian than liberty from ‘God’s everlasting wrath....’”<sup>16</sup> We are free in our conscience before God, not fearing his wrath, nothing beyond or otherwise than that.

A social ethic with social obligations is not part of this package. Hence, when the peasants sought some social justice, Luther urges them to Christian piety in their private lives; even as he urged the civil authorities to crush this revolt with all their might. Luther clearly split and segmented off the spiritual kingdom from the worldly one. Luther had no belly for the abolition of serfdom and the notion of the equality of all persons. This would make the worldly kingdom into something like the spiritual kingdom of Christ. Impossible! Luther considered it a malicious and evil thought to apply the principle of our freedom in Christ, and equality, to the civil, social realm.<sup>17</sup> Commenting on Psalm 101:7, he writes:

Therefore I have no sympathy for Master Smart Aleck, who wants to correct secular laws, or for all those who want to do it better. Sometimes it seems to me that the government and jurists may well be in need of a Luther, but I am worried that they might get a Münzer. God does not esteem the secular government [temporal realm] as highly as His own eternal

---

15. Luther, *Comm. Galatians*, xciii.; quoted from Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 192.

16. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 193.

17. *Luthers Werke*, vol. 18 (Weimar ed.) 326, 333; cf. *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958—), vol. 13: 161.

government in the church [spiritual realm]; therefore I cannot and will not hope that they may get a Luther. Because there is no hope of getting another government in the Roman Empire...it is not advisable to change it. Rather, let him who is able darn and patch it up as long as we live; let him punish the abuse and put bandages and ointment on the smallpox.<sup>18</sup>

The inner and outer kingdom functioned in a manner that produced a distinction between a public and private morality. Niebuhr elaborates:

“By thus transposing an ‘inner’ ethic into a private one, and making the ‘outer’ or ‘earthly’ ethic authoritative for government, Luther achieves a curiously perverse social morality. He places a perfectionist private ethic in juxtaposition to a realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic. He demands that the state maintain order without too scrupulous a regard for justice; yet he asks suffering and nonresistant love of the individual without allowing him to participate in the claims and counter-claims which constitute the stuff of social justice. The inevitable consequence of such an ethic is to encourage tyranny; for resistance to government is as important a principle of justice as maintenance of government.”<sup>19</sup>

This has had “a fateful consequence in the history of German civilization.”<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr reminds us that Paul’s injunction (in Romans 13:1-3) can be misapplied; for rulers, contrary to the words of the apostle, can indeed be a terror to those who do good and reward those who do evil. The Third Reich was a recent example.

But even without a Hitler, “the Lutheran political ethic would have led to defeatism in the field of social politics. Its absolute distinction between the ‘heavenly’ or ‘spiritual’ kingdom and the ‘earthly’ one, destroys the tension between final demands of God upon the conscience, and all the relative possibilities of realizing the good in history.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, since the common kingdom, as the popular phrase has it today, is not the kingdom of Christ, since it is doomed to fail and come to nothing, we need make no attempts to remedy social evils. This is a defeatist ethic. If I can’t have the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I will not settle for relative degrees of truth. If I cannot achieve white in the social realm, I will not attempt shades of gray that are getting closer to white.

---

18. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13: 217.

19. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 194-195.

20. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 195.

21. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 195.

Certainly Luther believed magistrates should do this, but that is their concern, not, say, an oppressed Christian peasant's concern or a theologian's concern. Luther's split-ethic allows the social conscience to be lifted of its burden—via forgiveness of sins and justification by grace alone—and thus to permit sin and sinning so that grace may abound. In short, this beautiful doctrine is trumpeted in such a way as to lead to a complacent acceptance of all injustice. Love of neighbor is without action in this regard. Then, too, Luther couldn't conceive the a-theistic assumptions that govern the state today versus the Christian presumptions that governed his political ideas relative to two kingdoms.

Luther certainly believed in "relative justice," but the church didn't have anything to say about it, not specifically. The Lutheran view, in this regard, cannot offer consistent criteria for the achievement of relative justice. Life presses in on us, in spite of justification and hopes of glory, and we are forced to erect some standards of relative good in society and political life.<sup>22</sup> Natural law is the usual contender to be the guide in these matters, but natural law must be discerned, interpreted, applied, principles extrapolated and administered, and all that is done by selfish, stingy lawyers and civil authorities who easily pervert justice in order to advantage themselves. An appeal to natural law is not some benign plea—that settles it, all agree, pound the gavel, next!

Human reason is corrupted, governed so very much by a heart under the plague of rebellion and innumerable twisted depravities. An appeal to "orders of creation" or "creational ordinances" labor under the same burdens as an appeal to natural law.<sup>23</sup> Not that the appeal is illegitimate; not at all. Only, the appeal isn't benign or neutral. The same is true for an appeal to Scripture. Each and all appeals to such authorities have to be interpreted; not everyone will agree with a given interpretation. Meanwhile, the interpreters bring their own baggage to the task—which means, we easily transmute and alter what is clearly there because we jolly well know what we *don't want* to be there—and so, well, it jolly well *isn't there*.

## 2.2. Helmut Thielicke—a reluctant critic

The Lutheran two-kingdoms ethic has met critiques on both sides of the Atlantic. Unlike Niebuhr, who was American, Helmut Thielicke was German and Lutheran. Not surprisingly, Thielicke seeks to rescue the Lutheran tradition from the negative assessment it has received from a variety of writers, like Niebuhr, as well as writers like

---

22. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 197.

23. See Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 197-198.

Ernst Troeltsch.<sup>24</sup> What is also not surprising is that Thielicke offers some typically Lutheran criticisms of the Reformed position. Thielicke's analysis and sympathetic evaluation of the Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine helpfully shows that, over against the Reformed tradition, the Lutheran doctrine comes to a different understanding of the Christian's calling in the world and of the lordship of Christ in the whole of life.

Thielicke specifically focuses on recent critiques of Luther on the two kingdoms. He acknowledges that there is much recent scholarship which argues that whereas Calvinism has a reputation for "activism," Lutheranism is characterized by "quietism." This difference between them is even sensed by persons who do not have a grasp of the "underlying theological differences" between Lutherans and Calvinists.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, the portrait is overblown and oversimplified, but it is true that Lutheranism is viewed as politically passive, while Calvinism, by contrast, "shows an incomparably greater and more active interest in politics, being concerned to bring it under a religious norm and control."<sup>26</sup>

Thielicke notes that this difference became manifest or worked itself out in the 1930s, with Lutheran passivity helping to give rise to "the Hitler state," the German Christians being complicitous with the rise of Nazism. The Reformed leaders, on the contrary, championed opposition theologically and strategically. At best, a few pockets within Lutheranism offered some defensive resistance, while the Reformed took the offensive. Says, Thielicke: "on the whole the characterization is correct."<sup>27</sup>

Why this difference? After all, Lutheran and Reformed alike have the language of two kingdoms or two governments—church and state. Both view God as restraining the forces of sin and evil by means of the sword which the state wields. Both see the church's mission being that of propagating the gospel in preaching, with the sacraments aiding the Word. Both recognize a kingdom of darkness, Satan's evil reign, waging war against the church as the kingdom of Christ. So, what accounts for this difference?

First, Thielicke, in view of the above mentioned characterization—and agreeing with it in part—notes that the Reformed see God's dominion exercised not only in the church but also in the state—yes, both church and state remain distinct from the other, but each is directly an expression of God's dominion. For the Reformed, the di-

---

24. See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931; reprint 1960), 515-576. See Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), s.v., "Thielicke, Helmut."

25. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, ed. William H. Lazarth, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 2: 565.

26. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 565.

27. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 565.

vine Word declares God's will as "sovereign over both kingdoms" and each are called to "serve his glory." The church, therefore, has the task to examine how the state conducts its affairs—not to interfere but to exhort it to proper action, to urge it to conduct itself in keeping with God's commandments; even as the state must support the gospel, protect it, and uphold true religion and thwart false religion.<sup>28</sup>

Although this stance has been modified by many Reformed churches, it is still the case that the Reformed believe they must offer resistance to tyranny, especially if the state hinders the preaching of the Word or in other ways compromise God's commandments. Thielicke points to Abraham Kuyper's *Stone Lectures on Calvinism* wherein Kuyper traces out certain sorts of revolutions which have arisen in Reformed lands, with a defense of rights and freedoms. This does not track with Lutheranism Thielicke admits.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, though (and this is more important for explaining the differences between Lutherans and Reformed on the question of church and state) is that the Reformed understanding of how church and state relate "implies an antithesis to the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms."<sup>30</sup> The typical critique is that "the Lutheran doctrine ... leads to the church's being aloof and disinterested in the political sphere."<sup>31</sup> Only when the state erects policies that impact the church's own interests—like hampering the preaching of the gospel—will a more active disposition become manifest. If the state's policies are only about persecuting Jews or eliminating the mentally unfit or similar crimes against humanity, the church, operating with the (Lutheran) two-kingdoms doctrine, may, yes, issue admonitions and warnings but it will not, in any case, offer resistance. The church thus encourages a *secular kingdom* by creating a *spiritual vacuum* which inevitably is filled with other ideologies and faith commitments or idols. Thus, so the critique goes, there arises a "hopeless rift" between church and world, the ecclesiastical and political, spiritual and secular responsibility.<sup>32</sup>

As this critique unfolds against the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms, it likewise strikes at the Lutheran take on *law and gospel*—not merely the antipathy set up between them, but the antipathy which rips them away from their mutual relationship and unity in the one God who is sovereign over church and state. This separation brings with it an abandonment of "the state to its own devices, the church delivers it up to demonism and error" (the Hitler state being a horrific example—for Hitler filled the spiritual vacuum).<sup>33</sup>

---

28. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 566.

29. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 566-567.

30. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 567.

31. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 568.

32. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 568.

33. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 568.

Thielicke admits that a twisted neo-Lutheranism is guilty of much of this critique, including how it pertains to Hitler. He denies that it fits historical Lutheranism, for the classical Lutheran two-kingdoms ethic “does not issue in a separation of church from world.”<sup>34</sup> Rather, it only aims at a distinction, which Reformed theology is jealous to maintain as well.

Thielicke cites Herman Diem’s sharp critique as well. The Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine splits “person” and “office”; and in separating the two kingdoms from one another (versus distinguishing them), it creates a divide that runs right down “the individual Christian.”<sup>35</sup>

Thielicke’s rebuttal is to chastise Reformed thinkers for “coordinating” church and state in the name of a *principle of unity*. This principle of unity—or better, a particular understanding of unity—is what accounts for “the antithesis between the divergent confessions.”<sup>36</sup> In short form, Thielicke thinks that the Reformed doctrine of the single divine decree, whereby God is behind everything in some sense, accounts for the coordinating principle among the Reformed, so that law and gospel, church and state, the spiritual and temporal, all come together to press for a kind of monism—a monistic understanding of life under Christ’s lordship. Rather than a “dualistic tension” (the Lutheran view) the Reformed opt for a “monistic bond.”<sup>37</sup> Says Thielicke, “For Luther there is necessarily a tension between state and church because the state is a strange work [*opus alienum*] of God, whereas the church, deriving from his proper will [*voluntas propria*], has his heart ‘directly’ in the forgiving and consoling Word of God. But this antithesis is expunged the moment the world and the kingdom of God are grounded in the one act of the pretemporal decree.”<sup>38</sup> The Reformed make every activity of God “proper” and nothing is “alien,” given the decree.

Moreover, says Thielicke, “Behind the Lutheran dualism and the Reformed monism in the relating of church and state there thus stands a prior theological decision whose ethical significance only comes out later.” Whereas the Reformed *coordinate divine love and justice*, not allowing a contradiction, “in contrast, it is the heart of the Lutheran view that God does contradict himself, that he sets his grace in opposition to his judgment and his love in opposition to his holiness; indeed, the gospel itself can be traced to this fundamental contradiction within God himself.”<sup>39</sup>

---

34. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 568.

35. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 570.

36. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 571.

37. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 574.

38. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 574.

39. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 575.

It is thus typical that in his doctrine of Law and gospel Luther should lay great stress on the rejection of any teleological connection between them. For to seek a point where the difference between them is dissolved in an overarching unity is to rob the gospel of its character as miracle. This is why the tension between them must be maintained. ‘Only the Holy Spirit can do it [distinguish between Law and gospel]. Even the man Christ could not do it; otherwise he would not have been a man like us.’<sup>40</sup>

Contrasted to this stands Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between law and gospel, which unlike Luther’s, is not one of *dialectical tension*. Indeed, Thielicke takes up an analysis of Calvin on law and gospel precisely to show the implications of his understanding on that topic for understanding differences between Lutherans and Reformed on the relationship of the two governments of God.

Once more, while the language of two kingdoms or two governments is the same (for the most part), and while the rationale and function of the state is much the same; and the concern to keep the church out of the affairs of state, and even more the state out of the affairs of the church is likewise in agreement, Calvin has, nevertheless, says Thielicke, “an essential difference from Luther.” *For Calvin, the gospel gives us a freedom within the law*, and that “freedom within the Law” is itself gospel. “Christian freedom does not mean freedom from the Law. It means freedom in the use of the Law, because the Christian has from Christ criteria which enable him to distinguish between the motive and the form of the Law...”<sup>41</sup> This is so very close to Luther but a deep difference exists. A legalism abides in Calvin, says Thielicke. Christ is a legislator, commanding on a universal scale. A kind of Christocracy invades this thinking. Christ has direct relation to all peoples and situations. Moreover, since the divine decree embraces not just salvation history but universal history, in all its orders and factors, the monistic thrust in Reformed thought figures also in the essential unity affirmed also regarding law and gospel.

We may think of the difference visually. Consider two models in a pictorial form: The Lutheran model is like two circles standing next to each other, meeting in the Christian person. God stands above both as Lord, the one is an alien work through the law—natural law and reason, and orders, i.e., the state of affairs in a fallen world, such as tasks, stations, vocations, responsibilities, to keep the human game going. These are not creation ordinances, since they are not creation, as such; but emerge from a fallen state for the preserving of human life.

---

40. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 575, see *Luther’s Works*, vol. 54, 127.

41. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 591; cf. 1: 94-125, esp. 123-25. *Italics added*.

Meanwhile, the Reformed model is more like two concentric circles. Christ is at the center; the church is the inner circle; the state is the outer circle. The church through Christ declares the will of God, and so also instructs the state regarding the will of God. Christ is the lord of each circle—from the inward to the outward, from church to state.

All of this leads the Reformed to press for a Christian form of the state, for a public manifestation of religion—a Christian state, not just Christian statesmen or politicians. The two kingdoms are coordinated, for Calvin, versus standing over against one another. What God does in the worldly kingdom is not alien work—rather, the state is to reflect Christ’s kingdom.

Yes, church and state remain distinct and separate. But this is different for Calvin than for Luther. Says Thielicke, “For Calvin the separation arises, not from the fact that the church stands in a direct relation to Christ’s kingdom whereas the state stands only in an indirect relation, but merely from the pragmatic observation that the effectiveness of each—which is in the interest of both—can be maintained only if limits of competence and distinctions of jurisdiction are observed.”<sup>42</sup>

For Luther, the difference isn’t merely pragmatic and a question of competence—of distinct callings of each to fulfill its mandate competently. No, for Luther, the difference is a two-kingdoms doctrine difference, for the morality of the Sermon on the Mount (gospel ethics) cannot function in public life filled with unconverted, sinful people; or, at best, can be “fulfilled only in part within the orders of the fallen world.”<sup>43</sup> In fact, that ethic would be doomed if put into effect, for it would allow evil to run rampant. The turn-the-other-cheek morality it exhorts is meant, this side of glory, only for private life—which testifies a word of rebuke and condemnation to the world, with its public life of sin. In any case, it cannot function publicly in this broken world.

The proper work of the gospel, God’s kingdom on the right, stands opposed to that alien work of the law, God’s kingdom on the left. “The idea of a Christian state for Luther is impossible in principle.”<sup>44</sup>

The Reformed, by contrast, says Thielicke, integrate, within one and the same kingdom of Christ, church and state, worldly kingdom and kingdom of God, following this monistic line.<sup>45</sup>

Thus far our sketch of Thielicke who, being a Lutheran expositor of Luther and the two kingdoms, offers his own criticisms of that tradition, as well as his take on the Reformed conception.

42. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 595.

43. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 596.

44. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 597.

45. Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 2: 597.

### 2.3. Wolfhart Pannenberg—a sober critic

If Niebuhr may be branded a severe critic of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, at least in its implications and practical application, and Thielicke may be labeled a reluctant critic, a sympathizer, Wolfhart Pannenberg is probably best tagged “a sober critic.”<sup>46</sup> Like Thielicke, Pannenberg is German and Lutheran; and, so, like Thielicke, he has more investment in this doctrinal tradition than a critic like Niebuhr. Nonetheless, Pannenberg does not deny that the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms has serious shortcomings.

Pannenberg uses Karl Barth as a foil to engage Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms. Barth, as noted above, was a harsh critic of Luther’s doctrine and maintained that “Luther’s theology and Lutheranism share the responsibility for making National Socialism possible.” Because Luther embraced the idea of the independent “authority of the state,” breathing room opened for “German paganism” to flourish, which “separated the created world and law from the gospel.”<sup>47</sup> According to Barth, “Martin Luther’s error in respect to the relationship of law and gospel, of secular and spiritual order and power” resided in his rendering “the secular realm independent and thereby immunizing it against the comprehensive claim of the Lordship of Christ over all realms of life.”<sup>48</sup>

Pannenberg disagrees with Barth’s analysis as being a bit one-sided, but he does not deny that Luther’s doctrine is grounded in medieval thought-forms and secularized Augustine’s conception of the “two cities.” Luther’s doctrine also offered abstract definitions. When these definitions are lifted out of the context of a prevailing Christendom and then planted into a secularized context that cordons faith off from the whole of life, the result can only bring forth the sinister consequences as adumbrated by Barth and others.<sup>49</sup>

Pannenberg observes that Luther’s doctrine involves “two kingdoms” and “two regiments,” that is, two realms and two ways God rules over these realms respectively. Luther acknowledged the “Lordship of God” over the state. Luther also affirmed that the preaching of the church ought to “inform and instruct all social classes how they should conduct themselves in their offices and ranks, so that they

---

46. On Pannenberg’s theology, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); E. F. Tupper, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973); and F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

47. Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 112. Pannenberg quotes Barth’s *Eine Schweizer Stimme* (Zurich, 1945), 122.

48. Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme*, 113, quoted in Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, 112.

49. Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, 114, 117, 127.

would act justly for God.”<sup>50</sup> Basically, this preaching called all persons to obey those who have authority over them unto the maintenance of peace. Luther appealed to “natural law” as the basis for order; and Luther distinguished natural law from “positive law,” the latter being established by human authority.<sup>51</sup> The state is subject to natural law. Thus a ruler and the state are not given “carte blanche” freedom to proceed as they wish but must submit to natural law, which was not, for Luther, “eternal law.” Rather, as Pannenberg explains, for Luther, the idea of natural law had an “elastic sense,” which meant that natural law was dependent on human reason. Though Luther distrusted “reason” in the theological/spiritual realm, calling it a harlot, in the secular/earthly realm he trusted it to act in a “spirit of fairness.” Indeed, reason is “the supreme law and master of all law.”<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, the law of love is taught by reason and the law of nature—thus, the law of doing unto your neighbor as you would have done to you keeps the state from acting from caprice, going its own way, independent of the will of God as revealed in nature.

Pannenberg admits, however, that

This does not ... exclude the possibility that in Luther’s distinction between two realms and two ‘regiments’ there might be factors that, taken alone, would move in another direction, as can be seen in the themes mentioned above, and would tend to separate secular authority from the context of those principles that motivate Christianity.<sup>53</sup>

Luther’s scheme implies “a concept of political authority that is neutral over against all specifically Christian motivation. It might be asked whether natural law and reason can still have the same concrete meaning under such different circumstances, and especially whether they can be identical with ‘the law of love’ in both instances.”<sup>54</sup> The circumstances and instances to which Pannenberg is referring are that of Christendom, and secular authorities who embrace faith and Christian principles, that of foreign religions or no religion at all, being hostile to Christian principles and the Christian faith. Luther tends to think that the principles on which the state rests are an indifferent matter vis-à-vis the religious grounding of a concrete political life. This neutrality of the state, as generally defined by Lu-

50. Luther’s sermon, “Dass man Kinder zur Schulen halten soll” (1530), WA 30, 537, 22ff., quoted from Pannenberg, *Ethics*, 113.

51. Pannenberg cites Luther’s “Von weltlicher Obrigkeit” (1523), WA 11, 278f., in *Ethics*, 113. In English, see, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, 173-129.

52. Luther’s “Von weltlicher Obrigkeit” (1523), WA 11, 272, cited from Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, 113.

53. Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, 114.

54. Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, 114.

ther, undermines the preaching office in its instructions to the civil magistrate. Consequently, “it is extremely difficult,” admits Pannenberg, “to reject out of hand the objections which Barth has raised against the doctrine of the two realms.” Barth’s sanctions certainly apply to a, not insignificant, strand in Luther’s thought.<sup>55</sup>

Pannenberg observes that Luther’s doctrine of the two realms grants to the political arena a certain “independence and arbitrariness,” an autonomy, which in turn exposes two other problems. The first, pointed out by Troeltsch, was that of a “double standard,” namely that the Christian as *Christian* accepts injustice against himself, but the Christian as *the bearer of a secular office* demands justice and makes use of force, even the sword. The Christian, as a bearer of a civil institution, ceases to be motivated by that which resides in his or her heart—being ruled now by a different master, so to speak. This master is defined not by timeless principles but, in part at least, by “specific historical conditions” and “cultural tradition.” Are these conditions and such tradition above reform? Are they to be embraced *carte blanche*? Luther is uncritical at this juncture.

The second problem is that Luther’s doctrine grants “independent authority to the secular realms of life”—as if the religious motivation that grounds or forms the basis for political life is a matter of indifference. In other words, secular life is not profane but neither is it spiritual; it is neutral. This corresponds, says Pannenberg, to Luther’s “remarkably unreflective adoption of a given system of roles, involving the concrete behavior of individuals in the context of life in society.” Luther’s thought, in short form, is not marked by consistency and is pock-marked with unresolved tensions.<sup>56</sup>

After tracing out the background of Luther’s two-kingdoms doctrine in Augustine’s notion of two cities and the medieval theory of two forces within Christendom, Pannenberg summarizes Luther’s position concerning the relationship between the church and the state, i.e., the church and the “autonomous political authority.” First, “Luther restricted the tasks of the church to the spiritual realm, to the inner life.” This reflects the then current Franciscan spirituality of the late medieval period. Second, Luther’s doctrine of two “regiments” separated but could not integrate God’s two ways of ruling, except to render believers in the church to be God’s instruments and believers or non-believers alike to be God’s instruments in the secular realm. Third, Luther carved out a place for the church and state to exist independent of one another. The state is “to establish external peace and justice, to hold the effects of sin in check.” It cannot “dictate to the human conscience and to human convictions.” Thus secular authority has limits. But Luther fails to realize that his scheme could be effective “only within a society shaped by Christiani-

---

55. Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, 115.

56. Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, 116-117.

ty." Luther makes the matter of redemption "extrinsic to the theoretical concept of secular authority." Indeed, for Luther, "political order does not belong to human destiny as such, to that which will find its fulfillment in the future Kingdom of God." Instead, Luther views political order as merely "an emergency measure" in order to hold sin at bay, "a divine interim that will disappear in the eschatological future...."<sup>57</sup>

Pannenberg does not believe we ought to take our theological cue from Luther on this topic. To view the civil magistracy merely as "an emergency measure" is much too limited, even if partly true. Moreover, his "abstract concept of secular authority, divorced as it was from the historical circumstances of Christendom," was easily commandeered to give "independent authority to the German states and to develop political absolutism." The church, following Luther's teaching, was then "defenseless against these tendencies." Thus, although Barth's sharp criticisms against Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine are historically myopic, nonetheless, "it still remains true that the gaps which remained in Luther's synthesis provided the occasion for historical tendencies to take hold in the portion of the Christian tradition influenced by Luther." In other words, Barth was right to label this Lutheran doctrine, with these weaknesses, "disastrous."<sup>58</sup>

For his part, Pannenberg believes that the weakness of Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine is rooted in the Augustinianism he embraced, which "did not do justice to the positive relationship between the hope for the Kingdom of God and the themes of political life, but instead regarded the latter as only an emergency measure against sin." Specifically this means that "nowhere in Luther can we find any inspiration to transform political conditions by the powerful vision of the eschatological Lordship of God which already illumines the present world." Although Luther powerfully posited the universal priesthood of all believers, he failed to see that that reality cannot be divorced from sharing in "the Kingship of Christ." Here Luther was still caught in the Middle Ages.<sup>59</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

At this juncture, we pause in order to offer some summary comments, to compose a synthesis of ideas and criticisms, with the aim of gaining a clearer picture of the problems, as presented by these critics, regarding the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms.

First, the Lutheran conception of two kingdoms is quietist in tendency, and as such is prone to acquiesce to the status quo, even if it is unjust. Even Thielicke grants this tilt in Lutheran thinking. Nie-

---

57. Pannenberg, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," in *Ethics*, 125-127.

58. Pannenberg, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," in *Ethics*, 127.

59. Pannenberg, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," in *Ethics*, 129-131.

buhr observes that the Lutheran allergy to “works” carries over into inaction in the social-political sphere. Neighbor love ought to motivate believers not only in their private lives but also in their public lives, in performing the duties of public offices and similar roles. The law/gospel paradigm with which Luther and Lutherans typically operate splits private and public life apart from one another, with gospel functioning in the private sphere and law pressing forward in the public domain—each exclusive of the other. This separation reduces the meaning of Christian liberty to liberty from the penalty of the law, divine wrath; that alone. Thielicke sees this separation as deserting the state to “its own devices.” Although it seems that Luther affirmed the right of the church to instruct all social classes and ranks on conduct toward one another, the focus in this instruction is to act justly *toward God*—meaning, obey those in authority over you. The net result is the absence of a *Christian social ethic*, though an ethic of law remains, driven by the dictates of human reason. Christian freedom (which for the Reformed is freedom *within* the law) is for Luther and the Lutherans freedom *from* the law, with the result that even when we find ourselves under an unhealthy government, we must accept it as a given, for Christ is no legislator.

Second, Luther’s two-kingdoms doctrine is caught in unhealthy dualism—the unhealthy government under which we find ourselves must be accepted as a given, and that according to divine providence. Luther—and Lutherans—did not discern that governing authorities, while ordinarily doing no harm to those who do right, can violate divine standards of justice and be a terror to those who have done no wrong at all (cf. Rom. 13:1-7 and Acts 5:29). Luther’s quietism is born of a social pessimism. He simply could not conceive that a more just society was obtainable—thus the status quo is always better than the ill-begotten attempted improvement. This gives us, in Niebuhr’s words, a “curiously perverse social morality.” It is “defeatist” at best; and worse, such an ethic encourages tyranny, for it has no effective voice against it (Adolph Hitler being the worst recent example). Thielicke wishes to offer a refined analysis of this trait, but acknowledges Lutheran “passivity” as contributing to Hitler’s rise to power. This same passivity encourages the emergence of a secular kingdom to fill the void, i.e., the spiritual vacuum that awaits occupation by other-ungodly masters. Secular authority, then, is not motivated by Christian principles, for it is absent gospel principles. Luther views political authority as a neutral-zone, governed by non-religious principles. The result is that the state rules according to what Pannenberg calls a certain measure of “independence and arbitrariness.”

In concert with that, Luther refused to recognize that shades of gray, getting closer to white, is better than remaining closer to black. Indeed, Luther had a concept of relative justice but, seemingly, not a concept of *layers* of relative justice toward which Christians may le-

gitimately labor. This is wedded to an eschatological vision that pushes the kingdom of God almost entirely into the future. Or, alternatively, the state is wholly extrinsic to kingdom come, and an emergency measure, and has no part of human destiny. Pannenberg finds this last idea in Luther much too limiting, for it has no room for the hope of kingdom come and the practice of justice in the here-and-now. Luther was blind to the vision that the kingdom of God imposes on the church, namely that current political conditions should be transformed after the vision of the eschatological lordship of Jesus Christ. Instead, the church and the gospel—the other side of the dualism—is cordoned off to the inner life and the spiritual realm. The priesthood of all believers doesn't work out into a life lived for social justice. Accordingly, life is no longer integrated. To be sure, whether one is an instrument of God within the realm of the church or within the realm of the state (and in the latter role that instrument may as well be an unbeliever as a believer), in either case you are *God's instrument*. But that is not to be integrated under the same lordship, for the former is governed by Christ through the gospel; the latter is governed by God through the law. Truly, a person lives under two masters in such a scheme.

Third, since Luther in effect split a Christian into two persons, one private and one public, one motivated by the gospel, the other driven by the law, neighbor love likewise is split, being *Christologically driven* in the private sphere of one's ethics, but *absent Christ* in the public sphere, where grace and gospel have no claim. "The person," on the one hand, and "the office" that person occupies, on the other, fail to come under the same Lord and the same ethic. Thieliicke calls this a "tension" within the Lutheran scheme (labeling the Reformed view monistic). The tension, however, is more than that; it is a dualism, such that the work of the state is an *alien* (not a *proper*) work of God. Thieliicke admits this when he states that divine love and justice are not coordinated in the Lutheran doctrine—in fact, this contradiction between love and justice is the "the heart of the Lutheran view." Love stands in opposition to holiness. With respect to the public sphere, no morality discerned from or elicited out of the Sermon on the Mount is suitable. Consequently, neighbor love—even if taught by natural law through reason—finally gives way to inaction, for the status quo is God's will. This leads to complacency and an implicit sanctioning of injustice in the name of divine law. No doubt, Luther lived, labored, and thought under the social ethos of Christendom; he may be excused for not anticipating the acids of modernity and the dominant secularism that characterizes our age. Modern advocates of this conflation of the two kingdoms, however, may not be excused; and, in taking this step, sinister consequences are the result (even Pannenberg grants Barth this criticism).

Fourth, natural law is conceived as the authoritative and reliable guide to shape public morality and to inform public opinion—i.e.,

natural law as discerned through reason. Here, too, we discover a dualism in Luther's—and Lutheran—theology. It is odd wholly to distrust reason vis-à-vis human righteousness before God, only for that distrust to give way to confidence vis-à-vis human righteousness as practiced by the magistrate and the public square. Pannenberg points out that Luther's appeal to natural law was really an appeal to "positive law" in the name of natural law. The Lutheran appeal to natural reason is much too flat, without nuance, and undiscerning of the way in which the human heart and human self-interest distorts an order for justice, corrupts appeals to creation ordinances and to orders of creation. Luther trusted human reason to act in a "spirit of fairness." Thus the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms exhibits an inattentive naïveté to the social character of sin, as if private sin alone is under the wrath of God, and as if God does not desire to see public justice come to fruition this side of glory.

\* \* \* \* \*

We now turn to a Reformed expositor, Herman Bavinck, who does not address the language or doctrine of "two kingdoms" directly but does address the Lutheran conception of a social ethic and its implications (or lack thereof) for public life.

#### 2.4. Herman Bavinck—a Reformed critic

In considering what a Reformed critic says in opposition to Lutheran views, it is beneficial to examine Bavinck's understanding of a Christian approach to Christ and culture, or what he also calls a Christian worldview. He also likes to use the language of nature and grace.<sup>60</sup> Although Bavinck does not specifically and directly engage the language of two kingdoms, his analysis easily informs this discussion. Here we examine the most prominent features of Bavinck's treatment of these themes, especially in his critique of Luther and the Lutheran tradition over against a Reformed approach to and understanding of these issues.<sup>61</sup>

For Bavinck, the relationship of grace to nature is "the great question"—even children are not immune to its implications. Thus, as we face the inevitable issues surrounding church and state, family

---

60. The last phrase, "nature and grace," is the category that Jan Veenhof uses in order to address Bavinck's approach to these sorts of issues. See Veenhof's massive study of Bavinck's theology, *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1968), 345-365. This chapter of Veenhof's study has been translated into English by Albert M. Wolters as *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2006).

61. On Bavinck's life and thought see the aforementioned title of Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, as well as Rolf Hendrik Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1961); and Ron Gleason, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Phillisburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

and society, and science and education—the very issues that define the doctrine of the two kingdoms—the question pleads for an answer. The matter in short form is this: “What is the relation between creation and recreation, the kingdoms of the earth and the kingdom of heaven, humanity and Christianity, between that which is from below and that which from above?”<sup>62</sup>

For Bavinck, in attempting to answer such a query, what is fundamental is that “grace does not erase and destroy nature, but restores and renews it.”<sup>63</sup> This means that redemption restores creation, bringing it to its original *intended goal*—the goal that sin thwarted and sidelined. That answer, however, has not been articulated by all segments of Christendom throughout its history. Bavinck carefully sketches various answers which he judges to fall short of the biblical portrait. In various writings he takes up how the Church fathers, diverse strains within Roman Catholicism, Socinians, Anabaptists, Mennonites, as well as Methodists, Pietists in various forms, and rationalistic theology have handled this question.<sup>64</sup> It is not our intention here to explore Bavinck’s analysis of these movements, except to outline in a rudimentary way the standard Roman Catholic conception of nature and grace, and in that light the Reformation answer in the alternative forms of the Lutheran and the Reformed traditions.

Bavinck rejects the Roman Catholic doctrine of the super-added gift (*donum superadditum*), in which nature is conceived not as sinful but as inferior to the supernatural. Thus, the supernatural is *added as a gift* to the natural. This means, for example, that original sin is conceived merely as the loss of the *donum superadditum*. “Nature, the world, is good, not corrupt; it is only missing that which in its own strength it could never reach.” Therefore, under this conception, the gospel of grace does not penetrate or sanctify creation, for the supernatural only perfects and completes creation. For Rome, this dualism is fundamental, since the supernatural and the natural are separated into a higher and a lower realm. “Creation and re-creation ... thus remain two realities independent of each other.”<sup>65</sup> The natural order of things is not annihilated or rejected as evil, but it is depreciated

---

62. Herman Bavinck, *De Offerande des Lofs: overdenkingen voor en na de toelating tot het heilig avondmaal*, vijftiende druk (Kampen: J.H. Kok, n.d.), 44-45.

63. Bavinck, *De Offerande des Lofs*, 44.

64. See, for example, Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 229; this article is translated by John Bolt from *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1888). Also see Bavinck’s “Common Grace,” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 45-49, which was originally published in 1894 under the title *De Algemeene Genade*.

65. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 229; idem, “Common Grace,” 45-49.

and devalued. Rome renders the cosmos, the created order, profane.<sup>66</sup>

The Reformers, notes Bavinck, sought to deliver themselves and the church from this dualism, for they didn't aim merely to reform the church; more profoundly, they reconceived the Christian faith, i.e., Christianity itself. However, among the major Reformers, Calvin was more successful and consistent in his reformatory efforts than Luther and Zwingli. In fact, Bavinck maintains that Luther did not escape dualistic thinking. Consequently, one often finds in Luther remarks like this:

*Christ did not come to change things outwardly but to change persons inwardly in their hearts. The Gospel has nothing to do with worldly matters. [Business and commerce are matters] for which one does not need the Holy Spirit. A Prince can be a Christian but he must not rule as a Christian and as ruler he is not called a Christian but a Prince. The person is a Christian but the office and princely dignity has nothing to do with Christianity. In sum, Christ wants everyone to stay in their station. All he asks is that whoever had formerly been serving the Devil should henceforth serve him.*<sup>67</sup>

To be sure, Luther is to be commended in that he, like Zwingli and Calvin, delivered the earthly realm from the bondage of ecclesiastical control. For Luther, the earth was no longer profane. Yet, Luther's theology still does not and cannot sanctify the earthly domain. Bavinck writes: "[Luther] leaves [the earthly realm] standing without connection next to the spiritual realm and sometimes speaks as though the external is a matter of complete indifference and not capable of ethical renewal." More specifically, "Luther's mistake here is that he restricts the Gospel and limits the grace of God. The Gospel only changes the inward man, the conscience, the heart; the remainder stays the same until the final judgment. As a result, dualism is not completely overcome.... Re-creation (*herscheping*) continues to stand alongside creation (*scheping*)."<sup>68</sup>

Unlike the Swiss Reformation, which was a reformation of the church and of society, the German reformation sought to reform worship and preaching only. It was "exclusively ecclesiastical (*godsdienslig*) in character." That is, it was "religious" in scope, pri-

---

66. Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 231.

67. Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 237. *Italics added.* This is a collection of quotations from Luther's writings, see, e.g., Luther's commentary on the Sermon on Mount (Matt. 5:19-21); his expositions and sermons on Luke 2:15-20, etc.

68. Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 237. Also see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-2008), IV: 410, 435.

vate, assuming public affairs to be non-religious as such. This stands in contrast to Calvin, who sought the reform of all of life according to the gospel. Indeed, for Calvin, argues Bavinck, the gospel is “a joyful tidings of the renewal of all creatures.... There is nothing that cannot or ought not to be evangelized. Not only the church but also home, school, society, and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity.” The ecclesiastical, the social, and the political must come under the norm of Scriptural teaching, since, for Calvin, the Bible is “the norm for all of life,” whereas, for Luther, it is “only a source of salvation truth.”<sup>69</sup> The experience of “the forgiveness of sins” proved sufficient for Luther. “[R]esting, entirely in justification ... he left all that was secular—art and science, state and society—to carry on by itself.”<sup>70</sup> Luther did not press for a reformation of the whole of life. Zwingli, and even more so Calvin, on the contrary, understood that God’s sovereignty in the work of salvation meant that he is

sovereign always and everywhere—in creation as well as in re-creation. If He had become King in the heart of man [i.e., His King in Jesus Christ as Savior], He had become that also in his head and hand, in the home and office and field, in state and society, in art and science. The question, How is man saved? did not suffice, but had to be led back to another, higher, deeper, and all-comprehensive one: How is God to have His due of glory? Hence, for Zwingli, and even more for Calvin, the work of reformation had only begun when [believers] had found peace of heart in the blood of the cross. The whole world lay open before them, so to speak, not in order to be left to its own devices but to be penetrated and hallowed by the word of God and by prayer. They began in their immediate environment by addressing themselves to the church and city where they lived. They restored not only the office of preaching but also the worship service and the church discipline; they reformed not merely the religious life of Sunday but also the civic and social life of the days of the week. They reformed not merely the private life of the citizen but also the public life of the state.<sup>71</sup>

Thus Lutherans join Roman Catholics and Anabaptists in restricting Christ’s work as Savior to the ethical-religious. Although Luther (and the Lutherans) stood in agreement with the Reformed in

---

69. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 238.

70. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 125.

71. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 125-126; also see his *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 410-411.

viewing fallen human beings as utterly corrupted and dead in sin, under God's wrath and wholly incapable of doing any spiritual good, they, with them, could not deny that many good things are achieved by unregenerate persons.<sup>72</sup> The Reformed found an answer to this apparent conundrum in the doctrine of common grace. The Lutherans, however, "could find no other way of dealing with this difficulty than by making a strict separation of the heavenly and the earthly, of the spiritual and the sensible, of 'two hemispheres, of which one is lower, the other higher.'" In the affairs of the natural life, man's reason and will remain free and capable of some good, but in spiritual matters they are utterly blind and powerless.<sup>73</sup> In this domain they are "to some extent self-reliant and independent of faith."<sup>74</sup> As Bavinck observes, "The Roman Catholic dualism is here not really overcome, even though the opposition of natural and supernatural has been modified in an ethical direction."<sup>75</sup>

In Bavinck's assessment, the effects of dualism are altogether sinister for the Christian faith inasmuch as reason is not wedded to faith and therefore is not guided by faith (that is, reason is not united to faith in Jesus Christ, gospel-faith). Left to itself, to be its own master, autonomous reason turns this circumstance to its own advantage and expands its domain, so that it lays claim, independent of faith, to civic matters, the academy, philosophy—the rest of life. Reason aims next to posit itself not only alongside of but in opposition to faith; and natural theology is reborn. The Lutheran reformation, in the face of this rationalism, could only succumb to it or retreat into pietism. Meanwhile, the reformation orchestrated by the Reformed, insofar as it also failed to liberate itself from this dualism, followed suit.<sup>76</sup>

Bavinck thus argues that these differences between the Reformation and Rome, as well as between the German and Swiss reformations, are not benign. In fact, he excoriates the Lutheran tradition in its practical outworking of divine grace for society and state. "[J]ust as Lutheran believers fail to understand the work of grace as arising from God's eternal election and covenant, so they also fail to

---

72. Of course, a kind of synergism was to infect Lutheran theology, compromising its doctrine of human depravity.

73. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 50. See Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1899), 266. The two hemispheres refer to "the objects about which the will of man in the state of corruption is occupied.... To the latter belong things purely spiritual or sacred.... To the former are referred ... 'All things and actions, physical, ethical, political, domestic, artificial, pedagogic, and divine, as far as they can be known by the light of reason and can be produced by the powers of nature aided by the general concurrence of God'" (David Hollaz, *Exam Theologicum Acroamaticum* [1707]), 577.

74. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I: 305.

75. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 50.

76. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, I: 305-306.

relate it to nature, the world, and humanity.”<sup>77</sup> But, then, Lutheran theology failed to reckon properly with the extent and curse of sin in nature, world, and human life beyond the moral-ecclesiastical, thereby splitting life into nature and grace, law and gospel, and the legal from the moral as such.<sup>78</sup> And this, not surprisingly, works itself out in the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms.

The Reformed on the other hand believe that the redemptive claims of Christ reach farther into life—just as sin and curse do. While Luther acknowledged that the gospel (and being a Christian) does not mean a renunciation of one’s legitimate vocation in life, the pursuit of that vocation is independent of being a Christian. One is perhaps a Prince and a Christian; but in being a Prince, fulfilling this office, his faith in Christ plays no role.<sup>79</sup> The Reformed do not bifurcate believers into two persons, so to speak, as Luther does. The gospel, though it does not militate against nature as such, nonetheless wages

the battle—always and everywhere, in every area of life and into the most secret hiding places—against sin and deception. And thus it preaches principles that, by moral and spiritual ... channels, have their pervasive impact everywhere and reform and renew everything. While, in keeping with Jesus’s command, the gospel must be preached to all creatures (Mark 16:15), it is ‘a power of God for salvation to everyone who believes’ (Rom. 1:16), a two-edged sword that ‘pierces down to the division of soul and spirit’ (Heb. 4:12), a leaven that leavens everything (Matt. 13:33), a principle that re-creates everything, and a power that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4).<sup>80</sup>

Consequently, says Bavinck, as Reformed, in contemplating the work of divine grace we do not relegate it to “the heart and inner room,” nor do we view it as “a supernatural addition to nature,” nor do we regard it as merely “medicine against the sickness of sin.” Contrary to these shrunken conceptions of grace, the Reformed view it as impacting “all of the rich diversities in human life.”<sup>81</sup>

Bavinck therefore regards the question of the relationship between nature and grace, and by implication, a conception of Christ’s lordship—the Christ who bears the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king—as reaching into the whole of the fallen creation with the gospel.

77. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III: 522.

78. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II: 553-554; 584ff.; III: 120, 375, 522-528.

79. See Luther’s discussion in “The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons)” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 107-115; 170-176.

80. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 395-396.

81. Bavinck, *De Offerande des Lofs*, 44, 45.

This conception is also woven into the doctrine of the church's catholicity. Indeed, for Bavinck, the definition of the church's catholicity is not limited to its ecumenicity, as the term is sometimes used. Catholicity actually has several layers of meaning. A common understanding of catholicity refers to the church viewed "as a unified whole" in distinction from the church seen as variously dispersed local congregations. An even more standard use of the word catholicity expresses "the unity of the church as inclusive of all believers from every nation, in all times and places." However, the term also refers to the reality that the church—or the gospel proclaimed by the church—"embraces the whole of human experience."<sup>82</sup> That is, the gospel is a saving message for all persons, irrespective of place, time, and nationality, involving the whole scope of life broken by sin. The universal character of the gospel, then, comes to save and sanctify all of life.

Thus, the church's catholicity involves the catholicity of Christianity itself, or better, the catholicity of Christ's salvific work. The word describes the church as spread out *over* all the earth, reaching every tribe, tongue, nation, and people; and more, the term describes the significance of the gospel *for* all the earth, since the whole creation is taken up into God's redemptive plan. No part of life—i.e., no part of God's "good," legitimate creation—is excluded from his liberating purposes in Christ. The Christian faith is therefore "international" and "cosmopolitan" in character.<sup>83</sup> "The Gospel is a joyful tidings, not only for the individual person but also for humanity, for the family, for society, for the state, for art and science, for the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation."<sup>84</sup>

Christ planted his kingdom in that world and made sure that it could exist in it and, like a leaven, have a transforming impact in all areas of life. It was his work to destroy the works of the devil everywhere and to spark the acknowledgment of the rights and honor of God. Intensively his reconciling and renewing activity extends as far as sin has destroyed and corrupted everything. For that reason he does not by his Spirit just bring some people individually to faith in him in order that they would then freely unite themselves and serve each other with the gifts given them by the Spirit. The truth is, he founded a community of believers, a church, and from the outset organized it in such a way that it can exist, propagate, expand, and fulfill its task on earth.<sup>85</sup>

---

82. Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 221.

83. Bavinck, *De Offerande des Lofs*, 47.

84. Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 224.

85. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 413.

This understanding of nature and grace—and, more specifically, this understanding of the cosmic scope of the work of grace—cuts dualism off at the root. The Christian faith “encompasses the whole person in the wholeness of life.”<sup>86</sup> The unity of God’s sovereignty over the entirety of the creation is not derailed in his redemptive operations and purpose.

Echoing themes we heard earlier, Bavinck argues that in the history of the Christian church, the gospel has unfortunately been understood and applied to human life in such a way as to shrink and subjugate the catholicity of each to narrower parameters and aims. When the gospel encountered a world of unbelief, it encountered a world that had long led a life of its own *without the gospel*—a world of great cultural achievement and rich natural life.<sup>87</sup> How the church should access and engage that world of cultural achievement brought different answers. Some early Christians advocated dualism and asceticism, which eventually gave way to monasticism. Anabaptism follows in the line of ascetic thinking. Roman Catholicism sought to bring all of life under the institutional church. Meanwhile, the Reformation sought a different model. Yet, here too there is diversity of conception. As Bavinck observes, “Lutheranism took its point of vantage in history, in the concrete reality, and there it rested. It did not ascend higher; it did not penetrate deeper; it was completely satisfied with justification by faith,—*i.e.*, with the religion of the heart and the pure doctrine.”<sup>88</sup> The rest of life functions independent of Christ and the gospel. This denial of the church’s catholicity has opened the door to a “new worldview” that, to be sure, grants religious freedom to all, yet “seeks to eliminate [Christianity and the church] from public life in order to relegate them to private life and thus to reduce them to sectarian phenomena.”<sup>89</sup>

Explicit in this new, secular worldview is the supposed “neutrality” of the state—and along those lines the posited neutrality of the world of finance and business, industrialization, and factory life. The

86. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 222.

87. Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, The Stone Lectures for 1908-1909 Princeton Theological Seminary (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 243. Bavinck defines culture, in its broadest sense, as including “all the labor which human power expends on nature.” Nature, however, includes all that is outside of humans and also includes humans themselves. Thus, culture involves two circles. “To the first belong all those activities of man for the production and distribution of material goods, such as agriculture, cattle-rearing, industry, and trade. And the second circle includes all that labor whereby man realizes objectively his ideals of the true, the good, and the beautiful, by means of literature and science, justice and statecraft, works of beauty and art, and at the same time works out his own development and civilization” (*Philosophy of Revelation*, 250).

88. Herman Bavinck, “The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations,” Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System. Proceedings of the fifth General Council Toronto 1892, p. 48-55. [See also page 75-81 of this Journal.]

89. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 244.

field of science likewise brings a set of principles to its disciplines, which in turn exclude the catholicity of the church—i.e., which negate Christ's lordship over all of life and learning. And in the face of this mighty foe, the appeal of pietism to retreat and to huddle in private conventicles proves quite attractive to many believers. The other temptation is to embrace this worldview and walk and think in step with it. Each alternative is a denial of the catholicity of the gospel. Each option is no option at all for the Reformed believer. A restrictive, ascetic perspective on the world and its culture, withdrawing from the world in Pietist fashion, or, alternatively, succumbing to a secularized worldview, thinking its thoughts after it, fails to follow the Swiss reformation in its original implications and intent. The reform of life itself is privatized. While "individuals are rescued and snatched out of the world—the world that lives in wickedness—" yet, a methodic, principled, organic or wholistic reformation of the world, of nation and society, of family and vocation is never conceived or attempted.

Thus the periphery is attacked but never the center; the bulwarks but never the fortress itself. It is not a mighty, imposing conflict between the entire church militant and the world in the entirety of its organization as a kingdom under its own master [the devil], but rather a guerilla war that weakens the enemy here and there but never triumphs.... The conflict is characterized by a struggle against individual sins while the root of all sins is often left untouched. The unbelieving results of science are rejected, but there is no inner reformation of the sciences on the basis of a different principle. Public life is ignored and rejected—often as intrinsically 'worldly'—while no effort is made to reform it according to the demands of God's Word. Satisfied with the ability to worship God in their own houses of worship, or to engage in evangelism, many left nation, state and society, art and science to their own devices. Many withdrew completely from life, literally separated themselves from everything.... It is dedicated to conflict with and even rejection of the world but not to "the victory that overcomes it" in faith.<sup>90</sup>

This perspective, and its worldly alternative, treats the gospel as "one opinion among others"—as if the gospel itself is content with or presents itself in such a garb. On the contrary, the gospel presents itself as "*the truth*, the truth that by its very nature is exclusive in every area." How mistaken it is to miss this point.

The church is not just an arbitrary association of people who wish to worship together but something instituted by the

---

90. Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 246-247.

Lord, the pillar and ground of the truth. The world would gladly banish Christianity and the church from its turf and force it to a private inner chamber. We could give the world no greater satisfaction than to withdraw into solitude and leave the world peacefully to its own devices. But the catholicity of Christianity and the church both forbid us to grant this wish.... The kingdom of heaven may not be of this world, but it does demand that everything in the world be subservient to it. It is exclusivistic and refuses to accept an independent or neutral kingdom alongside of it. Undoubtedly it would be much easier to leave this entire age to its own devices and to seek our strength in quietness. But such a restful peace is not permitted us here. Because every creature of God is good and not to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because everything can be sanctified by the Word of God and prayer, rejection of any one of His creatures would be ingratitude to God, a denial of His gifts [1 Tim. 4:3-5]. Our conflict is not with anything creaturely but against sin alone. No matter how complicated the relationships may be within which we as Christ-confessors find ourselves in our age, no matter how serious and difficult, perhaps even insoluble, the problems may seem in the areas of society, politics, and above all, in science, it would testify to unbelief and powerlessness for us to withdraw proudly from the fray and under the guise of Christianity to dismiss the whole of our age's culture as demonic. In the words of Bacon, that would be nothing less than attempting to please God with a lie. On the other hand, faith has the promise of overcoming the world [1 John 5:4]. That faith is catholic, not restricted to any time, place, nation, or people. It can enter into all situations, can connect with all forms of natural life, is suitable to every time, and beneficial for all things, and is relevant in all circumstances. It is free and independent because it is in conflict only with sin and in the blood of the Cross there is purification for every sin.<sup>91</sup>

Bavinck wants nothing to do with a conception of the Christian faith that confines Christ and his lordship to the narrow confines of an ecclesiastical sphere and a privatized spiritual life, and which therefore fails to challenge Christless worldviews and worldly principles at the root. Let it be noted, Bavinck is not here advocating any notion of triumphalism. In opposition to any such notion, Bavinck warns believers away from this danger. He explicitly acknowledges that the one thing needful is a vital faith in and devotion to Jesus

---

91. Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 248-249. The Scripture references in brackets [ ] have been added by me, JMB. The reference to [Francis] Bacon is from his *Novum Organon*, Bk I, LXXXIX.

Christ, with the proper cultivation of an inner life of spiritual intimacy with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, though this personal intimacy can be “overestimated and overemphasized.” Nonetheless, Bavinck maintains that while nineteenth-century Christians overlooked the world and abandoned the field to the enemy, there is also the danger of “losing ourselves to the world.” It is a mistake to think that we can “convert the world” and “conquer all areas of life for Christ” while we “neglect to ask whether we ourselves are truly converted and whether we belong to Christ in life and in death.” Bavinck asks, “What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world, even for Christian principles, if he loses his own soul?”<sup>92</sup>

That said, faith must not be conceived as a tack on; it is not an addition to the walk of the believer. Neither is it the goal after which we labor. After all, faith, for the Reformed, is not at the end but at the beginning of the way of salvation. The Christian life—life in Jesus Christ—“doesn’t strive for faith, but lives out of faith. It is the way that does not work in order to believe, but believes in order to work. Such a Christian has found his standpoint in the promises of God’s grace in Christ.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, “Religious life does have its own content and independent value. It remains the center, the heart from which all the Christian’s thoughts and acts proceed, by which they are animated and given the warmth of life.” If this were not the case, then another master occupies this place, another lord, not the Christ, and not the gospel, reigns in place of them; and believers are truly split personalities—split either between faith as the religious part of their lives and unbelief in the rest of their lives, or a split between the gospel and grace motivating and directing a part of their lives (church life, Sunday) and law and works governing the rest of their lives (family, vocation, education, politics, etc.). This dualism is unreformed in the most fundamental way. Spiritual life is not only the prayer chamber and the Lord’s Day with the blessings of the means of grace. Spiritual life, springing from the prayer chamber, fortified by the means of grace, embraces all of life—not excluding “family and social life, business and politics, art and science.” All of life must be stamped as “service to God,” and that in Jesus Christ. “Faith isn’t only the way of salvation, it also involves overcoming the world.” “Even now, by rights, everything in principle belongs to the church [Christ’s people, those washed in his blood], because it is Christ’s and Christ is God’s. As a priest in the temple of the Lord, he who believes this is king over the whole earth.”<sup>94</sup>

---

92. Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1980), 94. Elsewhere Bavinck asserts that it is impossible to escape a certain degree of “onesidedness” as individuals and churches. “None of us has our intellect, emotions and will, our head, heart and hand, equally governed by the Gospel” (“The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 248).

93. Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, 95.

94. Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, 95-96.

In this connection it is important that we also see how Bavinck handles the question of “church power.” For here too there is a difference between the Roman Catholic and the Reformation conceptions—that is, both the Lutheran and the Reformed understandings of this topic. In fact, the issue cannot be detached from how one addresses the relationship between the church and the world, and thus a conception of two kingdoms—God’s governance of believers through the ministry of the church and God’s governance of civic life through the magistrate.

Bavinck notes, as we saw earlier, that Rome set the antithesis between heaven and earth as something quantitative and supernatural. In contrast, the Protestant conception saw the antithesis as ethical, stemming from sin and fallenness. That is,

the natural was not of a lower order but in its kind was as sound and pure as the supernatural, inasmuch as it had been created by the same God who revealed himself in the re-creation [of the world] as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only it had been corrupted by sin and therefore had to be reconciled and renewed by the grace of Christ. Grace, accordingly, serves here not to avoid, to suppress, or to kill the natural, but precisely to free it from its sinful corruption and to make it truly natural again.<sup>95</sup>

At this point Bavinck observes that Luther only traveled “half-way” on this road in that he “left the natural untouched, and restricted Christianity too severely to the domain of religion and ethics.” This goes hand-in-hand with Luther’s two-kingdoms doctrine. Christ’s reign and the gospel’s fruits are to be applied to the private life of the believer, within a narrow ecclesiastical framework. This stands in contrast to Calvin, who “continued the work of reformation and tried to reform all of life by Christianity.” Says Bavinck, using several watchwords: “‘Avoidance’ is the cry of the Anabaptists; ‘asceticism’ [asceticism] that of the Roman Catholics; ‘renewal’ and ‘sanctification’ that of the Protestant, especially of the Reformed Christian.” Says Bavinck, “This last view is, without doubt, the richest and most beautiful.”<sup>96</sup>

Next Bavinck echoes themes we have heard above. “There is only one God ... both in creation and in re-creation.” This means that creation is not lower to something that is higher. Creation is a splendid work of the Triune God. Yes, sin has corrupted everything, and “not only the spiritual life, the ethical-religious life, but also the whole of the natural life, the body, the family, society, the whole world—yet that sin is not substantial or material but ‘formal’ and hence not

---

95. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 435.

96. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 435-436.

identical with the created world”—being removed by grace.<sup>97</sup> Consequently,

To regain that fallen world, God introduced the forces of grace into his creation. Neither is grace a substance or matter, enclosed in Word or sacrament and distributed by the priest, but a renewing and transforming force. It is not per se supernatural but only bears that character on account of sin and hence has it, in a sense incidentally and temporarily, for the purpose of restoring the creation.

This grace is distributed in a twofold form: as common grace with a view toward restraining [evil] and as special grace with a view to renewing [the world]. Both have their unity in Christ, the king of the realm of power and grace. Both are directed against sin; both ensure the connectedness between creation and re-creation. Neither has the world been left to itself after the fall, nor deprived of all grace, but it is sustained and spared by common grace, guided and preserved for special grace in Christ. Separation and suppression, accordingly, are impermissible and impossible. Humans and Christians are not two separate entities. The creation is incorporated and restored in [the process of] re-creation. Persons who are born again are substantially no different from what they were before regeneration. Incorporated in the church, they nevertheless remain in the world and must only be kept from the evil one. Just as Christ the Son of God took a full human nature from the womb of Mary and, having that nature, did not regard anything human and natural as strange, so the Christian is nothing other than a reborn, renewed, and hence, a truly human person. The same people who are Christians are and remain in the same calling with which they were called; they remain members of a family, members of a society, subjects of the government, practitioners of the arts and sciences, men or women, parents or children, masters or servants, and so forth.

Accordingly, the relationship that has to exist between the church and the world is in the first place organic, moral, and spiritual in character. Christ—even now—is prophet, priest, and king; and by *his Word and Spirit* he persuasively impacts *the entire world*. Because of him there radiates from everyone who believes in him a renewing and sanctifying influence upon the family, society, state, occupation, business, art, science, and so forth. The spiritual life is meant to refashion the natural and moral life in its full depth and scope according to the laws of God. Along this organic path Christian truth and

---

97. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 436.

the Christian life are introduced into *all the circles of the natural life*, so that life in the household and the extended family is restored to honor, the wife (woman) is again viewed as the equal of the husband (man), the sciences and arts are Christianized, the level of the moral life is elevated, society and state are reformed, laws and institutions, morals and customs are made Christian.<sup>98</sup>

As has become clear, Luther and Calvin clearly conceive of the calling of believers *as believers* in their vocations differently, which in turn manifests different conceptions of a doctrine of two kingdoms—conceptions that at certain points show themselves to be incompatible with one another. Unlike Luther, Calvin was forthright in arguing that the *government was subject to God’s Word*—both tables of the law—and, accordingly, the state should protect pure doctrine and enact civil penalties in support of the church. Moreover, a Christian who was a magistrate had the duty to exercise such responsibility *Christianly*, under the lordship of Christ.

Bavinck, writing after the Reformed confession article 36 of the Belgic had been revised, notes that Calvin “drew a boundary line between church and state” differently than we do. In short, both church and state had a reach into personal lives broader than we conceive today. Nonetheless, Calvin conceived of the relationship between church and state as “contractual and free.” “The church has no choice but to preach the Word of God, to witness to his commandments in his name; but if the government or anyone else refused to listen, then the church ... no longer had any power or right to resort to coercion.” All that is left is passive resistance, which in fact is a form of action.<sup>99</sup>

The church exercises only spiritual power. Meanwhile, “the government, like every human being, remained responsible only to God for its unbelief, its rejection of the Word of God, for its violation of his commandments, and for the persecution and oppression of the church.”<sup>100</sup>

Bavinck notes that Calvin, of course, wanted and sought for a Christian government that supported and defended the Christian faith, specifically the Reformed faith. This made unbelief and heresy crimes against the state. This was a mistaken view, says Bavinck. But that view well depicts Calvin’s doctrine of the two kingdoms working in tandem with one another.

As a corrective, modern Reformed writers have sought a better model of the relationship between church and state. Bavinck offers these regulating principles:

---

98. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 436-437 (italics added).

99. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 438.

100. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 439.

1. Though its witness has been weakened by its multiformity, the church cannot resist stating the demand that all creatures, arts, sciences, family, society, state, and so forth must submit to the Word of the Lord.
2. This demand is only a message, a moral witness, and may never be urged upon people, directly or indirectly, by means of coercion or punishment.
3. A Christian, or Reformed, government has the calling to promote the honor of God, to protect his church, and to destroy the realm of the antichrist.
4. However, it can and may do this only with means that are compatible with the nature of the gospel of Christ and only in the area that has been entrusted to its care.
5. Being itself responsible to God for its attitude toward his Word, it may neither interfere with the rights of the individual, nor with those of the family, society, arts and sciences, and is not responsible, accordingly, for what happens within these areas that is contrary to God's Word and law.
6. It must draw a boundary line between sin and crime according to the demand of the gospel and in keeping with the guidance of divine providence in the history of nations. These lines do not coincide with those between the first and the second table of the law, for many sins against the second table fall outside the jurisdiction of the government, and many others against the first table (perjury, Sabbath-breaking) are also punishable by a Christian government.
7. No one can designate fixed boundaries in the abstract, for they vary with different peoples and in different ages and can only be somewhat determined in their basic direction by the witness of the popular conscience.<sup>101</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Bavinck's analysis of the Reformed versus the Lutheran conception of Christ's lordship and its implications for the Christian life, both within the community of faith and beyond in the public spheres of life, explicitly challenges and implicitly upbraids the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms. The Lutheran view, according to Bavinck, labors under the following obstacles and unbiblical commitments.

---

101. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV: 439-440.

First, Bavinck detects that Luther is still caught in the medieval dualism of nature/grace. This is the fundamental error from which all the other errors or shortcomings derive. Life is split into a spiritual realm and an earthly realm—and neither realm is united and connected with the other under the lordship of Jesus Christ (under God in a bifurcated manner, yes, but not under Christ). Consequently, creation and re-creation (redemption) constitute different realms, subject to different authority, such that Christ's kingship is limited to the ecclesiastical domain—as if the devil's tyranny is limited to the ecclesiastical domain. The net effect is that the earthly realm is judged incapable of coming to ethical renewal and regarded as indifferent. This nature/grace split runs down the spine of Lutheran theology, issuing forth in a dualism also between law and gospel, the legal and the spiritual, the world and church. Luther showed little or no discernment that the gospel wages a battle against sin, deception, and curse *wherever* these may be found.

Second, Luther restricts the gospel and limits the grace of God; in fact, the Lutheran view advocates a shrunken conception of grace, for divine grace is not conceived as having the intension of impacting all the rich diversities of life. Thus, the Lutheran reformation attempted only the renewal of worship and preaching; the rest of life was expected to carry on as it was. The Reformed, by contrast, aimed for the reformation of all of life, and sought how the whole world might be penetrated and hallowed by the Word of God. The Reformed preached principles, moral and spiritual, which when put into practice exercised a pervasive impact everywhere and aimed to reform and renew everything.

Third, the Lutheran conception, in tandem with its dualism and truncation of redemption, confines Christ's work as Savior and Lord to the ethical-religious, splitting life into two hemispheres. In back of this stands an understanding of Christ's lordship that fails to reach out beyond the ecclesiastical sphere of the institutional church. This also lines up with what Bavinck views as the Lutheran misconception of the church's catholicity. Instead of the truncated Lutheran view, a proper conception of catholicity understands that the gospel is a saving, healing, and transformative message for the entirety of the creation. Justification issues forth unto sanctification, for the claims of Christ over all of life means also the beginning of the sanctification of *all of life*. This is the healing-work of the kingdom of God. Accordingly, and conversely, with Christ's lordship truncated and the church's catholicity shrunken, naturally faith *in Christ* does not penetrate and direct the life of the believer in an integrated way; rather, human reason and will vis-à-vis natural life (versus spiritual life) are deemed free and capable of some good in themselves. Human depravity, then, is reckoned less pervasive than in the Reformed understanding of human corruption. The inevitable result of the confidence Lutherans place in human reason with respect to worldly affairs is that an au-

tonomy is bestowed to it which finally not only liberates itself from faith but also declares no place for faith whatsoever in the earthly realm of human knowing.

Fourth, the Lutheran view, with its dualism, opens the door to a foreign, unchristian worldview that grants, to be sure, religious freedom to all, but seeks to banish the Christian faith from the public square completely, reducing religion and faith to a private affair. Ironically, while the Christian faith is privatized and confined to the spiritual realm, the devil and the thought-forms of unbelief are allowed free reign over public life and the earthly realm. Perhaps the church might urge better behavior from civil magistrates; and they in turn may, by means of natural law and human reason, attempt to correct the worst abuses. Christ, however, as *the Redeemer*, has no claim over the devil's work in the public, non-ecclesiastical domain. As Bavinck notes, the Lutherans attack the periphery of the kingdom of darkness but leave its center unopposed, the bulwarks are assaulted but the fortress suffers no threat.

Fifth, the Lutheran view of faith, unlike the Reformed, is satisfied in finding refuge in Christ, but doesn't strive onward. For the Reformed, faith issues forth unto good works; spiritual life extends into all of life. It isn't sequestered to Sunday and to the means of grace, but belongs to each and every day of the week and extends to the rest of life, inclusive of family and social life, business and political life, the academy and recreational life. Faith unto salvation does not cease with justification; it progresses onward unto "overcoming the world." Decisive here is the Reformed discernment that everything *in principle* belongs to Christ; and thus it belongs to the church. The Lutheran conception has no eyes for this state-of-affairs.

Finally, specifically on the topic of church power and its relation to the question of church and state, Bavinck maintains that the Lutheran view traveled only half-way down the road of reformation, leaving the natural world untouched by the reform of the gospel. Because the Reformed articulated a doctrine of common grace, they could more easily escape and safeguard themselves against dualism. For both common and special grace find their unity in Christ; together they impact the world and the church. Bavinck supports a revision of article 36 of the Belgic Confession, excluding the use of coercive measures by the state against false religion and the like, but he also firmly declares that the state must uphold the rights and dignity of all persons, for this supports the gospel itself.

### 3. Conclusion

As it turns out, as a Reformed critic, Bavinck's criticisms match fairly closely the censures we earlier examined of Niebuhr, Thielicke, and Pannenberg. What is noteworthy is that these authors come from

distinct ecclesiastical traditions, wrote at different times, and out of different cultural circumstances. Neither Thielicke nor Pannenberg, both Lutherans, believe Luther's two-kingdoms ethic is adequate as it stands in order for the church to address the issues present and pressing today.<sup>102</sup> While Thielicke is the least critical, and wishes to distinguish classic Lutheranism from a neo-Lutheranism, his articulation of Luther's views mirror that of the other authors we have considered. The charge of dualism, which Thielicke acknowledges and accepts as characteristic of Lutheran thought on the two kingdoms, is thus on target. While Thielicke dislikes the monistic view of the Reformed, monistic is too pejorative a word, really, to describe what is at stake. Wholistic unity under one Lord—the one whom Scripture calls, curiously and deliberately, the Lord *of lords*, and the King *of kings*.<sup>103</sup>

Niebuhr, more than the other writers, dedicated his scholarship specifically to questions surrounding social ethics, and he proves to be the most severe critic of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms. Pannenberg, after bringing historical texture to the development of this doctrine, must finally agree with Barth's sharp criticisms against it. Writing as a German theologian, and in the aftermath of the rise of National Socialism and the German Christians who offered complicitous support of Hitler, Pannenberg detects sinister weaknesses in the two-kingdoms doctrine. Of course, given Pannenberg's conviction that theology must be composed within and delivered unto the public square, he is not willing to make peace with an isolated Jesus-ethic, cordoned off from a public ethic—a public ethic wherein the name of Jesus Christ stakes no claim.

Bavinck, like the other critics, sees the fundamental error in the dualism that Luther and the Lutheran tradition have not wholly escaped. He rejects the two-kingdoms, two-hemispheres scheme of Lutheran theology, and traces out the implications of this scheme in contrast to the Reformed tradition. The Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, inasmuch as the gospel and Christ are fenced off from the broader fabric of life, relies on a natural law ethic to carry the heavy freight of moral reasoning for the public square. A natural law ethic, in "the raw" and naïvely pursued, however, labors under the burden

---

102. Among modern (Lutheran) critics of Luther's views, particularly his reading of the Sermon on the Mount and its relevance for this topic, see Clarence Baumann, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985); Warren S. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (New York: Scarecrow, 1975); Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989); Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960); and Rudolf Schnackenburg, ed., *Bergpredigt: Utopische Vision oder Handlungsanweisung?* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1982). I am indebted to Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (DownersGrove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 131, for discovery of these sources.

103. See 1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; and 19:16.

that humans do not read morality off their hearts rightly, nor (we might add) do they rightly accomplish this either from the law of nature itself or from a sense of divinity or an inner, moral imperative or a feeling of absolute dependence. Instead, fallen humans always suppress the truth in unrighteousness. While conscience, a universal moral sense, may indeed be inscribed on the human heart, the ability of the natural man to read and interpret such aright is another matter. The Canons of Dort, under the third and fourth main points of doctrine, article 4, declares the inadequacy of the light of nature. “There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall, by virtue of which he retains some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrates a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior....” But the Canons declare that this light of nature is altogether inadequate to bring persons to salvation or to rightly direct a public ethic. “But this light of nature is far from enabling man to come to a saving knowledge of God and conversion to him—so far, in fact, that man does not use it rightly even in matters of nature and society. Instead, in various ways he completely distorts this light, whatever its precise character, and suppresses it in unrighteousness.” A phrase like “completely distorts” (*totum contaminet*) stands in stark contrast to the Lutheran confidence that public servants will use their reason to interpret natural law benevolently or according to equity.

One way to think about these issues is to consider whether or not creation belongs to Jesus Christ. Does Jesus Christ come to restore the creation to its proper order and purpose, to let it blossom, even while it is “under contest” by Satan and his minions? The point of the question is to demonstrate that Christ is not an *addendum* to creation, and thus redemption isn’t a super-added gift. Christ is the purpose, the *by whom*, *through whom*, and *for whom* of creation. He isn’t an *extra*, who is therefore *extraneous* to it—at least, not according to Colossians 1. Here we might add parenthetically, that Psalm 2 well presents the nations as opposing the Lord *and His Anointed*, the Messiah. We also observe that at the end of the history of human rebellion and the history of salvation, every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess Jesus Christ *as Lord*—for that is the heart of all rebellion. This One is Lord, Lord of everyone and everything—surrendered to him or not. He is the King.

There is a terrible naïveté at work in the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, for the Christian faith is, at least in part, privatized and sequestered to the ecclesiastical realm. Meanwhile, the devil refuses to play by the rules; he refuses to compartmentalize life into sacred and secular, nature and grace, church and society, law and gospel. No, we know that atheism (likewise false ideology or false religion) isn’t privatized or sequestered to an ecclesiastical sphere. Unbelief doesn’t limit itself to a spiritual realm versus an earthly realm.

The battle of the kingdom of God isn't fought merely in the churchly domain of the means of grace. To the contrary, the battle extends over all of life, where Christ the king, who has all authority in heaven and on earth, is the only rightful Lord, though his kingship is resisted; and usurpers, false gods, seek to rule contrary to him. The Swiss reformation understood this dynamic with far greater discernment than the Lutheran reformation, with its peculiar take on a two-kingdoms scheme.

We have stated that the fundamental nub at issue in the Lutheran understanding of the doctrine of two kingdoms centers on the scope of Christ's lordship. Whereas the Lutheran conception limits Christ's lordship to the church, under the gospel, the Reformed extend it to the whole of life.

In back of this difference is a different conception of the relationship between law and gospel. Fundamental for Lutherans is the antipathy between law and gospel; the principal and first place function of the law is as a teacher of sin. Fundamental for the Reformed is the unity of law and gospel; the principal and first-place function of the law is as a guide to gratitude. The Heidelberg Catechism well exhibits this difference, expounding the law in its third part, but using only the summary of the law as the teacher of sin. Luther, by contrast, expounds the law first and fresh out of the gate in his catechism, summing it up this way: "God threatens to punish all who transgress these Commandments...."

This *law/gospel difference* also explains the difference between Lutherans and the Reformed pertaining to the situation in paradise; and this has direct implications for redemption and the calling of the Christian in the world. For Lutherans, Adam and Eve had achieved all to be achieved in paradise; man had reached his destination. Eternal life was already his possession. The highest ideal was realized. Nothing more need be accomplished. Man's mutability did not point to a beyond, an eschatology awaiting fulfillment. Thus, for Lutherans, in the state of grace, there is only that restoration of what Adam lost; and since destination already realized was fully compatible with mutability and the possibility of falling away, the sinner who has been brought back to his destination by Christ remains at this level. Thus Lutheran theology does not have a doctrine of perseverance of the saints and allows the teaching of the apostasy of the saints. Justification and adoption are losable blessings.<sup>104</sup>

The Reformed, then, view the paradise situation differently, with man's highest end yet to be attained. There is a future, a task, a calling to fulfill, a cultural mandate to pursue. The fall interrupts and corrupts this, of course. But redemption in Christ sets us back on

---

104. See G. Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 234-267; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II: 571-580.

this path. Thus, for the Reformed, the Christian life and the Christian's calling in this life are dominated in everything by the honor of God as its higher motivation. The Lutheran perspective is anthropological in its motives—even for justification. It is not motivated that we image God in the creation as reflective of his virtues, that we outwardly mirror God in our conscious life in life's variety of callings and aspects. The Reformed, however, see life as governed by God's good, holy, righteous will. The law isn't an alien or stranger, an enemy as such. All that we are and have is divine gift, to be rendered back in service—including obedience. Even obedience, to attain a reward, requires God reaching down in condescending grace and goodness, to reward what is already owed, to bless what in itself can earn no blessing, i.e., eternal life. Indeed, eternal life would be a divine gift even if we had never fallen into sin and had obeyed God completely, for the merely human can never strictly merit anything before God (cf. 1 Cor. 4:7).

Thus, the Reformed understand the relation between law and gospel as forming a unity, for the gospel fulfills the law. And underneath the law stands a gracious God—gifting us to be able to fulfill what he stipulates in the way of holiness. This is no legalism; but it is no licentiousness either. It certainly is no dualism.

We cannot contest the kingdom of the devil and its workings, weaving its influence throughout the whole fabric of life, apart from Christ and his gospel. We certainly cannot contest the kingdom of darkness in the public arena with bare natural law, leaving the gospel in the sanctuary, for one cannot contest the influence and effects of the kingdoms of this world, staking their turf in the public square, while huddled in the church on Sunday, only to sheathe the sword of the Spirit and silence the witness of the gospel the other days of the week. With Bonhoeffer we must deny that "there are God-willed autonomous spheres of life which are exempt from the lordship of Christ, and do not need to listen to this Word. What belongs to Christ is not a holy sacred district of the world, but the whole world."

It comes as no surprise, then, that the Lutheran tale of two kingdoms is not a Reformed story.