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Luther's Attitude Toward Religious Toleration in Light of his Two Kingdom Doctrine

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LUTHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD RELIGIOUS TOLERATION
IN LIGHT OF HIS TWO KINGDOM DOCTRINE

A Research Paper Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
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H-200

by
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LUTHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD RELIGIOUS TOLERATION
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INTRODUCTION

Any consideration of Luther's view on religious toleration is bound to be beset with difficulties. Not the least of these difficulties are Luther's own commentators whose conclusions in this area run the gamut of proclaiming Luther the founder of religious toleration to that of an intolerant tyrant.¹ Depending on one's sympathies towards Luther and his reforms, one could pick and choose from Luther's writings to support any number of emphases or positions. But even those 'objective' scholars who propose to sum up Luther's comprehensive views in this area, face mighty obstacles. J. W. Allan writes this about Luther's writings: "They, it will hardly be disputed, prove this at least: that he was not in any sense, on any subject, a systematic thinker."²

Besides the troubles encountered in systematizing Luther, it would seem that in this area Luther was not altogether consistent. A. J. Dickens has declared that, "...we should flatter Luther by arguing that he displayed a wholly consistent scheme of thought in the matter of

¹Luther Hess Waring, The Political Theories of Martin Luther (New York: Knickerbrocker Press, 1910), p. 256.

²J. W. Allan, "Martin Luther," in Social and Political Ideas of the Renaissance and Reformation, ed. by F. J. C. Hearnshaw (London: George C. Harrap and Company Ltd, 1925), p. 171.

religious toleration and public coercion."³ Dickens is by no means alone in this assessment. Part of the problem is that Luther was an eminently practical man. His theology and politics were not mere theoretical speculations, but rather he addressed himself to the present realities: the specific person, the specific situation.

In the chaotic 16th century the situation and the people were changing rapidly. Luther, himself, laments the changing course of the Reformation which caused him to enter new battles for the sake of the Gospel. when he writes, "There were so many who originally supported us and joined the cause of the Gospel against the pope that it might have seemed for a while that we were going to have the whole world on our side. Just when everything seemed to be in full swing, our own people went ahead to cause us more anguish than all the princes, kings, and emperors could have done."⁴

The purpose of the treatise is not simply to list the inconsistencies or contradictions that may exist in Luther's attitudes toward religious toleration (though at times it will become important to come to grips with these variances). No, the real challenge and goal is to uncover Luther's rationale, if possible, which determines his relations with those he opposes. In other words, it is the attempt to find that consistency or loyalty to principle that will clarify the all too apparent inconsistencies.

Indispensible to this task, and the key to understanding Luther's

³A. G. Dickens, The German Nation and Martin Luther (London: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 128.

⁴Martin Luther, The Sermon on the Mount, in Luther's Works - American Edition, ed. and trans. by Jaroslav Pelikan, XXI (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 249. (Hereafter cited as LW)

ecclesiastical and political suggestions on how the opponents of the Gospel should be handled, requires a clear understanding of Luther's two kingdom doctrine. Thus the first part of this paper will take up Luther's two kingdom doctrine outlining its implications on his attitude toward religious toleration. Especially important is Luther's discernment of the contact points between these two kingdoms.

The second half of the paper will deal exclusively with Luther's push for tolerance or nontolerance, whatever the case may be, with the purpose of comprehending the reasons underlying his stance. To understand Luther, to really see things through his eyes, challenges us to crawl inside this enigmatic figure, to experience the turmoil, the loyalties, dangers, and accomplishments that he experienced. Naturally this is an idealistic goal, but somehow one must attempt it - to get the feeling for that age, to appreciate the Zeitgeist when Luther was making his bold statements.

To encounter Luther in the spirit of his own time is all the more difficult considering the sheer complexity of his nature. Thus in our attempt to know the man and the reasons and goals for his actions, perhaps the best place to begin is with Gerhard Ritter's captivating description of Luther.

"He is a man of the people, an agitator in grandest style and the most popular speaker and writer that Germany has ever produced; possessed of unprecedented hitting power and coarseness of language, of boundless anger and fighting zeal, he sways the masses most forcefully. He shares the moral indignation of his contemporaries over the outward corruption of the church; he uses all the slogans of anticlerical and anti-papal opposition of the preceding hundred years and still outdoes them - but at the same time he is the most brilliant

profound theological thinker, the most powerful and strong-willed figure of his people, and a religious genius whose experience of faith is of unprecedented inwardness and intimacy."⁵

⁵Gerhard Ritter, "Why the Reformation Occurred in Germany," The Concordia Theological Monthly, XXX (October, 1959), 723-732.

CHAPTER I

LUTHER'S TWO KINGDOM DOCTRINE

The Spiritual Realm

To accurately survey Luther's religious toleration or lack of it, as I've said, presupposes a clear understanding of his concept of the spiritual government or "right-hand kingdom." A short, pithy definition of this kingdom might be as follows:

"...the spiritual order of salvation in which he God carries out his opus proprium, the work of redemption. It is essentially an inward and invisible government, a government of the soul; for it is not concerned with men's external lives but only with their eternal salvation. In it God rules through the Word and the Holy Spirit, by means of which he operates secretly in men's hearts to draw them away from sin and make them righteous."⁶

We may note that in this kingdom there is no violence, compulsion, or distinctions to be found. The mark of this kingdom and its supreme importance for men is the righteousness, i.e., the righteousness of God it helps us obtain. The distinguishing mark of this kingdom is that by the Holy Spirit it produces Christians and righteous people under Christ. So Luther writes, "The gospel, however, does not become involved in the affairs of this world, but speaks of our life in the world in terms of suffering, injustice, the cross, patience, and contempt for this life and temporal wealth."⁷

⁶W. D. J. Chargin Thompson, "The 'Two Kingdoms' and the 'Two Regiments': Some Problems of Luther's Zwei-Reiche-Lehre," The Journal of Theological Studies, XX (1969), 164-185.

⁷LW, Admonition to Peace, XLVI, 35.

Because this right-hand kingdom deals with external matters it is of necessarily higher rank.⁸ Therefore Luther feels that the misuse of spiritual power, "...is a more serious matter than the misuse of secular power, because it is more dangerous."⁹ The danger is confusing this kingdom with its counterpart on the left, or finding its distinguishing mark not in God's secret work through the Word and Spirit, but instead, in some external organization or manner of living. Again these matters are of the worldly kingdom and imply rank and privilege which have nothing to do with God's right-hand kingdom. Luther writes, "Among Christians there is no superior but Christ himself, and him alone. What kind of authority can there be where all are equal and have the same right, power, possession, and honor, and where no one desires to be the other's superior, but each the other's subordinate?"¹⁰

Now what does all this mean as it concerns the Christian Church? It signifies for Luther that the continuity of the church from its beginnings is not to be found in its external organization or ties, but in its doctrine and practice.¹¹ It means that Luther weakens none of the impact of the Sermon on the Mount commands, nor limits them to certain estates (e.g. Monastic orders) or particular items (such as the end

⁸Paul Althaus, The Ethics of Martin Luther, trans. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 56.

⁹Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁰LW, Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, XLV, 117.

¹¹Lowell C. Green, "Erasmus, Luther, and Melancthon on the Magnus Consensus: The Problem of the Old and the New in the Reformation and Today," Lutheran Quarterly, XXVII (November, 1975, 364-381.

of history).¹²

So Luther writes, "Now you see the intent of Christ's words which we quoted above from Matthew 5, that Christians should not go to law or use the temporal sword among themselves. Actually, he says this only to his beloved Christians, those who alone accept it and act accordingly..."¹³ Writing to the peasants Luther reminds them what it means to be a citizen of this spiritual kingdom: "...the Christian law tells us not to strive against injustice, not to grasp the sword, not to protect ourselves, not to avenge ourselves, but to give up life and property, and let whoever takes it have it. We have all we need in our Lord, who will not leave us, as he has promised (Heb. 13:5). Suffering! suffering! Cross! cross! This and nothing else is the Christian law!"¹⁴

Luther is no way sought to diminish the power or necessity of the sword. In fact, he upheld it emphatically. His purpose was only to draw a sharp demarcation line between the kingdom of the right and the left. He makes this quite clear in his treatment on the Sermon on the Mount.

"He [Jesus] is not saying: 'No one should ever resist evil'; for that would completely undermine all rule and authority. But this is what He is saying: 'You, you shall not do it.' Now, who are these 'you'? They are the disciples of Christ, whom He is teaching about their personal lives, apart from the secular

¹²Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, trans. by Karl H. Hertz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 13.

¹³LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 92.

¹⁴LW, Admonition to Peace, XLVI, 29.

government... Therefore He intends to say: 'Leave the resistance of evil, the administration of justice, and punishment to the one who holds a position in the secular realm, as the lawyers and the laws instruct you to do.'¹⁵

Again and again Luther emphasizes the passivity of the Christian in the face of all forms of injustice. He points this out clearly, writing, "...for it is a Christian's duty not only to be merciful, but also to endure every kind of suffering - robbery, arson, murder, devil and hell."¹⁶ Thus there are two classes of people in this world, "...the first belonging to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world."¹⁷ If, however, the whole world was composed of real Christians there would be no need for temporal government. And why not? Luther answers, "It is because the righteous man of his own accord does all and more than the law demands. But the unrighteous do nothing that the law demands; therefore, they need the law to instruct, constrain, and compel them to do good."¹⁸ But, alas, the Christian is a rare bird and always in the minority. Furthermore, this utopian speculation is tempered with Luther's own realistic verdict of even the Christian man as one who is always simul justus et peccator, who must ever battle with the old man.¹⁹

¹⁵LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 114.

¹⁶LW, An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants, XLVI, 70.

¹⁷LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 88.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁹Thompson, "The 'Two Kingdoms' and 'Two Regiments!'," pp. 180-181.

It is plain that Luther's understanding of the right-hand kingdom provides principles which determine his views on religious toleration. From here springs the notion that faith can never be forced; it is an internal thing, worked by God, not something man is able to create or mold. Furthermore, one discovers that the weapons of this kingdom and its goals are vastly different than the temporal order and therefore correspondingly shape and limit the administration of this kingdom. The weapons are Word and Sacrament and the goal is man's salvation, none of which have anything to do with power, rank, privilege or wealth. From this vantage point, that is, from his views of how God carries out His proper work of saving men, Luther could stand out as a champion of religious toleration in an oppressive religious 16th century setting.

The Temporal Realm

Luther was certainly a realist when it concerned man and his possibilities. To Luther the left-hand kingdom or the temporal realm was a great blessing, especially in light of the Fall. The most horrendous error in Luther's mind was to proclaim that the world could or should be ruled by the Gospel. This would display a total misunderstanding of how God works through the two kingdoms for our good. Luther writes,

"If anyone attempted to rule the world by the gospel and to abolish all temporal law and sword on the plea that all are baptized and Christian, and that, according to the gospel, there shall be among them no law or sword - or need for either - pray tell me, friend, what would he be doing? He would be loosing the ropes and chains of the savage wild beasts and letting them bite and mangle everyone, meanwhile insisting that they were harmless,

tame, and gentle creatures; but I would have the proof in the wounds."²⁰

The imagery of the wild beast, who would if he could, ravage everybody and everything, is Luther's favorite way of reckoning what the world would be like if it were not for God, who in His great mercy, instituted the kingdom of His left-hand. The purpose of this kingdom is to maintain the external peace, to punish sin, and provide for the needs of man's existence. Thus the kingdom is ruled by pure force or by the "fist" as Luther likes to call it. Luther appeals to Romans 13 to support the use of force in the temporal realm more than once. He says unabashedly, "Therefore the wrath and severity of the sword is just as necessary to a people as eating and drinking, even as life itself."²¹ Such force is indeed a true blessing for the innocent and godly, just as it is a scourge to the wicked.

Luther is without a doubt that God is behind this administration of justice in the secular realm. Hidden perhaps to all but the eyes of the faithful, God has committed his work to the rulers and ordained their rule. He writes, "However, God alone is lord over justice and injustice, and God alone passes judgement and administers justice. It is God who commits this responsibility to rulers to act in his stead in these matters. Therefore let no one presume to do this, unless he is sure that he has a command from God, or from God's servant the rulers."²²

²⁰LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 91.

²¹LW, Harsh Book Against the Peasants, XLVI, 73.

²²LW, Whether Soldiers Too, Can Be Saved, XLVI, 114.

What one must bear in mind is that the term 'secular' realm often conjures up the modern notion of some sort of autonomous realm independent of God. This was not what Luther meant at all.²³ For in his view, God was as active in the secular realm as He was in the spiritual.

Just as the right-hand kingdom had certain defined limits, so also does the realm of the left-hand. Luther was explicit in setting them down. He writes,

"The temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul... We want to make this so clear that everyone will grasp it, and that our fine gentlemen, the princes and bishops will see what fools they are when they seek to coerce the people with their laws and commandments into believing this or that."²⁴

This was a theme he was to harp on, given Rome's propensity to meddle in, if not participate fully in, the affairs of the secular realm. Luther took direct aim at Rome in his Address to the German Nobility where he decrees that one wall which urgently needs to be torn down is Rome's interference with the duties of the temporal realm. This leads Luther to state, "It should be decreed that no temporal matter is to be referred to Rome, but that all such cases shall be left to the temporal authority, as the Romanists themselves prescribe in that Cannon law of theirs, which they do not observe."²⁵

²³George Wolfgang Forell, Faith Active in Love (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), p. 131.

²⁴LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 105.

²⁵LW, To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, XLIV, 160.

However antagonistic the state may be, it is Luther's opinion that this has little bearing on the substance of our faith. Luther believed that the temporal power could not harm our faith because it had nothing to do with preaching or the first three commandments.²⁶ In fact, he was to say that temporal power was a "small matter in the sight of God", and something which is "too slightly regarded by him for us to resist, disobey or become quarrelsome on its account, no matter whether the state does right or wrong."²⁷ But Luther was to demonstrate by his own career that this was not always his own opinion or course of action.

The prince

When Luther speaks of secular authority, he means to include all the orders of creation that God uses to rule the world. Philip Watson in his book, Let God Be God! illustrates this best when he writes, "The whole created world, then, as Luther sees it, occupies a kind of mediatorial position between God and man. Its manifold order of life - 'the prince, the magistrate, the preacher, the schoolmaster, the scholar, the father, the mother, the children, the master, the servant' - can be described as 'persons and outward veils (larvae),' which serve God as 'His instruments by whom He governeth and preserveth the world.'"²⁸

The office of the prince plays an especially unique and primary role. When Luther thought of the state, he did not think of the pluralistic

²⁶LW, Treatise on Good Works, XLIV, 92.

²⁷Ibid., p. 93.

²⁸Philip S. Watson, Let God Be God! (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), p. 79.

nation states of today. For Luther, the state was synonymous with the person of the prince.²⁹ It was a personal form of government.³⁰ Luther displays some development in his attitude toward the princes from the beginning of the Reformation when most of the princes were hostile, to that later period when princes were constantly seeking his advice. But his basic thoughts about them remained the same.

His major complaint was that they interfered with the spiritual realm to the detriment of their own duties. Thus Luther complains,

"Why, you even take up the case of Luther and discuss in the devil's name whether one can eat meat in the fasting seasons, whether nuns can take husbands, and things of that kind which are not your business to discuss and about which God has given you no commandment. Meanwhile the serious and strict commandment of God, the commandment by which he has appointed you protectors of poor Germany, hangs in the air;..."³¹

Though Luther often had a poor opinion of the princes, he would never sanction or find it permissible to depose a prince, except if the prince were found to be insane.³² Even though a prince would not tolerate the Gospel, he remains the legitimate ruler. In specific instances; however, Luther would summon all Christians to obey God rather than men.³³

²⁹Althaus, The Ethics of Martin Luther, pp. 151-152.

³⁰Conrad Bergendoff, "Christian Love and Public Policy in Luther," Lutheran Quarterly, XIII (August, 1961), p. 227.

³¹LW, On War Against the Turk, XLVI, 189.

³²LW, Whether Soldiers Too, Can Be Saved, XLVI, 105.

³³LW, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, XLVI, 52.

Though Luther saw it necessary to obey the prince, this did not mean keeping silent about their excesses and corruptions. He found it incumbent, by virtue of his office as preacher of the Word, to speak out against the princes when necessary. Thus he writes after the Peasants' War, "When I have time and occasion to do so, I shall attack the princes and lords, too, for in my office of teacher, a prince is the same to me as a peasant."³⁴

But with all his rebuking of the princes, he nevertheless held their office to be second only to that of the spiritual office. Thus he writes in praise of this office, "In a word, after the Gospel, or spiritual office, there is on earth no better jewel, no greater treasure, no richer alms, no fairer endowment, no finer possession than that of a ruler who makes and preserves just laws."³⁵ Granted, this was written in 1530 when many more princes were favorable to Luther's reforms, but it fairly represents Luther's attitude throughout his life.

Luther was to have, even in his later years, harsh words for those princes he believed had over-reached their authority. Yet still he is able to call them gods on the basis of Psalm 82 - but gods who themselves have a Lord. He writes,

"He [God] confesses, and does not deny that they are gods. He will not be seditious or lessen their honor or power, as the disobedient rebels do, and the mad saints, and the heretics and fanatics. Nevertheless, he makes a true distinction between God's

³⁴LW, Harsh Book Against the Peasants, XLVI, 75.

³⁵Martin Luther, Eighty-second Psalm Translated and Explained, trans. by C. M. Jacobs, IV (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1931), 302. Hereafter cited as WML.

power and theirs. He will let them be gods over men, but not over God Himself, as if he were to say, 'It is true that ye are gods over all of us, but not over the god of all of us.'"³⁶

Luther is not quiet about the duties of the prince either. It is in this area that we see clearest his development and change of attitude over and against the prince. When he writes his tract on civil government in 1523, he summarizes the fourfold duty of the prince in this way: "First, toward God there must be true confidence and earnest prayer; second, toward his subjects there must be love and Christian service; third, with respect to his counselors and officials he must maintain an untrammelled reason and unfettered judgement; fourth with respect to evil doers he must manifest a restrained severity and firmness."³⁷

In 1530 in his tract on the Eighty-second Psalm he also had some advice as to the duties of the prince, but this had a noticeably different flavor. Here he summed up the duties of a prince by listing the virtues that the office requires. In delineating the first virtue Luther seems to pursue a different emphasis. He writes, "For by the first virtue, the furtherance of the Word of God, He helps many to blessedness, so that they may be redeemed from sin and death, and attain salvation."³⁸

Here Luther seems to be encouraging a more activist stance on the part of the prince as it concerns a man's religious life. This emphasis grew stronger as Luther's life and the Reformation progressed. This led Luther to view the ideal relationship between prince and subject to be

³⁶Ibid., pp. 289-290.

³⁷LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 126.

³⁸WML, Eighty-second Psalm, IV, 306.

likened to that of a father to his son.³⁹ Thus in a paternal way, the prince is to be concerned for his subject's physical and spiritual life.

While Luther's vision of a paternal relationship between prince and subject would have great import in discerning his attitudes toward religious toleration, it must be seen in light of Luther's constant rebuking of those political officials who intrude upon the spiritual office. Just three years before his death, he writes complaining of such an intrusion.

"Either they [civil authorities] must become pastors, preach, baptize, visit the sick, serve communion, and carry on all church work, or else resist from mixing the different functions together, mind their court affairs, and leave the congregations to those who have been called to minister to them, and who shall render an account to God for their ministry. We want the functions of the church and the court to be kept separate, or both will perish. Satan continues to be Satan! Under the pope he mixed the church with the state; now he mixes the state with the church. By the grace of God we will resist and do what we can to keep the functions separate."⁴⁰

So even though the prince could be called a savior, father, and deliverer, it is only in so far as he carries out his duties and they concern only the externals of life.

Reason and natural law

Whereas in the spiritual realm, reason is at best incompetent, in the realm of civil affairs it is the "empress of worldly rule."⁴¹ Luther

³⁹Althaus, The Ethics of Martin Luther, p. 115.

⁴⁰"Martin Luthers Briefwechsel, Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe," eds., Konrad Burdach et al., X (Weimar, 1930ff), 436, cited by G.M. Bruce, Luther and Church Government, "The Lutheran Quarterly, V (November, 1953), 377-378.

⁴¹Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., "Church and State in Theological Expression Since the Reformation," in Church and State Under God, ed. by Albert G. Huegli (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 77.

writes, "In the human affairs of this world man's reason suffices. He needs no other light than reason. God does not teach in Scripture how to build houses and to makes clothes, marry, make war and similar things. For these the natural light [of reason] is sufficient."⁴² For Luther this becomes an important factor, especially as it relates to the princes whose decisions affect many people. Luther thought of natural law as that hidden law of God which all men can acknowledge. Spitz explains poignantly:

"There is apart from revelation a moral order of nature, a special moral sense (synteresis) in man, for God has placed into the human conscience a knowledge of natural law and has established a hidden inner law in the historical forms of human society. The imprint of God's eternal rightness (ius divium) finds expression in natural law (lex naturae), by which men everywhere can judge right and wrong according to their measure of understanding."⁴³

In Luther's mind, common sense was of the highest priority for those who were called to rule. Therefore, though Luther did not disdain the positive law, he was not above criticizing it or urging the rulers to bend it for the sake of what he considered a more just ruling. Luther writes, "A good and just decision must not and cannot be pronounced out of books, but must come from a free mind, as though there were no books."⁴⁴ Just before the Peasants' uprising, he used the same reasoning to chastise the princes. "A cartload of hay must give way to a drunken man - how much more ought you to stop your raging and obstinate tyranny and not deal unreasonably with the peasants, as though they were drunk, or out of

⁴²Martin Luther, Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, eds. J. K. F. Knaake et al., X (Weimar, 1833ff.), p. 531. (Hereafter cited as W.A.) Cited by George W. Forell, et al., Luther and Culture, Martin Luther Lectures, IV (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1960), 16.

⁴³Spitz, "Church and State," p. 76.

⁴⁴LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 128.

their minds!"⁴⁵

In Luther's mind the positive law only barely reflected the natural law. He calls the natural law the "healthy law" and positive law he labels the "sick law". So he writes, "Whatever is done with nature's power succeeds very smoothly without any law; in fact, it overrides all the laws. But if nature is missing and things must be done according to laws, that amounts to mere beggary and patchwork; and no more is achieved than is inherent in diseased nature."⁴⁶

What this means to the prince is that he has a certain amount of independence. But all law and all decisions are to ultimately be judged by God via either His Written Word and or the God-given natural law. The loyalty is to God, but the problem is perceiving that will. Luther never volunteers to offer detailed instructions on exactly how the prince is to rule. But he is ever ready to, "...instruct his heart and mind on what his attitude should be toward all laws, counsels, judgements and actions."⁴⁷

The Christian's Responsibilities and participation in the left hand kingdom

In this section, I will restrict the discussion specifically to the prince (though the same principles apply to all men in all their respective callings) for it will serve as valuable background in understanding Luther's exhortations to the princes concerning issues related to religious toleration.

⁴⁵LW, Admonition to Peace, XLVI, 21.

⁴⁶LW, Psalm 101, XIII, 163-164.

⁴⁷LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 119-120.

As Luther puts it, "There is no getting around it; a Christian has to be a secular person of some sort."⁴⁸ This is unquestionably true of the prince who is a Christian. In Luther's thought there is an important distinction to be made. "According to your own person," as Luther has it, "you are a Christian; but in relation to your servant you are a different person, and you are obliged to protect him."⁴⁹

Thus for Luther there are two sets of life relationships.⁵⁰ There is the private person and the public person. The two lives cannot be separated, but the distinction must be made whether one is acting as a private person, or as a public person carrying out one's office. For Luther, "No Christian shall wield or invoke the sword for himself and his cause. In behalf of another, however, he may and should wield it and invoke it to restrain wickedness and to defend godliness."⁵¹ So for a prince or judge to punish or execute is not wrong, but is of great service as long as it is not done merely out of personal hatred or vindictiveness.⁵²

Luther writes,

"You suffer evil and injustice, and yet at the same time you punish evil and injustice; you do not resist evil, and yet at the same time, you do resist it. In one case, you consider your neighbor and what is his. In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself affording to love and tolerate no injustice

⁴⁸LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 109.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Bornkamm, Two Kingdoms, p. 8.

⁵¹LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 103.

⁵²LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 111.

toward your neighbor. The gospel does not forbid this; in fact, in other places it actually commands it."⁵³

For the prince who wishes to follow this advice on behalf of his subjects, the question will always be: what constitutes the injustice. Can the spreading of heresy or false teaching be considered an injustice against the people? Then again who is to determine false doctrine or heresy? Is this validly a part of the prince's office or would this be another unfortunate co-mingling of the two kingdoms? Obviously the tension to maintain the separation of the two kingdoms and yet encourage a rule that best served the interest of the people represented a pivotal struggle for Luther between the maintenance of a sharp separation of the right and left hand kingdom and what appeared to be the great practical necessity of a church in need of reform. Undoubtedly Luther saw dangers no matter which way one leaned.

The Inter-relationships Between the Two Kingdoms

Luther's most constant refrain about the relationship between the two kingdoms is that they are to be kept separate. He writes, "I must always drum in and rub in, drive in and hammer home such a distinction between these two kingdoms, even though it is written and spoken of often that it is annoying. For the cursed devil himself does not cease to cook and brew these two kingdoms into each other."⁵⁴

⁵³LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 96.

⁵⁴W.A., LI, 239-240. Cited by Spitz, "Church and State," p. 81.

For Luther the problem is with the official who overreaches his office and concerns himself with matters over which he has no authority. He writes, "In the devil's name the secular lords always want to teach and instruct Christ how He should run His Church and the spiritual government. So also the false persons and factious spirits, not in God's name, always want to teach and instruct how one should order the secular government."⁵⁵ Therefore it is not surprise that Luther desires to give general directives concerning the political and spiritual offices. For example he writes, "Second, from this it follows that the same person cannot be a bishop and a sovereign, nor simultaneously a pastor and a house-father."⁵⁶

To illustrate the horrible mess that can occur when the two kingdoms are not kept separate, Luther often points to the example of the papacy. Immersed as it is in the affairs of the temporal world, Luther can only remark that it is little wonder that the spiritual realm has suffered. With regard to this pitiful situation, Luther feels constrained to urge the emperor to remind the pope of his duties. This he does, writing, "Instead, he [the emperor] should draw the pope's attention to the Bible and the prayer book, that he preach and pray and leave the government of lands and people - especially those that no one has given to him - to the temporal lords."⁵⁷ Luther was encouraged by only one thing in

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶LW, "Letter 225 to Philip Melanchthon, July 21, 1530," IL, 383.

⁵⁷LW, Address to German Nobility, XLIV, 167.

this confusion of the two kingdoms within the Catholic church, and that was that unlike the kingdom of the Turk, the papacy did not yet have the sword.⁵⁸

But to the carnage that could be wrecked by those who took up the sword unlawfully, Luther pointed to the Peasants' uprising. Luther considered this disaster a prime example of what might result from the confounding of the two kingdoms.⁵⁹ The peasants had no right to arm themselves and revolt in the name of God against their princes. To do this was to thoroughly confuse the two kingdoms and their functions, and led Luther to write in his tract, An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants; "Now he would would confuse these two kingdoms - as our false fanatics do, would put wrath into God's kingdom and mercy into the world's kingdom; and that is the same as putting the devil in heaven and God in hell."⁶⁰

Although Luther would "hammer" it in that the two kingdoms should be kept apart, he would admit their close inner connection. For the unity of the two kingdoms as Luther clearly perceived it, was found in the sovereign rule of God Himself.⁶¹ As Luther saw it, God has never ceased to be active in the world to 'uphold it, direct it, and replenish it with new creatures'.⁶² It is the essence of this activity in the natural order

⁵⁸LW, On War Against the Turk, XLVI, 198.

⁵⁹Forell, Luther and Culture, p. 65.

⁶⁰LW, Harsh Book Against the Peasants, XLVI, 75.

⁶¹Spitz, Church and State, p. 84.

⁶²Thompson, "The 'Two Kingdom' and 'Two Regiments,'" p. 184.

that God, "...does not reveal himself openly, but prefers to remain 'concealed' (verborgen, absconditus) and to operate through natural means."⁶³

In contrast to this, the mask is removed and God is revealed in Christ in the spiritual realm. In this realm the Word and Spirit are ever active in bringing men to salvation. Thus both governments are an expression of God's love for men.⁶⁴ They both dispense righteousness, though they are two kinds of righteousness. Only that righteousness of the spiritual realm - the gift of God - can procure salvation. But both are of God as Luther has written: "Thus God himself is founder, lord, master, protector, and rewarder of both kinds of righteousness. There is no human ordinance or authority in either, but each is a divine thing entirely."⁶⁵

In all of this what must be carefully avoided is to somehow identify the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of the World with the temporal and spiritual kingdoms. These last two kingdoms must always be seen as the two hands of God continually working in the world with God Himself, or better yet, His love for mankind as the unifying factor between the two kingdoms. For the coercive law and the defenseless Word are both ways in which God saves and sustains.⁶⁶ This is true even though the world may curse the severity of God if they wish to acknowledge Him at all. But the Christian will recognize and perceive such severity for what it

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Bornkamm, Two Kingdoms, p. 33.

⁶⁵LW, Whether Soldiers Too, Can Be Saved, XLVI, 101.

⁶⁶Bornkamm, Two Kingdoms, p. 28.

is, that is, an expression of God's love for our good.⁶⁷

With this inner connection in mind, Luther viewed the relationship between the two kingdoms, as one that checks and balances the other. So Luther is convinced that it is the very duty of the spiritual teachers to publicly correct and instruct the rulers. He writes in his Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount,

"So it is a mistake when some wiseacres maintain now that it is enough for a preacher to tell everyone what is right and simply to preach the Gospel, but not to touch the pope, the bishops, the princes, and other stations or persons, since this causes unrest and discord. But what He [Jesus] means is this: 'If you want to preach the Gospel and help people, you must be sharp and rub salt into their wounds, showing the reverse side and denouncing what is not right, like the Masses, monkery, indulgences, and all their words and ways, so that these scandals are eliminated and no longer deceive people.'⁶⁸

Again he writes in his discourse on the Eighty-second Psalm, this time more specifically concerning the princes: "So, then, this first verse teaches that to rebuke rulers is not seditious, provided it is done in the way here described; namely, by the office to which God has committed that duty, and through God's Word, spoken publicly, boldly, and honestly."⁶⁹

None of this means that Luther intended for the officeholders of the spiritual realm to give specific directives to the princes or other officeholders in the temporal realm and therefore permit them to exonerate themselves from sticky issues.⁷⁰ No, to do this in Luther's thought would be to again confuse the kingdoms and the various offices. The purpose of such instruction and or rebuking was only intended to remind the temporal

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 15.

⁶⁸LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 56.

⁶⁹WML, Eighty-second Psalm, IV, 297.

⁷⁰Althaus, Ethics of Martin Luther, p. 149.

lords who they were responsible to, and what duties they should be about. Naturally the emphasis would be on summoning their consciences to God who was their lord, as they were lord over others. But Luther in no way preached, or encouraged the preaching of insurrection. Though the prince be a tyrant this in no way affected the legitimacy of his rule. If the prince pits himself against God, then it is right to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). But this form of resistance is always to be passive, one that is ready and willing to suffer. Accordingly Luther writes, "For the governing authority must not be resisted by force, but only by confession of the truth. If it is influenced by this well and good; if not, you are excused, you suffer wrong for God's sake."⁷¹

Now on the other hand, the state was to check and balance the spiritual realm. For instance, Luther throughout the troubled period of his career maintained that it was the responsibility of the secular authorities to call a general council. He writes in 1520, "No one can do this so well as the temporal authorities, especially since they are also fellow Christians, fellow priests, fellow members of the spiritual estate, fellow lords over all things."⁷² Later he was to write and support this notion using historical precedents. He appealed to the case of the Council of Nicaea where because, as Luther saw it, the Arian heresy had "proved too much for the clergy of Alexandria, and even for other clergy." Hence it was left to the 'pious emperor Constantine' to add his authority and straighten out the matter.⁷³

⁷¹LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 124-125.

⁷²LW, Address to German Nobility, XLIV, 137.

⁷³Jaroslav Pelikan, Obediant Rebels (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 71.

It was not only in the calling of councils that the temporal order was to be serviceable to the church, but it was also to be called on to correct the notable external abuses within the church. This is especially seen, and will be discussed more fully later, when Luther and his contemporaries saw the need for the state's assistance in re-structuring the church beginning with a general visitation of the parishes. This, of course, was to draw a very fine line between balancing the two kingdoms and the co-mingling of them.

Summation: The Relationship Between the Two Kingdoms

Paul Althaus captures the paradoxical relationship of Luther's thought pertaining to the two kingdoms when he writes, "Luther says that we cannot have one without the other. And he also says that we should separate them as far from each other as heaven is separated from earth."⁷⁴ But as we have noted, they both represent instruments by which God seeks to preserve and serve the world. Thus as Luther has it, "God has a double blessing, a physical one for this life and a spiritual one for eternal life."⁷⁵

However, for Luther these two kingdoms are not just simply instruments to bless men, but they are also weapons used in the cosmic battle against the regnum diaboli.⁷⁶ The Word seeks to win men to Christ, to turn them from their sins, and draw them into obedience, while the

⁷⁴Althaus, Ethics of Martin Luther, pp. 60-61.

⁷⁵LW, Lectures on Galatians, XXVI, 251.

⁷⁶Thompson, "The 'Two Kingdom' and 'Two Regiments,'" p. 172.

temporal government seeks to restrain the diabolical forces that lie just underneath the surface of society and would destroy the world through their sin.⁷⁷ On the otherhand, the devil is constantly attacking these two kingdoms, seeking to undermine them and grab control over them. He seeks to do this by stirring up rebellion and tempting those in offices of authority to ignore their duties.⁷⁸ Thus in Luther's view, chaos of any form is a direct service to the devil and a way in which he attempts to drown out the Good News of the Gospel.⁷⁹

So in opposition to this Kingdom of the World, the two governments may often cooperate to do battle with the devil. The point where the two kingdoms most clearly touch one another is the point of God's law. As Althaus has it, "Political authority is basically the office of the law. However, both the gospel and the preaching of the law have been committed to the church."⁸⁰ Therefore order serves the Gospel. Because the church also teaches the law, it consequently can be of great service to society. The Christian, himself, in his enlightened state will be all the more eager to serve the needs of society for he sees in it God's will at war against the devil and his kingdom.

We can see now that Luther draws no rigid line between church and

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 173.

⁷⁹Forell, Luther and Culture, p. 27.

⁸⁰Althaus, Ethics of Martin Luther, p. 148.

state.⁸¹ Both have the same Lord and both are responsible to serve Him. The implications of this for his views on religious toleration are many, as would be expected. He saw the role of the two kingdoms as that of helping the other to be obedient.⁸² In the case of a non-Christian prince, this role might well be best carried forth by a strict separation. But with a Christian prince the benefits of a paternal relationship could serve the church immeasurably. Yet regardless of who was ruling, the church was not about to leave society to run its own course or 'resign it to a secularized culture'.⁸³ Nor were the rulers to be left untouched, but they were to be constantly reminded of God's will for them. This give and take between the two kingdoms and Luther's perception of a cosmic battle are two aspects of considerable significance influencing Luther's evolving attitude toward religious toleration.

⁸¹Ralph F. Moellering, "Attitudes Toward the Use of Force and Violence in Thomas Münzer, Menno Simons, and Martin Luther," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXI (July, 1960), 421.

⁸²Althaus, Ethics of Martin Luther, p. 147.

⁸³Roland Bainton, Here I Stand (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950), p. 243.

CHAPTER II

LUTHER: THE CHAMPION OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

"The Reformation began with such high hopes - the end of religious tyranny, the transformation of society by a benevolent priesthood of confident believers, even the mass conversion of the Jews."⁸⁴ Naturally there could be other ways to describe the atmosphere of those early years, but no doubt this one contains a strong element of truth. For Luther was being hailed as an enlightened one (though for many reasons depending on the person and his perspective). In the early years he was a champion for many different sorts of people: the humanists, the peasants, the knights, the Jews, etc. For he was the man who represented the fight against tyranny in all its various forms.

Briefly we must mention the tremendous impact of his doctrine of justification. No longer was man bound to all sorts of mediators. No longer need man consider his relationship to God bound to the strait-jacket of sacramental and hierarchial mechanisms. Luther's writings had a way of freeing men and pointing their loyalties toward God and away from human institutions and statutes.⁸⁵ Thus he writes,

"...and be quite certain that no man, neither bishop, pope,

⁸⁴Steven E. Ozment, The Reformation in the Cities (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 151.

⁸⁵James S. Preus, "The Political Function of Luther's Doctrine," Concordia Theological Monthly, XLIII (October, 1972), 594.

nor even angel, may command or prescribe anything contrary to these three commandments [the first table] and their works, whether it is contrary to them or does not further them. And if they attempt to impose such demands, we must consider their demands unauthorized and worthless. If we follow their demands and obey them, or even let such things go on, we are guilty of sin."⁸⁶

It is in this spirit of looking to God and His Word as opposed to men or organizations that Luther writes brave words in his Treatise on Good Works: "But, if, as often happens, the temporal power and authorities, or whatever they call themselves, would compel a subject to do something contrary to the command of God, or hinder him from doing what God commands, obedience ends and the obligation ceases."⁸⁷

In that same year in this Address to the Christian Nobility, he attacks the three walls that the papists have built to insure their own political self-interest. For he calls for the nobility to end the papacy's temporal-like rule. He denies that the pope alone can interpret Scripture for the whole church or that he alone can summon a council. His words throughout this treatise seem to cry out for a religious liberty that rightfully belongs to every man. To the true Christians he writes, "...all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office."⁸⁸ As regards the the heretics, he still has heartening words: "We should overcome heretics with books, not with fire, as the ancient fathers did. If it were wisdom to vanquish heretics with fire, then the public hangman would be

⁸⁶LW, Treatise on Good Works, XLIV, 89.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 100.

⁸⁸LW, Address to German Nobility, XLIV, 126.

the most learned scholars on earth. We would no longer need to study books, for he who overcomes another by force would have the right to burn him at the stake."⁸⁹

During the period of the 1520's, Luther had more sympathy for those who were called heretics, for this label was often applied to him. He took consolation in the fact that Scriptures often pointed to those who persecuted as the ones who were clearly wrong and the ones being persecuted as always in the right. Consequently he writes, "The majority always supports a lie, the minority the truth."⁹⁰

Luther stood firm within this 'liberal' (surely liberal for this period) attitude of religious toleration, even with the outbreak of trouble within his own camp. While he was hidden away at the Wartburg, Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets were causing quite a stir in Wittenberg. Though Luther did not oppose the reforms of Karlstadt, he certainly opposed the speed in which they were being instituted. With the meek Melanchthon unable to judge the spirits or stem the tide, Luther felt bound to return to Wittenberg and straighten things out, even if the Elector did not approve of his return.

His return to Wittenberg was a dangerous and brave act. He viewed his cause as a battle in which God's Word alone would make the difference. Thus in a letter to Elector Frederic concerning his return to Wittenberg, he rejects the idea of receiving protection from the Elector. He writes,

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 196-197.

⁹⁰W.A., VII, pp. 20-38; 49-73. Cited by Joseph Lecler, Toleration and the Reformation, trans. by T. L. Westow, I (New York: Association Press, 1960), 154.

"I do not intend to ask your Grace's protection. Indeed I think I shall protect you rather than you me. If I thought your Grace could and would defend me by force, I should not come. The sword ought not and cannot decide a matter of this kind, God alone must rule it without human care and cooperation."⁹¹ In fact, as Luther would state later in his letter, if he were to be captured and put to death the Elector was not to offer any resistance. This willingness to suffer would mark his attitude of religious toleration toward others in the future. For the most part, he found his opponents much less courageous.

On returning to Wittenberg, he preached his renowned eight sermons to quell the iconoclasm and the much too spirited reforms. His second sermon is noteworthy for our purposes, because it points out what he felt of outward compulsion compared to the results the Word might effect. This second sermon concludes:

"I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example, I have opposed the indulgences and all the papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and with Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy, that never a prince or emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing; the Word did it all."⁹²

Here Luther shows his consistency maintaining that only the Word can move the hearts of the people. The reforms are to be the work of those who labor on behalf of the spiritual kingdom. Luther sees no

⁹¹Martin Luther, "Letter 529, Luther to the Elector Frederic of Saxony, March 5, 1522," Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters, ed. and trans. by Preserved Smith and C. M. Jacobs, II, (Philadelphia, 1918), 95. Hereafter designated Luther's Correspondence.

⁹²WML, The Eight Wittenberg Sermons, II, 399-400.

good resulting from reforms carried through by general laws as he commented earlier in this Wittenberg sermon: "But I would not make it an ordinance for them, nor urge a general law; he who would follow me could do so, and he who refused would remain without. In the latter case the Word would sink into the heart and perform its work...and thus God would accomplish more with His Word than if you and I would forge into one all power and authority."⁹³

But those who persistently resist the reforms are to be left alone as Luther instructs in a letter to Nicholas Hausmann.

I condemn masses held as sacrifices and good works, but I would not lay hands on those who are unwilling to give them up or those who are doubtful about them, nor would I prevent them by force. I condemn by word only; who so believes, let him believe and follow; who so does not believe, let him disbelieve and depart. No one is to be compelled to the faith or to the things that are of faith, but to be drawn by word, that he may believe and come of his own accord."⁹⁴

In 1523 he wrote the tract "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed." In this tract he sharply delineated between the two kingdoms of Church and state. What preceded the composing of this tract and prompted Luther to write it was the news that some of the princes were forbidding their subjects to read his works. Naturally Luther found this practice abhorrent. In his mind, only one alternative was left and that was to obey God rather than man. Luther writes, "And the subjects make the mistake of believing that they, in turn,

⁹³Ibid., p. 398.

⁹⁴Luther's Correspondence, "Letter 537, Luther to Nicholas Hausmann at Zwickau, March 17, 1522," II, 110.

are bound to obey their rulers in everything. It has gone so far that the rulers have begun ordering the people to get rid of certain books, and to believe and conform to what the rulers prescribe."⁹⁵ Luther later in the tract makes it more explicit that temporal authority can compel no religious belief and that religious freedom is the proper possession of each individual conscience. He writes, "Therefore, in matters which concern the salvation of souls, nothing but God's word shall be taught and accepted. Again, consummate fools though they are, they must confess that they have no power over souls. For no human being can kill a soul or give it life, or conduct it to heaven or hell."⁹⁶

Again pertaining to the same concern he writes, "How he believes or disbelieves is a matter for the conscience of each individual, and since this takes nothing away from the temporal authority, the latter should be content to attend to its own affairs and let men believe this or that as they are able and willing, and constrain no one by force."⁹⁷

One very interesting question that Luther raises in this tract, is whether or not it is permissible for the temporal government to see to it that externally no one deceives the people by false doctrine. He gives an answer to this very question in his tract on civil government. The answer is significant, for Luther later in his career renders a far different opinion. In 1523 he answers it this way: "This the bishops should do; it is a function entrusted to them and not to the princes.

⁹⁵LW, Temporal Authority, XLV, 83-84.

⁹⁶Ibid., p. 106

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 108.

Heresy can never be restrained by force. One will have to tackle the problem in some other way, for heresy must be opposed and dealt with otherwise than with the sword. Here God's Word must do the fighting."⁹⁸

Note: In this context, Luther uses the word heresy to conote public false teaching. By 1530 Luther will have firmly reputiated this answer.

For Luther in this period before 1525, the matters of faith and justification were all consuming topics. And because they were both a matter of the heart he realized that no external ordinance, least of all capital punishment, would effectively convince or convert anyone. But with his hopes high, now with the Gospel freed to do its work, many would be brought into the fold. With such optimism Luther could afford to be generous with those who failed to join in the reforms. In his Preface to an Ordinance of a Common Chest he writes with some of these in mind.

"Since no one is to be forcibly brought to faith and the Gospel, the remaining inmates, who on account of their age, their belly, or their conscience continue in the monasteries, should not be ejected or dealt with harshly, but supported for the rest of their days just as before. For the Gospel teaches us to do good even to the unworthy, as our heavenly Father sends rain and sunshine upon good and evil alike..."⁹⁹

For Luther the real battle was with the devil in the intangible spiritual realm. The temporal upheavels of that present time were viewed as only a minor skirmish in this war. Hence he writes,

"Now the devil is a spirit who cannot be beaten with armor, muskets, horses, and men, and God's wrath cannot be allayed by them, as it is written in Psalm 33 (147:10), 'His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man; but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 114

⁹⁹WML, Preface to an Ordinance of a Common Chest, IV, 94.

who hope in his steadfast love.' Christian weapons and power must do it."¹⁰⁰

In fact, Luther emphatically denies that he or his followers used anything but the Word to further their cause. He points to the pope as persecuter. In comparison, Luther paints himself as a peaceful man.

"They call me and my followers seditious; but when have I ever coveted the sword or urged men to take it, and not rather taught and kept peace and obedience, except when I have instructed and exhorted the regular temporal rulers to do their duty and maintain peace and justice? I and my followers keep and teach peace; the pope, along with his followers, wages war, commits murder and robs not only his enemies, but he also burns, condemns, and persecutes the innocent, the pious, the orthodox, as a true Anti-Christ."¹⁰¹

In this same line of thought he attacks the notion that the temporal lords or emperor can be of any assistance in this spiritual war. Firmly adhering to his two kingdom doctrine, he reproves the mixing of the offices of the spiritual and temporal authorities. So he lamblasts the idea of the emperor being designated the defender of Christendom.

"He has been urged, as head of Christendom and as protector of the church and defender of the faith, to wipe out the Turk's religion, and the urging and exhorting have been based on the wickedness and vice of the Turks. Not so! The emperor is not the head of Christendom or defender of the gospel or the faith. The church and the faith must have a defender other than emperor and kings. They are usually the worst enemies of Christendom and of the faith..."¹⁰²

These arguments culminate in a manifesto on religious liberty that was surely unheard of in this period of close cooperation between church and state. Luther writes, "There are entirely too many Turks,

¹⁰⁰LW, On War Against the Turk; XLVI, 170.

¹⁰¹Ibid., pp. 180-181.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 186.

Jews, heathen, and non-Christians among us with open false doctrine and with offensive, shameful lives. Let the Turk believe and live as he will, just as one lets the papacy and other false Christians live. The emperor's sword has nothing to do with the faith; it belongs to physical worldly things, if God is not to become angry with us."¹⁰³

It is no doubt that words like this by Luther spawned a spirit of religious freedom. Here was a man who was breaking down the walls and snapping the chains that held people religiously captive. Luther's own words describing the monks who resisted following him are enlightening; he calls them "inmates". The example of Luther's own person was bound to be inspiring. A man who stood before the pope and the princes and would not be deterred from his convictions. A man who faced danger and was ready to give up his life for the Gospel. Any successes were attributed to the word, and no credence and even warnings were given to those who sought to force the reforms which he had inspired. In these early years no help was needed or sought of the temporal lords. In many cases they were hostile anyway, and Luther was more anxious to restrain them from over-reaching their office and interfering in the spiritual realm. Finally in urging the separation of church and state, of the spiritual and temporal realms, Luther issued forth statements whose resplendent tone sounded forth a call for religious liberty that was foreign to the ears of a slowly awakening Medieval society.

With such a presence and with such words, Luther could be construed as a champion of religious liberty. But this was not his destiny

¹⁰³Ibid.

nor his cause. His object was not the pursuit of religious liberty, but rather his loyalty was with God's Word and his cause was to see that it remained pure. Therefore as events would have it, these two causes were bound to go their separate ways.

CHAPTER III

LUTHER AND THE DEMISE OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

As has been said, Luther was a realist and a man who addressed himself to very practical issues. The events of the Reformation were by no means static, nor was Luther and the positions he maintained. Such was the case with the issue of toleration. Luther's adamant stand for the cause of religious liberty was to fade for many different reasons. The approach of this paper is to pin-point some of the areas which demonstrate Luther's hardening and to show the reasons why. The attempt throughout is to perceive his rationale that caused him to turn, and become increasingly less tolerant.

Sedition

It has been shown that Luther often spoke of a religious freedom. The accent, however, was always on the word 'religious'. He propounded the freedom that was available in the spiritual realm in contrast to that civil freedom in the temporal realm.¹⁰⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan explains it this way, "Luther maintained that the only freedom that mattered was the freedom from sin, death, and hell available in Christ to men who otherwise were enslaved."¹⁰⁵ This was not the kind of freedom that

¹⁰⁴ Althaus, Ethics of Martin Luther, p. 146.

¹⁰⁵ Pelikan, Obedient Rebels, p. 20.

demanded social emancipation. But in the 1520's among the peasants, it was not hard to understand how all of this might become thoroughly confused.

No one can say that the peasants' lot was an easy one, nor was it bettered any by the fickle princes. Luther was aware of the peasant rumblings and probably was more astute to the factors underlying the conditions than most. In a letter to Elector Frederic and Duke John in July of 1524, Luther makes mention of those who are inciting the peasants and what he expects the outcome to be. He writes, "The sole reason for my inditing this letter to your Grace is that I have gathered from the writings of these people, that this same spirit will not be satisfied to make converts by word only, but intends to betake himself to arms and set himself with power against the government, and forthwith raise a riot." Despite this he sums up the very same letter with an admonition to keep separate the offices of the Word and the temporal offices. "To sum it up, gracious Lords, your Graces must not interfere with the office of the Word. Let them go on boldly and confidently preaching what they can and against whom they will; for as I have said, there must be division, and the Word of God must take the field and fight...But if they will fight with anything more than the Word, if they will break and smite with the fist, then your Graces should interfere..."¹⁰⁶

Luther's analysis of "these people" accurately coincided with their actions. That March previous to his letter to the Elector, Thomas M nzer

¹⁰⁶Luther's Correspondence, "Letter 631, Luther to the Elector Frederic and Duke John of Saxony," II, 243.

and followers had burned down a chapel dedicated to the Virgin at Mallerbach just outside of Allstedt. This was to be a sign of things to come. By April of 1525, Luther was ready to offer his advice to a larger audience when he wrote his tract, "Admonition to Peace." In it he has harsh words for the temporal lords. He writes, "We have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you princes and lords..."¹⁰⁷ It was his belief that they were asking for trouble. With the peasants, he argues more mildly. He endeavors to show them the terrible effects their uprising could have on all authority, government, and law. He complains that even the Turks and the heathen would be considered better off than those peasants who call themselves Christians and yet in their violence have no regard for God's own natural law.¹⁰⁸

The real inherent danger, as Luther sees it, is that the violence done in the one kingdom - in this case, the temporal kingdom - could leave the other kingdom vulnerable and apt to be destroyed. In a word, the insurrection was dangerous to the gospel. He writes, "This, then is a great and dangerous matter. It concerns both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. If this rebellion were to continue and get the upper hand, both kingdoms would be destroyed and there would be neither worldly government nor word of God, which would ultimately result in the permanent destruction of all Germany."¹⁰⁹

But again Luther will tolerate no mixing of the offices and thus

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 246.

¹⁰⁸LW, Admonition to Peace, XLVI, 27.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 18.

he advises the rulers: "Indeed, no ruler ought to prevent anyone from teaching or believing what he pleases, whether it is the gospel or lies. It is enough if he prevents the teaching of sedition and rebellion."¹¹⁰ However, the distinction between cultivating sedition and the simple teaching of false doctrine becomes increasingly blurred.

It was not long after this tract that Luther was to have some first hand experiences with the excitable peasants. The unrest had spread into the Thuringian area and Luther found that his preaching there was met with little approval. He was heckled and interrupted and he had good reason to fear injury.¹¹¹ Thus with his own encounters, together with the unpleasant news of the peasants' activities in the South, Luther was more than ready to deal harshly with the peasants. Less than a month after publication of the tract, Admonition to Peace, Luther had issued his scathing attack against the rebellious peasants in the treatise entitled, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes.

This rebellion was a sign to Luther that the devil was stealthily manipulating events to get to him and the gospel.¹¹² The devil had shifted the plains of the battle from the spiritual kingdom to the temporal kingdom. In Luther's mind this called for drastic action. He went so far as to call upon individuals to aid and act on behalf of the government. Therefore he writes, "Furthermore, anyone who can be proved

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 22.

¹¹¹Mark U. Edwards, Luther and the False Brethren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 111.

¹¹²LW, Admonition to Peace, XLVI, 33.

to be a seditious person is an outlaw before God and the emperor; and whoever is the first to put him to death does right and well. For if a man is in open rebellion, everyone is both his judge and his executor; just as when a fire starts, the first man who can put it out is the best man to do the job." His language became even more pointed and harsh when he encouraged people to, "smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel."¹¹³

This last tract did much to earn Luther the label of 'flatterer of princes'. Surely this was an unfair label, but it did portray in part Luther's newfledged realization of the valuable role the princes played in fighting a two front war with the devil. Though he was cognizant of this much earlier, Luther came to realize even more the need for evangelical Christians to be involved in all forms of secular authority. Luther was later to consent to a suggestion that sedition also entailed the peaceful abstention of oneself from society and its responsibilities, hence not supporting law and order. This is one of several reasons why he became less tolerant toward the Anabaptists. But more often he tackles the sedition that manifests itself openly, seeing in it the hand of the devil who employs it for the sake of subverting God's rule.

Luther's last tract concerning the Peasants' Uprising, "An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants", was meant to be an explanation of his virulent words against the peasants. In it, he

¹¹³LW, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, XLVI, 50.

remains consistent, seeing the severity that was dealt the peasants, as really a blessing from God who has upheld the two kingdoms, the sources of every blessing. So he writes, "Although the severity and wrath of the world's kingdom seems unmerciful, nevertheless, when we see it rightly, it is not the least of God's mercies."¹¹⁴

The result of the Peasants' Revolt did much to change Luther's image. He threw off any connection between his religious 'rebellion' and the bloody rebellion of the peasants. What is more, it had a fundamental influence on his perception of the religious ferment of the day. As Roland Bainton assesses it, the Peasants' Revolt left a deep scar on Luther. He writes, "The deepest hurt was to Luther's own spirit. He became so fearful that religious extravagances would lead to social disorders as to become at times hard and indiscriminating."¹¹⁵

These suspicions, for instance, colored his further dealing with Karlstadt. He observed and experienced first hand what he considered the word of Karlstadt. He was rudely accepted by Karlstadt's congregation at Orlamünde, which he attributed more to Karlstadt's leadership there than the controversial nature of his visit.¹¹⁶ And though he housed Karlstadt for a time while he was still under the Elector's banishment, he was more inclined to stick with his previous assessment when he asserted, "Therefore, though I have not said that Dr. Karlstadt is a murderous prophet, yet he has a rebellious, murderous, seditious

¹¹⁴LW, Harsh Book Against the Peasants, XLVI, 71.

¹¹⁵Bainton, Here I Stand, p. 284

¹¹⁶LW, Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments, XL, 100-101.

spirit in him, which if given an opportunity, would assert itself."¹¹⁷

These same suspicions were directed toward the sacramentarians and the Anabaptists, although not always without warrant. About the so-called sacramentarians he writes, "I have been a prophet since I always said that the mind of the sacramentarians is full of hidden [leanings toward] insurrection. [This mind] comes now to the fore and betrays itself. Unless God intervenes they will be another Múnzer; but they will be this to their own ruin, so that they, the violators and defilers of the sacrament and the gospel, may receive their punishment. Let the dead bury the dead."¹¹⁸

As for the Anabaptists, Luther's tolerance narrowed, surely goaded by the sudden turn of events which saw the usually peaceful Anabaptists turn violent in their capture of the city of Múnster. There they hoped to inaugurate the reign of the saints, but they were soon suppressed by the joint effort of the Catholics and Protestants. And as Bainton would remind us as well, in Luther's own backyard the leading Anabaptist was Melchior Rink, who was with Múnzer at the battle of Frankenhausen.¹¹⁹ Naturally, then, in Luther's mind the Anabaptists would have, at least in part, a seditious taint.

Amidst a countryside seething with revolution, with so-called men of God leading the way, tolerance was something Luther thought ill-advised. Given the circumstances, Luther was forced to become more explicit as to what the reforms and gospel were all about. Fermenting revolution was the

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 89.

¹¹⁸LW, "Letter 202, Luther to Nicholas Hausmann, February, 1530," XLIV, 264-265.

¹¹⁹Bainton, Here I Stand, p. 378.

devil's ploy to besmirch the gospel. To show tolerance to the fanatics was to align oneself with the arch enemy. For the fanatics and the false prophets were not interested primarily in the Word or faith but in the externals that the world valued.¹²⁰ So if Luther embraced the princes, it was not because they were any better than the peasants, but because that in this particular time they were able to serve the gospel whether they knew it or not.

Obviously it was the state's duty to deal with rebellion because it was an external matter and thus a duty to be accomplished in the secular kingdom. Even so, the year 1525 represented a pivotal date in Luther's development. For from this year onward he comes to rely more and more on the state. This was due in part because of the value he placed on law and order for the good of the gospel and its growth. But it was also due to the changing political circumstances. One of these significant changes occurred on May 5, 1525. For on that day the Elector Frederic died and his brother John took the throne.¹²¹ John enthusiastically embraced the Reformation and was willing to serve it in a way that Frederic had never offered. This was to place an evangelical prince in the temporal kingdom and inaugurate a new alliance between the two kingdoms.

The Magistrate

As I have shown, Luther knew the value of a prince who faithfully

¹²⁰Edwards, Luther and the False Brethren, p. 53.

¹²¹Roland H. Bainston, "The Development and Consistency of Luther's Attitude to Religious Liberty," Harvard Theological Review, XXII (April, 1929), 116.

carried out his duties. Luther was likewise convinced that no one since Augustine had glorified the temporal duties as he had.¹²² From the outset of the Reformation, Luther had remained in close contact with the centers of political power. Spalatin, the court chaplain under Elector Frederic, had played a vital mediating role for Luther.¹²³ With the ascension of Duke John to the throne, and with the resignation of Spalatin, Luther generally practiced a more direct approach in his dealings with the prince.

In the height of the turmoil with the peasants, Luther wrote in his tract, "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes,": "These are strange times, when a prince can win heaven with bloodshed better than other men with prayer!"¹²⁴ Of course, what Luther meant was that it had become crucial that the rebellion be suppressed for the sake of the gospel. As much as Luther appreciated the princes for their unwitting assistance to the gospel, Luther gradually came to realize that this might not be enough. With the peasants and men like Karlstadt on one side and the Catholics on the other, the 'Lutheran' churches definitely needed a protector and perhaps organizer. This need for protection was surely not Luther's great concern - for he was ever ready to rely on the Word alone - but he was increasingly alarmed at those who welcomed the Reformation as an excuse for their gross religious indiscipline. The church having rid itself of the Catholic ecclesiastical structures, was short on organization

¹²²LW, On War Against the Turk, XLXI, 163-164.

¹²³Ozment, The Reformation in the Cities, p. 126.

¹²⁴LW, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, XLVI, p. 55.

and clearly did not measure up to the tasks of restoring good discipline. Left with this state of affairs, the only possible allies were the princes. They alone had the power to re-organize. For it was clear that the renovation of the whole Catholic Church had been halted and it was thus necessary, at least for the time being, to organize local churches.¹²⁵

Luther may have eventually desired an evangelical episcopate, independent of the temporal rulers. However, many of the existing bishops resisted the reforms. To deal with the immediate situation, Luther was left with only one alternative: leaning on the princes and city councils. But what in the later years of life prevented him from forming the evangelical episcopate? The only answer seems to be Luther's eschatology; he genuinely expected the end of the world to come in his life time and therefore saw little need to give much time to the polity of the church.¹²⁶

Not only were the princes and councils the one alternative left to re-organize the parishes, but it was also a matter of practical convenience. For in most localities church and state had been meshed together, with properties and external affairs long being the prerogative of state administration.¹²⁷ Given these circumstances, it is no surprise that Luther, after John's assumption to the Electorship, would write requesting the aid of the prince for the churches within Saxony. In a letter dated October 31, 1525, Luther writes to Elector John:

¹²⁵Bergendoff, "Christian Love and Public Policy in Luther," p. 220.

¹²⁶Spitz, Church and State, p. 89.

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 352.

"The first matter is that everywhere the parishes are in such poor condition...The common man pays so little attention and respect to preachers and pastors that in a short time there will not be a parsonage, a school, or a pulpit functioning, and thus God's Word and worship will perish, unless your Electoral Grace passes strict laws, and carefully regulates the maintenance of parishes and pulpits. For this reason, may Your Electoral Grace continue to allow God to use your Grace, and to be God's faithful instrument. This will bring great comfort to your Electoral Grace's own conscience, because it is God who asks and requires this action of you through us and through the emergency situation itself."¹²⁸

The outgrowth of Luther's request was to take shape in the form of a general visitation of local parishes and disciplining when necessary. It was to be carried on by a joint effort of the theologians and the jurists. The financial matters were to be primarily the concern of the jurists with the quality of the worship life the chief concern of the theologians. Luther staunchly remained with his conviction that though the rulers were to reform the Church, they were not to have authority in matters of worship and faith.¹²⁹ Even Luther who offered a sample of good church order in his treatise, The German Mass and Order of Divine Public Service (1526) would compel no church to adopt it. Within the church, things were to proceed on a voluntary basis. The visitors were however, to prevent sectarian and separatistic movements and assure that all preaching and administering of sacraments was done according to God's Word.

It is characteristic of Luther that throughout his life he strove

¹²⁸LW, "Letter 160, Luther to Elector John, October 31, 1525," XLIX, 135.

¹²⁹Dickens, The German Nation and Martin Luther, p. 69.

to maintain the distinction between the office of the prince and the office of the spiritual authorities. He would repetitiously remind the secular authorities of this distinction. He writes in the introduction to the 1528 Instruction: "For although His Electoral Grace is not commanded to teach and to rule spiritually, nevertheless he is responsible, as secular ruler, to maintain things so that dissension, faction, and rebellion do not arise among the subjects."¹³⁰

Luther viewed the princes as friends, brothers, and even fathers.¹³¹ They may promote religion as members of the congregation, but not in any pre-eminent or absolutist fashion. Although he was to refer to the princes as bishops, it was always as an emergency bishop (Notbischof) whose help was required only because of the circumstances and only for a time. This is how Luther explains it in 1542:

"Our secular lords must now be emergency-bishops and protect and assist us pastors and preachers (since the pope and his gang do nothing for us, but rather hinder us) so that we can preach and serve churches and schools. As Isaiah says, 'reges mitricij tui,' kings shall nourish you and queens shall nurse you. As it is still done where the Gospel has made the godly."¹³²

Theoretically the distinction between the prince and church could be made, but in practice it was more difficult to maintain. Unfortunately for the church, Luther never seemed to rectify this temporary situation and replace it with a more permanent solution. This had a sad effect upon the later church as the state came to predominate the church's life and

¹³⁰Spitz, Church and State, p. 88.

¹³¹Ozment, The Reformation in the Cities, p. 137.

¹³²W.A., LIII, 235. Cited in Forell, Faith Active in Love, pp. 163-164.

worship. Already within Luther's lifetime, Elector John had established a civil court to handle ecclesiastical problems, although as long as Luther was alive they were usually referred to him. Melanchthon, too, differed somewhat from Luther's view of the prince, consistently conferring to him as the pre-eminent member of the church. The effect of this was to shift more responsibility on the prince's shoulders because of his inherent power and dignity, which Melanchthon rooted in natural law.¹³³ Practically speaking, all of this tended to blur the distinction between the two kingdoms and the offices of the spiritual and temporal authorities.

This need to rely more on the secular authorities created a tension for Luther who had always maintained that faith cannot be compelled. Yet false beliefs almost always had social implications which involved the temporal authorities. Allan in his essay on Martin Luther in the book Social and Political Ideas of the Renaissance and Reformation, is helpful in discerning the three theories of the magistrate's relationship to religious matters, and suggesting Luther's place in the scheme.¹³⁴ First it might be said that the magistrate's duty is to maintain religion by force. This Allan alleges as the position of Calvin and for the most part the Catholics. Secondly, it might be said that a magistrate chooses to suppress heresy or tolerates it depending on what seems good to him. This view Allan attributes to the princes as their prevailing attitude. Thirdly, it might be said that the rulers have no business interfering

¹³³Spitz, Church and State, p. 89.

¹³⁴Allan, "Martin Luther," p. 185.

with religion at all, but rather they should allow complete freedom of belief and worship as long as it did not disturb the social order. This, as Allan sees it, was held by more than a few isolated thinkers. Which category does Luther fall within? Allan answers, "Luther gave the first of these answers to the question; and he gave the third. He never gave the second." To Allan this inconsistency was "...due to the fact that on this question of toleration, even more than any other, his deepest convictions were at war with his sense of what was practically and immediately necessary."

Allan's assessment is valuable in pin-pointing a peculiarity of Luther. For it appears that Luther did not much care about the prince's activity as long as the Word was furthered and unimpeded. Therefore as it concerns a man's private faith, Luther could be considered extremely tolerant. But if it was an external, something that had any public exposure at all, then he was ready and willing to see the prince's involvement in the matter for the sake of order and the gospel. This extended even to the smallest things such as vestments, rituals, fasting, and feasting. He supports such controls on the basis of the Old Testament and quotes Genesis 2 when he writes, "For it is a worldly matter and earthly existence which are subjected to reason through the word: 'Have dominion over the earth!'. Since secular government is reason's highest product [the government] is able to be creative and give orders in these matters."¹³⁵

¹³⁵LW, "Letter 229, Luther to Elector John, August 26, 1530," XLIX, 409.

The tightening of Luther's views on religious toleration can best be seen in his discourses on the topics of blasphemy. In a letter to Thomas Ldscher in August of 1529, he gives his rationale as to why blasphemy against the Christian faith is a matter that civil government can not permit. He writes,

"Grace and peace in Christ. This is my opinion, my brother in the Lord, about what you write concerning those despising blasphemers: As no one is to be compelled to [accept] the faith and the gospel, so they should not be allowed under the same government to blaspheme. But they should be called and heard, and they [themselves] should listen; if they can give no explanation [for their conduct] and have no wish to believe, they should by all means be forced to silence, so that no seed of civil discord be nourished. For he who wants to speak against [the Christian faith] should do this in public, and he should be checked through the authority of the government either publicly or privately. This is the way we do it, and the way we advise [handling the matter]." ¹³⁶

Again Luther is consistent in the belief that faith in Christ can not be forced. But by the same token, blasphemers have no right to express their unbelief publicly or argue against the faith without incurring the investigation of the civil government. The whole tenor of the letter suggests that unbelief will necessarily lead to troublesome social and political implications.

Luther expands on his views against blasphemy in his treatise on the Eighty-second Psalm. Here his 'liberal' attitude toward religious toleration seems to have all but disappeared. He alternates between the extremes of a harsh, bitter indictment over and against the princes, to that of laudable, praise-filled compliments. The gist of the treatise

¹³⁶LW, "Letter 195, Luther to Thomas Ldscher, August 26, 1529," XLIX, 233-234.

is that princes are God's greatest blessing to the land when they see to it that God's Word is furthered. It wouldn't be unfair to Luther to say that the Word that is to be furthered, protected, and supported is not the same Word that the Catholics, Anabaptists, and sacramentarians uphold. For all of these in their own way are blasphemers. And Luther makes no bones about it that such blasphemers should not be tolerated by the princes.

"If some were to teach doctrines contradicting an article of faith, clearly grounded in Scripture and believed throughout the world by the whole church, such as the articles that we teach children in the Creed...such teachers should not be tolerated, but punished as blasphemers. For they are not mere heretics, but open blasphemers, and rulers are in duty, bound to punish blasphemers, as they do those who curse, swear, revile, abuse, defame, and slander. Such teachers, with their blasphemy, are defaming the name of God, and robbing their neighbor of his honor in the eyes of the world. In like manner, the rulers should also punish, - or certainly not tolerate, - those who teach that Christ did not die for our sins, but that everyone shall make his own satisfactions for them; for that, too, is blasphemy against the Gospel..."¹³⁷

Luther, in spite of his open invitation to the secular rulers to defend and protect the Christian faith, wished to keep a vestige of the separation of the two kingdoms by again affirming that faith and belief cannot be forced. But at least in this treaty he seems to have blurred any of the other distinctions between the temporal and spiritual kingdom. His severity seems related to his growing inclination to appeal to the Old Testament. Luther continues:

"By this procedure no one is compelled to believe, for he can still believe what he will; but he is forbidden to teach and blaspheme. For, by so doing, he would take from God and the Christians their doctrine and word, and he would do them this injury under their own protection and by means of the things

¹³⁷WML, Eighty-second Psalm, IV, 309-310.

that all have in common. Let him go to some place where there are no Christians; for as I have often said, he who makes a living from the burghers ought to keep the law of the burgh, and not defame and revile it, or else he ought to get out. We are told that the holy fathers in the Council of Nicea, when they heard the doctrine of the Arians read, all hissed unanimously, and would not listen or permit any argument or defense, but condemned them out of hand, without any disputation, as blasphemers. Moses, in his Law, commands teachers, are to be stoned."¹³⁸

Luther was ready to defend his strong opinions against any objections that might be raised. In the treatise itself, he wrote of what undoubtedly he thought would be the most common rebuttals. He takes up the case of the Jews, with whom he deals with later in an incredibly harsh tract entitled, "On Jews and Their Lies". Luther's treatment of the Jews is worth separate treatment in itself. Therefore within the scope of this paper, little will be said of Luther's relationship with the Jews. By and large it can be said that his surprisingly cordial relationship with the Jews underwent a development that left him bitter and uncompromising. Here in this treatise he tackles the question of why the Jews are tolerated within the land for they above all deserve the label blasphemer.

Luther retorts, "They have their punishment for this, in that they are outside the Church and cannot hold any public office; and even as it is, they are not allowed to utter this blasphemy publicly."¹³⁹ Later in his life, he would go so far as to urge their expulsion from the land. In a letter to his wife, in the last year of his life, from Eisleben, he

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 316.

writes, "After the main issues have been settled, I have to start expelling the Jews. Count Albrecht is hostile to them and has already outlawed them. But no one harms them as yet. If God grants it, I shall aid Count Albrecht from the pulpit, and outlaw them too."¹⁴⁰ It cannot be doubted that at the end of his life he had little if any religious toleration for the Jews.

Perhaps the most perplexing question that can be raised about this tract and Luther's increasingly intolerant attitudes is how he, who had barely escaped the tyrants whom he says, in his own words, persecuted the gospel, could encourage the princes to root out blasphemy in their lands. For who knew better than Luther that the word blasphemy might be given different interpretations? Indeed Luther's doctrine was often labeled blasphemy. Fortunately Luther does not shy away from such a question, but faces it head on, and answers it again in his treatise on the Eighty-second Psalm. He writes,

"Perhaps someone may make me another clever answer and say that with this kind of teaching, I am strengthening the case of the tyrants who persecute the Gospel, and opening door and window for them. Since they consider our Gospel heresy and blasphemy, they will now preen themselves sure enough, and pretend that conscience and duty compel them to punish us as blasphemers. Answer: What do I care? If we were to hold back necessary instruction because of the tyrants, we would long since have had to give up the Gospel altogether. If they do right they will find it out, and I leave them to worry about it. When they knowingly use their power over wordly things, in the most self willed manner, for the injury of others, what wonder that they do us wrong? Like blind men, they cannot hear it. It was thus that the kings of Israel killed the true prophets. Nevertheless, we must not abolish or hide the commandment to stone false prophets; but pious rulers will punish no man without first

¹⁴⁰LW, "Letter 316, Luther to Mrs. Martin Luther, February 1, 1546," L, 291.

seeing, hearing, learning and becoming certain that he is a blasphemer."¹⁴¹

What Luther proves by this reply is his belief that the Gospel is evident and it is entirely the fault and the sin of the princes or whoever does not afford it the respect it is due when it is not obeyed. Again, for the Word to remain unclouded, is the supreme task in Luther's thought, even if it meant the sacrifice of other causes. Luther expended no extra love on those he considered obstinate in the face of the clearly perceived truth of the Gospel.

Definitely blasphemy, public false teaching and sedition were matters that the temporal authorities were bound to suppress. But what of the 'peaceful', passive, Anabaptists? In 1531 Melanchthon had drawn up a memorandum addressed to Elector John on the question of whether or not the Anabaptists should be punished with the sword. In the course of the memorandum two types of Anabaptists were distinguished: seditious and 'peaceful'. Naturally the seditious Anabaptist would be handled like any ordinary rebel. But what of the other Anabaptists, what is to be done with them? Melanchthon writes,

"There are others who do not teach seditious doctrines. One must, however, consider as blasphemy and sedition the fact the public preaching is condemned, that people are turned away from it, and that the Church is rejected in every way. It is intolerable blasphemy thus to reject public preaching and to teach that one should seek other ways of satisfaction, without preaching and without a minister of the Church. This implies destruction of the Church and sedition against the clerical status. Such

¹⁴¹WML, Eighty-second Psalm, IV, 316-317.

an attempt must be prevented and repressed like any other sedition..."¹⁴²

Luther may have been a bit vexed by Melanchthon's opinion but he was willing to sign it along with the other Wittenberg theologians and send it to the Elector. He did, however, attach a postscript which read, "I assent. Although it seems cruel to punish them with the sword, it is crueller that they condemn the ministry of the Word and have no well-grounded doctrine and suppress the true and in this way seek to subvert the civil order."¹⁴³

In 1536, Melanchthon had issued a second memorandum under the title, "Are Christian princes bound to repress the Anabaptists, an anti-Christian sect, by corporal punishment and even by the sword?" Melanchthon answers,

"Everyone is bound to prevent and repress blasphemy according to his status and function. By virtue of this commandment princes and civil authorities have the power and the duty to abolish unlawful cults, and to establish orthodox teaching and worship. The same commandment teaches them, moreover, to repress the public teaching of false doctrines and to punish the obdurate. Concerning this point the text of Leviticus applies (24:16): 'he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, dying let him die'."¹⁴⁴

Luther again signed the memorandum along with Bugenhagen and Cruciger. In essence this did away with any distinctions that were made between the seditious and non-seditious Anabaptists.¹⁴⁵ Bainton tells us

¹⁴²Phillipi Melanchthonis Opera, Corpus Reformatorum, ed., C.G. Bretschneider and H.E. Bindsel, IV (Halis Saxonium, 1834ff.), 739. Cited by Lecler, Toleration and the Reformation, I, 162.

¹⁴³Bainton, Here I Stand, p. 377.

¹⁴⁴Lecler, Toleration and the Reformation, p. 163.

¹⁴⁵p.D.L. Avis, "Moses and the Magistrate: A Study in the Rise of Protestant Legalism," Journal of Ecclesiastical History, XXVI (April, 1975), 155.

that Luther again added a postscript which pleaded, "that severity be tempered with mercy."¹⁴⁶ But the effect remained; the preaching of the Word was not hindered in any shape or form.

It is reported in his table talk (1540) that Luther was to disavow this position and again favor the distinction between seditious and non-seditious Anabaptists, preferring only to banish the 'peaceful' Anabaptists.¹⁴⁷ The idea of capital punishment for false teachers had always bothered Luther. His studies of Scripture had shown him, as already noted, that it is often the righteous who feel the full brunt of persecution. In a letter to Wenzel Link in July of 1528, he demonstrates this concern writing, "I hesitate to give capital punishment even when it is evidently deserved, for I am terrified to think what happened when the papist and Jews, before Christ, persecuted with death...Wherefore I am not able to admit in any case that false teacher be put to death; it is sufficient to banish them, and if our posterity abuse this penalty at least their sin will be less and will hurt only themselves."¹⁴⁸ But Luther in response to Melanchthon's second memorandum in 1536 was ready to admit that death and imprisonment might be preferred for the simple reason that the 'infection' was not spread elsewhere.¹⁴⁹

As we look at Luther's development on this question of capital punishment for false teacher, we note his vacillation. He went back and

¹⁴⁶Bainton, Here I Stand, p. 377.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸Luther's Correspondence, "Letter 800, Luther to Wenzel Link at Nuremberg, July 14, 1528," II, 447.

¹⁴⁹Bainton, "Luther's Attitude to Religious Liberty," p. 120.

forth on the question, though he did seem to lean to the side of leniency. In fact, viewed from the society of his day, and in comparison with other reformers including his own colleague Melanchthon, Luther's leniency is all the more noteworthy. Luther in light of his two kingdom doctrine was ever ready to tolerate Anabaptists as long as their faith and beliefs remained private. To the end of his life he maintained this stance. But Luther was never convinced that such a false faith could remain private and unobtrusive. Nevertheless in keeping with the separation of the two kingdoms, which Luther adamantly maintained was necessary, he instructed the prince to punish and prohibit only, "public crimes like perjury, and open blasphemy of God's name such as they indulge in, in the meantime not forcing them to believe that what the government prohibits is wrong, not even if they secretly curse it."¹⁵⁰

If there is one characteristic that stands above the others in Luther's treatment of the Anabaptist question, it is the lack of interest he shows for protecting religious liberty. He faces the issues from the perspective of how the Word of God will fare. Life or death, imprisonment or banishment, are small matters compared with the possibility of God's Word becoming sullied. To tolerate the ruination of the Word would lead to greater catastrophes and even greater losses in the scope of all eternity. All of this Luther is not about to risk at the hands of the devil's servants on earth.

One further area that Luther was inclined to lean on the prince's

¹⁵⁰Luther's Correspondence, "Letter 715, Luther to George Spalatin at Altenberg, November 11, 1525," II, 353.

assistance was that of dealing with the clergy. In 1523 in his treatise, To Judge All Teaching and to Call Teachers, Luther proclaims of the Christian, "...to preach to the erring heathens or nonchristians and to teach them the Gospel..."¹⁵¹ Yet on the otherhand, Luther emphasized that where there were Christians who had the same power and right as he, there was a need to be properly called to preach and teach on behalf of the others. It was to the later contingency that Luther was to give a majority of his attention.

In the early years of the Reformation, Luther was persuaded that the people of his day had been, in Pelikan's words, "the victims of poor preaching."¹⁵² But now that the Gospel was put in its rightful place, Luther was optimistic and looked forward, confidently trusting the Word to do its work. But after his return from the Wartburg, the following turbulent years were to show the terrible results of misguided 'evangelical' prophets. In his treatise on the Sermon on the Mount, he labeled such preachers, "sneaks and cheats" and "tramps and rascals" who ought to be handed over to the police.¹⁵³ Luther was ever aware of these false prophets connection with rebellion: "They try to meddle into other people's office and commission, in defiance of the ordinances of the government."¹⁵⁴ To Melanchthon, who was having trouble

¹⁵¹WML, The Right and Power of a Christian Congregation or Community to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proved from Scripture, IV, 80-81.

¹⁵²Pelikan, Obedient Rebels, p. 80.

¹⁵³LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 7, 250.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 250.

'judging the spirits', Luther writes while still at the Wartburg "Do not by any means receive them if they assert that they are called by mere revelation, for God would not speak even to Samuel until Eli knew it and gave his consent."¹⁵⁵

There is no doubt that Luther's experiences with the Zwickau prophets, Karlstadt, M nzer and others, pushed him into a greater dependence on the magistrate. Faithful preachers of the Gospel who were rightfully called could be depended on to stick to their office and prevent civil disobedience. But the sectarians could not be trusted. Thus Luther reflected in 1530: "If M nzer and Karlstadt and their comrades had not been allowed to sneak and creep into other men's houses and parishes, whither they had neither call nor command to go, that whole great calamity would not have happened."¹⁵⁶

The Visitation was a concrete expression of the magistrate's direct involvement with the clergy and represented the force and coercive power necessary to see that they the preachers indeed had their rightful call. Luther's toleration of any 'unlawfully' or unauthorized clergy was at a minimum. He writes in his exposition of the Eighty-second Psalm,

"It is true that all Christians are priests, but all are not pastors. For to be a pastor, one must not only be a Christian and a priest, but must have an office and a field of work committed to him...Therefore Christ, too, would not let the devils speak, when they cried out that He was the Son of God and told the truth, for He did not want to permit such an example of preaching without a call. Let everyone, then remember this: If he will preach or teach, let him prove the call or command which drives and compels him to it, or else be silent; if he will not do this, then

¹⁵⁵Luther's Correspondence, "Luther to Melanchthon, January 13, 1522," II, 84.

¹⁵⁶WML, Eighty-second Psalm, IV, 313.

let the rulers hand the knave over to the right master, Master Hans [the executioner]. That will be what he deserves, for he certainly intends to start a rebellion, or worse among the people."¹⁵⁷

Luther defends his verdict that force and violence have not been mixed with the Gospel, nor is anyone compelled to believe, but rather, "it gives the community peace from the hot-heads..."¹⁵⁸ For in Luther's eyes the pastor is as much, or more the upholder of the civic righteousness as the policemen in the temporal government. Thus he can recommend in 1529 that everyone be compelled to attend church even if they don't believe on the grounds that the foundations of civic life and righteousness are based on the decalogue and catechism.¹⁵⁹ This collusion between church and state was to serve in the war against the greater enemy, the devil. Positively put, the cooperation served the cause of peace and good order which benefited the gospel. Negatively, it meant a blurring of the sharp distinction between the two kingdoms. For Luther it was just another way of protecting the priceless treasure, the Word of God, from stain and corruption.

To briefly summarize Luther's view of the relationship between the Church and the magistrate, leads to the conclusion that Luther's tolerance decreased as his dependence on the magistrate grew. It would be false to assume that Luther sought any enduring partnership between the secular and spiritual authorities. He worked at keeping a proper distance between

¹⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 314-315.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 312-315.

¹⁵⁹Bainton, "Luther's Attitude to Religious Liberty," p. 119.

himself and the princes and urged pastors to be unafraid at pointing out, and even preaching against, the sins of the rulers, as he himself was ever ready to do. What he required of the government was that it faithfully carry out its duties of checking all rebellion and sedition, punishing criminals and keeping peace and order. However with respect to a Christian prince, Luther expected more. He looked to the Christian prince to further God's Word by protecting and encouraging it in the land. In doing so he became a paternal figure, interested in all the externals that touched the life of his subjects. If on the other-hand the prince was antagonistic to the evangelical faith, as for instance in Bohemia, Luther recognized the right of such a congregation to become separatist.¹⁶⁰

Insofar as his attitude toward religious toleration was concerned, Luther was bound to become more intolerant regardless of the magistrate's disposition. The chief concern of Luther was not the politics of the day, but rather the Gospel, which he was committed to keep pure. Luther's view of the reigning magistrate was based solely on that Prince's attitude toward the gospel. True, Luther often stated that heathens could make excellent princes because the ability to rule was based on natural reason. Nevertheless, his disposition toward that kind of prince was entirely different to that of his relationship with a Christian prince. In the case of the heathen prince, he strictly forbade the meddling of the temporal authorities with the matters of the spiritual realm.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 131.

Conversely, Luther looked to the Christian prince to further God's Word and suppress the sects and false teachers. The inconsistencies were evident, and yet throughout, Luther displayed a consistent loyalty to what he thought really mattered: the Word of God, its protection and furtherance.

The Devil

The battle to defend God's Word was always viewed by Luther in a cosmic dimension. He wrote of this in his Address to the German Nobility, "It is the power of the devil and of the Antichrist which resists the things that serve to build up Christendom. Such power is not to be obeyed, but rather resisted with life, property, and with all our might and main."¹⁶¹ For Luther the devil was not to be allegorized.¹⁶² He spoke of devils incarnate and believed that just as Christ had his angels, pastors, and servants, so the devil also had his evil angels, false teachers, and heretics. His designation of the pope as Antichrist is well known and he was inclined to call the papists the "devil's Christians". With such depiction of this cosmic struggle, Luther sees it imperative to act against the devil and his kingdom. He laments the inactivity of the past against the papacy, "For if it is our duty to strive against the words and works of the devil and to drive him out in whatever way we can, as both Christ and his apostles command us, how have we gotten into such a state that we have to do nothing and say nothing when the pope or his

¹⁶¹LW, Address to German Nobility, XLIV, 138.

¹⁶²Bainton, "Luther's Attitude to Religious Liberty," p. 126.

cohorts undertake devilish words and works?"¹⁶³

In Luther's view, the devil would only be overcome by the Word of God. He never forgot this even when he became willing to suppress this devil and his servants by force. The devil's work was to bring down the two kingdoms. Any success he had in wrecking havoc in one was bound to effect the other. Thus the Peasants' Revolt stirred Luther to mark the peasants as devils who carried out the work of their master. He wrote, "Fine Christians they are! I think there is not a devil left in hell; they have all gone into the peasants. Their raving has gone beyond all measure."¹⁶⁴ Luther was especially ready to point out the leading culprit, a sort of rank and file within the hierarchy of the devil's kingdom. With this in mind he writes about M nzer: "To put it briefly, they are doing the devil's work. This is particularly the work of that archdevil who rules at M hlhausen, and does nothing except stir up robbery, murder, and bloodshed..."¹⁶⁵

The Peasants' Revolt was a seditious attempt of the devil indirectly aimed at the gospel. It was thwarted by God, who in his own peculiar way, used the far from perfect princes to protect His own Kingdom. But the devil was relentless and shrewd. What the devil was unable to accomplish by force he would surely attempt to do with guile. This perception of the devil's guile occupied Luther even before the Peasants' Revolt.

¹⁶³LW, Address to German Nobility, XLIV, 132.

¹⁶⁴LW, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, XLVI, 51-52.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., p. 49.

In a letter to Nicholas Gerbel Luther narrates the devil's activity. Luther writes, "Satan is setting up a sect among us, at yet another place, and this sect supports neither papists nor us. [The members of this sect] boast that they are being moved by pure spirits, without the testimony of Holy Scripture. This shows that our word is truly the Word of God, since it is being harassed not only by force, but also by new heresies."¹⁶⁶

Luther was not about to give any comfort or aid to the enemy. He saw in these new 'spirits' the instruments that the devil proposed to use to discredit the gospel. He was sensitive to the Catholic critics who were accusing him and his reforms for every disturbance of peace and every firebrand preacher that roamed the countryside. The gospel's reputation was at stake and Luther felt duty bound to defend it.

The papacy ever remained for Luther the bastion of the devil. But after his return from the Wartburg, Luther was to find the devil at work even in his own camp. The rupture between Luther and Karlstadt was viewed by Luther himself as that of God's Word battling a cunning devil. It was Karlstadt's slippery interpretation of Scripture that Luther took aim at and sought to expose as the devil's tool. Karlstadt was but a puppet in this grand battle. Luther attacked Karlstadt, but it was really the devil he hoped to wound.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶LW, "Letter 145, Luther to Nicholas Gerbel, May 6, 1524," XLIX, 82.

¹⁶⁷Edwards, Luther and the False Brethren, p. 51.

Luther's attacks became acrimonious when it concerned the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The battle line was drawn clear and either one was on the side of the devil or Christ. There was no middle ground. Karlstadt was joined most notably by Zwingli in incurring Luther's wrath. He called their doctrine of the Sacrament "poison" and sent letters to warn against it.¹⁶⁸ For the matter of the real presence in the Sacrament was at the core of the gospel and whereas in matter of charity one should yield, no yielding could be permitted when it came to a central article of faith. Luther's religious toleration came to nil when the sacramentarians denied the real presence. The Marburg Colloquy which hoped to bring unity among the 'protestants' only helped to more firmly establish in Luther's mind that the battle he was fighting was with the shrewd devil himself. For Luther believed that the compromises and the shuffling that his opponents were willing to make were in contrast to the immovable and unchanging faith. He was of this mind when he wrote,

"It is precisely the same devil who now assails us through the fanatics by blaspheming the holy and venerable sacrament of our Lord Jesus Christ, out of which they would like to make mere bread and wine as a symbol or memorial sign of Christians, in whatever way they dream or [their] fancy dictates...Therefore I do not fix my attention as much upon them, as upon him who speaks through them - the devil, I mean - just as they regard me as full of devils."¹⁶⁹

Luther, because he saw the devil behind his evangelical opponents, gave no quarter, and poured out his abuse on them with not infrequent

¹⁶⁸LW, "Letter 158, Luther to John Briessman, August 1525," XLIX, 122.

¹⁶⁹LW, That These Words of Christ, "This is My Body," Etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics, XXXVII, 18.

written attacks. He stuck by the principle that he expounded in his treatise on the Sermon on the Mount: "God does not want us to be hypocritical with our sectarians, as though their doctrine were correct. We must regard them as our enemies, from whom we are separated by the Gospel, by Baptism, by the Sacrament, and by all their doctrine and life."¹⁷⁰ His evangelical opponents could never really understand what motivated Luther to attack them so viciously. They were shocked and dismayed to hear themselves characterized as devil's false apostles when most all of them acknowledged Luther as a fellow Christian who had wrought great things on behalf of all Christendom. Such abuse led Oecolampadius to write about Luther, "...if you wish to teach, leave your invective in Wittenberg. It does not improve your matter and we have no need of it either. I also do not know how you will answer for it before God."¹⁷¹

Luther, of course, saw such harsh language and personal attacks as necessary to expose the guile and the furtive manner in which the devil hoped to carry out his work. Luther judged himself to be obedient to the Word, whereas his opponents were not. It was as simple as that. Therefore he is able to write in a letter of 1522 something that might serve as an explanation to his harsh language and manner. He writes, "Therefore, my good friend, do not be surprised that many take

¹⁷⁰LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 226.

¹⁷¹Martin Luther, "Samtliche Schriften," Reformations Schriften, XX (St. Louis: Concordia, 1890), 599. Cited by Edwards, Luther and the False Brethren, p. 91.

offense at what I write. So it should be and so it must be. Only few will be faithful to the Gospel...My work is not that of one who can take a middle course, and yield this or give up that, as I have done hitherto, fool that I was."¹⁷²

The consequence of seeing the devil behind each of his individual opponents allowed Luther to lump them together and freed him from taking each of their issues seriously. Thus the sacramentarians, sectarians, spirits, false teachers, heretics and hordes could be dealt with in similar fashion for they all had in common that satanic spirit which warred with the Word. Luther would indeed refute with specific points the arguments of his major opponents (i.e. Karlstadt, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Agricola, Bullinger, Schwenckfeld, etc.) and yet by attributing their words and works to the devil he summarily dismissed most of what they said. A demonstration of this approach is gleaned from any number of his general tracts and exegetical writings.¹⁷³

The war was not so much with the individuals, but with the devil who stood behind them. Thus the misdeeds of false prophets were attributable to one as much as the other, for the source was the same. Likewise the divisions and quarrels that raged between the various sects were proof to Luther that their teachings were of Satan. This 'proof' did not stop Luther from turning the tables and explaining the division within

¹⁷²Luther's Correspondence, "Letter 553, Luther to an Unnamed Correspondent, August 28, 1522," II, 134.

¹⁷³Christof Windhorst, "Luther and the 'Enthusiasts'. Theological Judgements in His Lecture on the First Epistle of St. John (1527)," The Journal of Religious History, IX (December, 1977), 342.

his own party as the attempt of the devil to infiltrate and corrupt the pure gospel. Luther likens his difficulties with those Jesus experienced when he writes, "The fact that His precious disciple [Judas] forsook Him and caused this trouble does not make what He taught false and what He did wrong. Therefore we must not mind our Judases either."¹⁷⁴

Understanding Luther's view of an active devil who is ever attempting to subdue the two kingdoms and ultimately the Word, goes a long way to explain his religious intolerance. As Luther saw it, the world was embroiled in a gigantic struggle in which the forces of evil were equally willing to use either force or guile to achieve their ends. Every compromise, every neutral reaction to their overtures only encouraged and signaled victory for the satanic forces. The satanic servants were known by their fruit (eg. sedition) or their departure from the Word (e.g. denial of the real presence). For Luther to be anything but harsh was in his own mind a service to the devil. Unwittingly as some of the servants of the devil may be, nevertheless for the sake of the gospel, Luther felt bound to expose their error and make a sham of their teaching. This was especially necessary in that these false teachers were preaching in the name of the gospel, and in Luther's mind their pretended association with the gospel would only bring it harm and corruption. Thus as paradoxical as it may seem, Luther probably viewed his increasing religious tolerance as the best he could do to insure the spread of the pure Gospel with all of its freeing power.

¹⁷⁴LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 249.

Vanity

Luther for the most part restricted his intolerance to those who erred publicly in their religious views and those who threatened to upset the peaceful stability of society. But if there is one personal characteristic that helped the most in identifying the false teacher, it was vanity. From Karlstadt to Agricola they all showed an unwillingness to be instructed, preferring to stay with their own false notions.

Karlstadt was a good example in Luther's view of a man who wished to stand above the Word and not under it. He sought the applause of the mob. He wanted his teachings accepted without question. He was given to rash acts. Luther spoke of "Karlstadt's monstrosities", that is the radical reform he carried out in his parish at Orlamünde (such as destruction of images, abolishment of Eucharistic and other clerical vestments, etc.) as due in part to his "untamed desire for glory and fame" which Luther was sure was consuming the man.¹⁷⁵ The great harm that was being done was to the Word which Luther surely thought was having to take second place to a gigantic ego.

The pattern was the same with respect to the other false teachers. In the case of Münzer, Luther desired to know how he acted at his capture, feeling it "profitable to know how that haughty spirit behaved himself."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵LW, "Letter 142, Luther to George Spalatin, March 14, 1524," XLIX, 72-73.

¹⁷⁶W.A. Briefwechsel, III, 507-508. Cited in Edwards, Luther and the False Brethren, p. 67.

He was impressed similarly with Zwingli who he felt was unwilling to be instructed by the Word. Luther wrote Melanchthon in October of 1527 concerning this characteristic of Zwingli: "I believe Zwingli is worthy of holy hatred, so insolently and unworthily does he deal with the holy Word of God."¹⁷⁷ At the Marburg Colloquy, Zwingli's repeated use of the Greek during the discussions confirmed Luther's belief that Zwingli was conceited. Finally Zwingli's violent death was a sign that he had not dealt faithfully with God's Word, but had stuck with his own vain notions and opinions.

Luther saw this same tendency of outward show in those followers of the false teachers. But even with all the outward show they could not hide the fact that they had departed from the Word of God. This Luther points out in a section of his Commentary on Genesis (1545):

"For today both the Anabaptists and the Sacramentarians despise the Word and neglect the doctrine of faith. Meanwhile they manifest the greatest show of devotion and respectability. I hear that there is very strict discipline among the Swiss. They do not play, do not gormandize, and do not give themselves up to luxury in clothing, in feasts, etc. This is their religion, and they are proud of it. They boast that they excel us by far. But where is the Word? 'The body of Christ,' they say, 'is in heaven; but the bread is bread, and the wine is wine.' They believe nothing but have fallen from the Word and faith."¹⁷⁸

Luther perceived a real danger derived from the unchecked vanity of these false teachers. Besides their own clever pretensions, they had the advantage of addressing primarily "careless, smug, and frivolous people."

¹⁷⁷Luther's Correspondence, "Letter 778, Luther to Melanchthon in Jena, October 27, 1527," II, 419.

¹⁷⁸LW, Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 45-50, VIII, 133.

This leads Luther to conclude:

"With a single sermon such a criminal can seduce an entire city which has had the Word of God for a long time. In one hour he can make them forget what they have been listening to for ten years. If I wanted to, I could easily manage in two or three sermons to preach my people right back into the papacy, and put on such an appearance of special sanctity that I could create new pilgrimages and Masses. As has been said, the common people are easy to talk into something, besides being curious and eager to hear something new."¹⁷⁹

In contrast to all of the vanity that Luther saw in his opponents' manner, was the example of his own conduct. He was the humble servant of God. In a letter to Elector Frederic and Duke John, Luther cites his own behavior toward the pope. He writes, "How humbly I attacked the Pope, how I besought him, how I made requests of him, as my first writings show!"¹⁸⁰

The predominant flaw that Luther prescribed to his opponents was not simply a matter of their vain behavior, but what this behavior signified in relation to God's Word. Was it not that they loved the sound of their own voices? Did they not want to be famous and preach as long as they had a following and needed to fear no danger?¹⁸¹ In Luther's accusation they lurked the suspicion that he was dealing with self-serving men who put themselves above the Word of God. These false teachers had fallen prey to their own fleshly and wordly desires and thus represented a real danger to the gospel. Hence when Luther suspected that a teacher had succumb to such temptations, any appreciation or tolerance of that man's views were

¹⁷⁹ LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 254.

¹⁸⁰ Luther's Correspondence, "Letter 631, Luther to the Elector Frederic and Duke John of Saxony, July 1524, " II, 244.

¹⁸¹ LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 63.

greatly diminished. For in the eyes of Luther, such men and their followers were not supporting and furthering God's Word, but were dragging it down.

Moderation

Luther's drift toward a steadily growing intolerance is not without instances when he seems to demonstrate the opposite. As Pelikan notes, Luther was never known as an irenic reformer, but he was ever willing to compromise on all but the most essential issues.¹⁸² For in Luther's mind the unity and cohesiveness of the Christian faith was to be found in the gospel. Thus agreement in the gospel and the 'visible' gospel, that is the sacraments, were all that was needed for the unity of the Church, and consequently Luther's hand of fellowship.¹⁸³

It was in this matter of the sacraments that Luther was to become enveloped in his most heated debates with fellow evangelicals. But it was also in his debates over the sacraments, that is more specifically the Lord's Supper, that he shows a willingness to proclaim agreement and join hands in fellowship. Two examples of Luther's flexibility will serve to illustrate that his growing intolerance was not totally arbitrary or inconsistent.

Briefly, the first example is his reapproachment with the Bohemian Brethren. Ever since the Leipzig debate where Eck successfully linked

¹⁸²Pelikan, Obedient Rebels, p. 58.

¹⁸³Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and trans., The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), Augsburg Confession, Article VII, p. 32.

Luther to the Bohemians and John Hus, Luther had been favorably disposed to these Eastern neighbors. This sympathetic attitude toward the Bohemians culminated in Luther's endorsement of their Confession in 1535. One sore spot may very well have been the Bohemian doctrine of the real presence in the Lord's Supper. Their doctrine of the real presence differed little from that of Zwingli's, a doctrine, which Luther condemned out of hand. Why then was Luther's attitude much more favorable to the Bohemians than to Zwingli? This is a difficult question. It is known that Luther thought that the worst abuse or misrepresentation of the sacrament occurred not with any failure to agree on the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament, but rather with it being considered a sacrifice or good work. In this respect, he might have been gladdened that the Bohemians had publicly disavowed this greatest of the abuses against the sacrament. But by the same right, Luther should have been sympathetic to Zwingli, but he was not.¹⁸⁴

Part of the answer lies in what we have already taken up, that is, the matter of Zwingli's vanity or at least Luther's perception of it. Zwingli refused to accept instruction, whereas the Bohemians were receptive and even made changes in their doctrinal formulations. What it finally amounted to in Luther's mind was that the Bohemians were ready to take their lead from the Word, whereas Zwingli was not. Pelikan summarizes this succinctly: "Zwingli had never been able to persuade Luther that he placed the word of God above reason and private judgement. The

¹⁸⁴Pelikan, Obedient Rebels, pp. 139-141.

Unity of Bohemian Brethren did persuade Luther of this."¹⁸⁵

The second example that affirms the fact that Luther was not utterly implacable was the Wittenberg Concord of 1536.¹⁸⁶ This was primarily engineered by Bucer, who was able to convince Luther and Melancthon that he had converted to their view of the Lord's Supper. In fact, from Luther's point of view, all the concessions came from the Swiss and Bucer and none from the Lutheran side. The clincher came when Luther asked whether or not the true body of Christ was present even when given to the unworthy recipient. When the Swiss agreed that it was, then the fellowship issue had been decided. Luther considered it a victory for the Word in the battle between the true church and the false church.¹⁸⁷

In both examples Luther remained consistent, granting union and tolerance only when he thought the Word of God was thereby honored and not compromised. It is important to see this placability on Luther's part in comparison to his general and more usual stance of intolerance, because it points to the fact that Luther did not ascribe to any kind of individualism that attributed all authority to the individual in religious matters. Nor of course did he accept the Roman claim that demanded absolute authority be attributed to the Roman church and its hierarchy and organization. But rather authority was centered in God's Word, which Luther steadfastly claimed to be clear and unambiguous.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁸⁶E. G. Schweibert, Luther and His Times (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 736-739.

¹⁸⁷Edward, Luther and the False Brethren, p. 155.

CONCLUSION: IN SEARCH OF A RATIONALE

From the hindsight of the twentieth century, one could hardly consider Luther the exemplar of the religiously tolerant man. In fact, by the standards of our modern pluralistic society, he was very intolerant. In many ways he was a product of his time who was unwilling to escape the pattern of medieval society which held the state as much responsible for the maintenance of true religion as was the church.¹⁸⁸ And so political unity meant religious unity and vice versa. Religious tolerance was not to be the result of Luther's or any of the reformer's activity, but instead as Spitz indicates, it was something of an historical accident, a result of society's exhaustion in its attempt to eradicate the various minorities and sects.¹⁸⁹

Nevertheless Luther is unique in the manner in which he tackles this question of religious freedom. In the dynamic of his two kingdom doctrine he grasps the essence of the Christian faith. Such a faith he understands as an inward condition immune to the strictures, rules, and swordsof men. A true religious liberty is to be had in each man's conscience, each man's heart. This was the gospel of freedom that Luther proclaimed. It was that voice crying in the wilderness of the 16th century society calling for a new loyalty and new life for the church based

¹⁸⁹Preus, "The Political Function of Luther's Doctrina," pp. 592-593.

¹⁹⁰Spitz, Church and State, p. 111.

on the very Word of God.

But the new loyalty that Luther pointed to was not to be conditioned by any personal opinions or preferences. All individualism was to be tempered by the fact that truth was objective. Truth for Luther was always the Word of God, which was just that, His immutable Word as opposed to man's thoughts and opinions. To oppose such truth was the work of Satan, a work which in Luther's thought could not be tolerated in either kingdom.

Luther never reversed his belief that each man's conscience was his bastion of freedom where compulsion and coercion were useless. Heresy, that is the false religious belief of an individual, could never be legislated against. But public expression of false beliefs which pitted themselves against the Word could not be tolerated. For such tolerance represented retreat and signaled a victory for the Kingdom of the devil against God's Kingdom. This is not to say that the duty of temporal lords is to maintain the religion they think to be true. No, for above both kingdoms there is the Word of God and thus the temporal kingdom, as much as the spiritual, is to "permit itself to be judged, condemned, and instructed by this word of God."¹⁹⁰

Luther advises princes to suppress, even persecute false beliefs and yet paradoxically he warns them of the dangers of meddling with the affairs of the church. Luther's wrath is poured out against those princes who he deemed hindrances to the Word and vile persecutors of it. But on

¹⁹⁰Althaus, Ethics of Martin Luther, p. 150.

the other hand, Luther assents to the banishment and even imprisonment and death to Anabaptists within Elector John's domain. However, these seemingly inconsistencies do give way to the overarching unity of his purpose and true goal, which was to uphold the Gospel.

With the Word of God elevated over both kingdoms, Luther was inclined to use lessons and applications from the Old Testament to shed light on the issues with political import for his day.¹⁹¹ But he never thought in terms of a theocratic institution. He consistently maintained the separation of offices of the temporal and spiritual authorities. For him this was a Scriptural principle that Jesus had instituted, and without which there would be scant comprehension of the Scriptural message. The only connection between the two kingdoms and their corresponding offices was that God was at work in both and that both were to be a service to Him and His Word.

'The Word they still shall let remain' is the motif of Luther's attitude toward religious toleration. If they were to humble themselves, and be instructed by the Word, ready to face any danger or persecution on behalf of it, Luther was more than glad to share the hand of fellowship. What is remarkable in this stance is Luther's absolute certainty that the Word of God is clear and easily understood. Such a certainty he expresses when he chastises his Marburg opponents:

"Our spirit is different from yours; it is clear that we do

¹⁹¹Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther and the Old Testament, trans, by Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 11-18.

not possess the same spirit, for it cannot be the same spirit when in one place the words of Christ are simply believed and in another place the same faith is censured, resisted, regarded as false and attacked with all kinds of malicious and blasphemous words."¹⁹²

To those who did not or do not share the beliefs of Luther, such an attitude of certainty seems only to express a 'we are right and you are wrong' sentiment.¹⁹³ To others it is a great confession and the faithful work of maintaining the pure gospel. Both sides can agree that Luther had little tolerance to those he thought distorted this precious Gospel. He considered them "swine and dogs" and promised that they would get nothing from him until they came to him, or "any other real preacher" and affirmed the one true Gospel as Luther had known it.¹⁹⁴ This is blatantly intolerant, but in Luther's mind righteously so.

The Word of God and it alone determined Luther's attitude in regard to all questions of religious toleration. His one loyalty and reference point for treating questions of toleration in both kingdoms was the Word of God. No prince, peasant, preacher, teacher, Jew, or Anabaptist dare impede or hinder the Word of God. Nor did Luther tolerate any rebellion, questionable church practice, or individual vanity to be connected with the Gospel, lest it suffer by association. The rationale and consistency of Luther's relationship with his contemporaries is seen in the priority he gives to God's Word. He proclaims it the greatest treasure, and that which must remain even when all else is lost. For Luther

¹⁹²LW, The Marburg Colloquy and the Marburg Articles, XXXVIII, 70-71.

¹⁹³Bainton, "Luther's Attitude to Religious Liberty," p. 142.

¹⁹⁴LW, Sermon on the Mount, XXI, 225.

it is the Word of God that predicates all our dealings in either kingdom and it is that Word that commands the loyalty of citizens of both realms. So Luther writes, and so he believed.

"If I must bless and praise one of them and curse and damn the other one, then I will bless the Word of God but curse them with everything they have. For I must place the Word of God above everything else. To keep it and to stay with Christ, who is my highest Treasure in heaven and on earth, I must be willing to risk my body and life, the popularity of the world, my goods, my reputation, and all my happiness. For one of these two things has to happen: either the Word of God will abide and conquer them or at least they will be unable to suppress it, even if they refuse to accept all its grace and goodness and salvation.

In this way a Christian can easily handle the situation and his relations toward his neighbors and his friends. So far as his neighbor's person is concerned, he will love and bless everyone. But on the other hand, so far as God and His Word are concerned, he will not put up with any transgression. He must give this precedence over everything else and subordinate everything else to it, irrespective of any person, be he friend or foe; for this cause belongs neither to us nor to our neighbor, but to God, whom it is our duty to obey before anything else (Acts 5:29). Consequently I say to my worst enemies: 'Where it is only my own person that is involved, there I am very willing to help you and to do everything good for you, in spite of the fact that you are my enemy and that all you ever do for me is to harm me. But where it is the Word of God that is involved, there you must not expect any friendship or love that I may have for you to persuade me to do something against that, even if you were my nearest and dearest friend. But since you cannot endure the Word, I will speak this prayer and benediction over you: 'May God dash you to the ground!'"¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵Ibid., p. 121.

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