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The Political Function of Luther's *Doctrina*

JAMES S. PREUS

THEOLOGY IS IMPLICITLY POLITICAL; LUTHER'S CAREER AS THEOLOGIAN DEMONSTRATES this principle clearly. By attacking the papacy's doctrine, Luther attacked the framework of society in 16th-century Europe. The doctrine of faith had explosive political implications, and Luther found himself increasingly forced to place limits on the political conclusions drawn from his work by his followers, chiefly through his construction of the two-kingdoms teaching. The essay is a revised version of the Louis H. Beto Memorial Lecture, given at Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Ill., in April 1971. The author is associate professor of church history at Harvard Divinity School.

Lutherans tend to accept the view that theology and life can be cleanly separated. But theologians need to be sensitive to the political and social function of what they teach, spend their energies working on, and working for. Luther claimed that the deeds proper to the Reformation were its words; as he matured, this tended to make words ends in themselves, leading theologians to believe they could speak strictly "as theologians," *in abstracto*, making judgments on doctrine without considering the living social context in which theological speaking takes place. But words, as the "deeds" of Luther's Reformation, need to be judged like other deeds—not only by the intention of their authors, but by their fruits.

The intent of this essay is not to dissipate or compromise the intense occupation with theology that characterizes the Luther tradition, but to broaden its self-consciousness. A tradition that has dedicated so much energy on behalf of the integrity of doctrine has a unique obligation and opportunity to assess the implication of doctrines as they appear and are fought over at specific times and places, and to raise questions about a proper theological agenda for our own situation.

Theology functions politically insofar as it affects people's apprehension of and relationship to other people, to institutions—to the whole spectrum of social realities, both churchly and secular. Theology is political when it says something about people's place and role in society, and about their status of dependence on, or independence of, institutions and authorities. Theology is political when it states or implies who is the keeper of a Christian's conscience, when it identifies who a person is answerable to in each of the relationships of his life, when it supports or in any way provides legitimation for the class or group with which the theologian identifies his own interests and destiny. Finally, theology is political because it is a church's organizational ideology.

Theological doctrines may be more political in function than they seem. Consider, for example, infant baptism. Its social and political implications now seem minimal. But in the 16th century, the old imperial Code of Justinian provided the legal basis for the persecution and even execution of Anabaptists by the authorities. The same fate threatened those who, like Servetus, attacked the doctrine of the Trin-

ity. Servetus, it will be recalled, enjoyed the dubious distinction of being the only 16th-century heretic first burned in effigy by the Catholics and then in reality by the Protestants.¹

In that time, infant baptism was the initiatory rite into the given Christian society, a society in which the church was roughly coterminous with society as a whole and the final arbiter of its values and ethos.

The rebaptizers were denounced because they were heretical, but they were executed because they were subversive. They were undermining the foundations of medieval society by separating out what they called the church. Resisting the right of magistrates to legislate the affairs of the Christian communities, and abhorring the spectacle of ecclesiastical lords emulating the roles and life-styles of princes, they were inclined to advocate Christian withdrawal from worldly offices, particularly magistracy, hence delegitimizing not only the religious but the political authorities as well.

Furthermore, at the personal level, infant baptism symbolized the "givenness," even inevitability, of the person's relationship to the church, rather than its chosenness. Two very different ideas of Christian identity, of Christian community, and of its mission in the world emerged from this struggle.

Infant baptism tended to authorize ecclesiastical arrangements of the sort that developed in Germany, whereby the secular authorities could also function as ecclesiastical heads. Luther argued, in 1520, that everyone was bishop and priest in vir-

tue of his baptism. From there, it was but a short step to contend that the prince, as a prominent member of the congregation, was a logical choice for the office of "emergency bishop" in the formative years of the German reform.

The Anabaptists contended that Luther's early definition of the sacraments led ineluctably to their interpretation of baptism rather than his. Luther had argued that the essence of a sacrament was God's promise, which had to be received with faith in order to reach its goal and be complete.² The logic of this definition more naturally led to believer's baptism than to infant baptism together with the tortured theological argumentation wherein Luther tried to show that infants really had something called "faith." Had Luther's concrete situation and strategy for the survival of the reform allowed it, he might have agreed that the Anabaptists' position was theologically more consistent than his own. But he placed a high value on legitimacy, and the lawfulness of his movement. He refused to break essential continuity with the medieval church. Furthermore, he had committed implementation of the reform to the nobility, an arrangement impossible under Anabaptist ideas of church and state.

Thus, it is a matter of great political (as well as theological and ecclesiastical) import that the mainline Reformers invoked an analogy between western Christendom and Old Testament Israel, whose initiatory rite was circumcision. The Reformers declined to break the basic pattern of medieval society, in which church and

¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Hunted Heretic* (Boston, 1964), p. 3.

² *Luther's Works*, ed. H. T. Lehmann and J. Pelikan (St. Louis and Philadelphia, 1955—), 36, pp. 65—67 (1520). Hereafter cited as *LW*.

state were the two arms of a unified, universal Christian society.

THE LIBERATING FUNCTION OF LUTHER'S EARLY "DOCTRINA"

Luther is reported to have compared himself to earlier reformers in the following way: men like Wyclif and Hus, he said, dissipated their energies by merely attacking the sins of the pope, whereas I (Luther claims) have succeeded better by going to the heart of the matter: I have attacked his doctrine.³

This is usually taken to mean that whereas earlier reformers spent their energies attacking abuses and matters of ethics and practice, Luther went after the theology. But this is too simple a reading. It is more accurate to say that Luther's particular genius shows up in his assault on the pope's ideology. "Others have censured only life," he said, "but to treat doctrine is to grab the thing by the throat, namely, that the *governance and ministry (regnum et officium)* of the papists are bad. Once we've asserted this, it's easy to say and declare that the life is also bad."⁴

As this remark shows, Luther's target was the very structure—institutional as well as ideological—that made abuses possible if not inevitable. He attacked the theologically formulated basis of papal power; that is a major thrust of Luther's *doctrina*. It was not simply a case of exposing the discrepancies between Biblical and papal ideas. Rather, Luther selected for attack those specific assumptions on

which the papacy built its claim to dominate society as a whole, as well as the consciences, lives, religious practices, and ethics of the Christian community. He exposed the way in which the Roman regime had become in principle unchallengeable by would-be reformers, because it had managed to render itself unaccountable to anyone on earth.

In the three famous treatises of 1520 (*Appeal to the Christian Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and On the Freedom of the Christian Man*) Luther took precise aim at those theological doctrines which had such a self-serving political function. Every doctrine he attacked, from papal supremacy to indulgence traffic, had worked in concert to sanction the church's imperialism, spiritual and secular. Luther's analysis thus exposed the intrinsic connection between the prevailing orthodoxy and the church's institutional self-interest. He showed that *this* "orthodoxy" had been diverted from its proper function, which was to lead man safely to salvation, into an ideology for ecclesiastical self-preservation and aggrandizement. Recognizing the political function of selected Roman doctrines, he called them "walls," and set out to turn them into "rods" with which to flagellate the church.⁵

In all three of these treatises, the overall theme of Luther's message was liberation. The magistracy was liberated from the tutelage of the spiritual estate and the legal constraints of the Canon Law. Luther declared that every Christian is priest, bishop, and pope as far as his estate (*Stand*) is concerned.⁶ The Holy Spirit

³ LW 54, p. 110.

⁴ Ibid. I have altered the translation on the basis of the text in *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883—), *Tischreden*, I, 294, 23—295, 2. Italics are mine.

⁵ LW 44, p. 126.

⁶ LW 44, p. 129.

was liberated from a churchly incarceration which gave the magisterium a monopoly on authorized interpretation of Scripture. The Spirit, Luther declared, dwells "only in pious hearts," not in institutional offices.⁷ (We can see from this, by the way, that the original argument was not over the nature of the Bible, but over the question of who was authorized to determine its true meaning — its *sensus literalis* — for the Christian community.) The church, Luther continued, was to be liberated from papal absolutism in favor of a general council. The sacramental system was to be liberated from the grip of an avaricious institutional monopoly, and restored to its proper function as a seal of God's grace for man. And the Christian man was liberated from his status of servile dependence on the priestly order for the means of grace. The whole complex of sacramental machinery was demystified and dismantled, and salvation was available through the Word, which required only someone to speak it.

Hand in hand with that, the Christian man was liberated because he was "justified by faith alone," which truly *was*, in this context, the doctrine on which Luther's church could stand and the Roman church fall. On this new theological platform the Christian could stand free of that institution outside of which there was supposed to be no salvation, and do so without being threatened by the terror of anathema and wrath that pursued him. The doctrine of justification liberated because it severed the necessary relationship between justification before God and penance before priest, between Christian identity and

total dependence on the sacramental mechanism. Luther said: not penance, but repentance, not "faith formed by love"—i. e., faith enlivened by grace which comes only through the sacraments of the church, but faith *alone*, which grasps God in His Word, a Word which even Christian brothers can speak to one another with the full authority and power of God.

So even the doctrine of faith was a highly political doctrine, subversive for the medieval form and structure of the church. Heretofore, sacramental absolution had been the sole channel of forgiveness. But Luther said: you are all priests. If for some reason your priest will not hear your confession, then take it "to your brother or sister, whomever you like, and be absolved and comforted. Then go and do what you want and ought to do. Only believe firmly that you are absolved. . . ."⁸

Clearly, the frail conscience about which Luther cared so deeply was not only that of the sinner standing guilty before a just God. Luther was writing for the conscience of a new Christian *person* who needed to be gently weaned from his long-standing embrace in the arms of the church's confessional, in order to come of age as a free man of faith. The church had been the keeper of his conscience for more than 1,000 years. From now on, Luther was saying, you are responsible for your *own* conscience, and for that of your brothers.

No more ecclesiologically revolutionary doctrine could be imagined, in that 16th-century context. Exasperated by the twisted maze that comprised the sacramental system, Luther called for demolition: ". . . there is no hope of betterment

⁷ LW 44, p. 134.

⁸ LW 44, p. 180.

unless we abolish at one stroke all the laws of all men, and having restored the Gospel of liberty we follow it in judging and regulating all things."⁹ Truly, an agenda for liberation.

The church had long been aware that heresy was political, and not merely a matter of unacceptable ideas; Pope Gregory VII had declared that whoever did not agree with the Roman church was a heretic.¹⁰ The reverse side of this doctrine was that of "implicit faith," whereby one was not personally responsible for holding all the right doctrines, but only for believing what the church believed. We could adduce many more examples to show that Luther's doctrines, like those of "heretics" before him, had import not merely for the inner man, but for the social and political man as he lived in the world.

Luther's doctrine of vocation, for example, had an unprecedented social and institutional meaning which is almost lost in the abstract theological analyses to which we are accustomed. For Luther, it answered the question: if the highest Christian calling is no longer that of the "religious" — the monk — then what is the Christian supposed to do with his life? Luther did not bother to join the chorus of late-medieval criticism of monastic abuses, but went for the jugular, attacking the doctrinal, or ideological, bases of the entire monastic enterprise. In his treatise on the monastic vow (1521) he delegitimated it utterly as an acceptable vocation for Christians, on fundamental theological grounds. It has "no divine authority, but

. . . is actually contrary to the Christian faith and evangelical freedom."¹¹

Another issue: Communion in both kinds. This had been an explosive political issue 100 years earlier in Bohemia. Luther noted its political implication: withholding the cup from the laity fixes their position as a subordinate class. It reminds them that the clergy enjoy superior status as spiritual lords, rather than being the servants of the congregation.¹² The sacrifice of the Mass, too, seemed a perversion to Luther not only because of what it intrinsically symbolized about the work of Christ, but because it reinforced the interests of the clerical class, when in Jesus' intention the Christian society is a "classless" society.

LIBERATION CONSTRICTED

Luther's reformation did not remain on the keynote of liberation. Becoming the leader of a church he had no plan to establish, he found the shoe on the other foot. He found himself obliged to provide theological sanctions for a new set of political and institutional arrangements. He was pressed to hedge his message of liberation in order to defuse its disruptive political potential. More for the sake of order than for Reformation ideals, the territorial church became permanent, despite Luther's original intention that the prince should hold the office of "bishop" only so long as the emergency lasted. Thus, ironically, the long struggle of the medieval church to establish its institutional autonomy and integrity over against the empire was lost in favor of a revitalized *Eigenkirche* — a proprietary church in which

⁹ LW 36, p. 103.

¹⁰ See his famous *Dictatus Papae*.

¹¹ LW 44, p. 317.

¹² LW 36, p. 27.

the territorial ruler had the right to determine and regulate the religion of his entire territory (*cuius regio, eius religio*) — to be sure, with a little help from the clergy.

Unfortunately, Luther did not give his new church a polity, i. e., a politics for autonomy. Moreover the Holy Spirit, momentarily set free from the cage of the medieval magisterium and relocated in "pious hearts," had to be once again tied to a new kind of teaching authority, centered now in the Lutheran doctrine — and learned doctor! — of Holy Scripture. Luther learned to his sorrow just how political his early doctrine had been, and that a degree of liberation in religion inevitably stirred people's political and social aspirations as well. Writing against the so-called "heavenly prophets" Luther sounded somewhat like his own Catholic opponents of earlier days:

. . . where God tells the community to do something and speaks to the people, he does not want it done by the masses without the authorities, but through the authorities with the people. Moreover, he requires this so that the dog does not learn to eat leather on the leash, that is, lest accustomed to rebellion in connection with the images, the people also rebel against the authorities.¹³

The tragic Peasants Revolt of 1525 forced Luther even farther toward strictures on his message of justice and liberation. In this affair, the dog ate all the way through the leather, so that Luther felt compelled to draw the sharpest possible distinction between the inner liberation of the conscience and liberation in everyday life — political liberation. And

¹³ LW 40, p. 90 (1525).

this invites us to consider the political impact of the doctrine of the two realms.

In a sense, Luther was trapped by the upheaval of the peasants — trapped by the cruel social and political realities of the time. Looking at this conflict, we can see a heartbreaking clash between two theologically based principles that, according to the logic of his previous theological and political commitments, could be resolved only by suppression of the revolt. The one principle was that secular authority was directly God-given, and hence unfailingly legitimate, however oppressive particular rulers and regimes might be. Both from a political point of view and in face of theological sanctions about obedience to authority, the peasants had no means for redress of their grievances, save negotiation from a position of weakness or, failing that, violence. Current political theory provided not a shred of sovereignty in them, and no mechanism of accountability for their rulers (except for judgment in the next world).

But there was another principle present in Luther's writings from earlier years. In discussing how the Christian should conduct himself in this conflict-filled, litigious world, he had laid down the principle that one should not pursue his own interest, but rather, with Christ, suffer every injustice. Yet at the same time, Luther said, the Christian was responsible for the care of his neighbor, and therefore called to combat injustice at large. I quote from the 1523 treatise on secular authority:

In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the Gospel [here Luther refers to the Sermon on the Mount] and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the per-

son and property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor.¹⁴

This justified taking up the sword, if need be, and serving as soldier or hangman for the sake of peace and order. Thus, the ethical conflict for the concerned Christian in face of the peasant's oppression and revolt can be seen as a clash between these principles: the obligation to defend the neighbor against injustice on one hand, and the obligation to obey legitimate authorities on the other. What, in short, was to be done when the authorities *themselves* were the ones who were oppressing one's neighbors?

Luther cut away every shred of theological legitimation for what the peasants were doing by pressing his sharp distinction between earthly and heavenly justice. At the same time, he carefully distinguished between himself speaking as theologian and speaking politically. Yet the distinction itself could not escape being a political one. He was saying: I am washing my hands of the cause of the peasants. So the peasants were put to the sword under Luther's urging; as for the princes and their injustice, Luther could only consign them to the wrath of God — by and by.¹⁵

Luther insisted that he remained theologically consistent. He could quote his own earlier writings to show that he had never sanctioned rebellion against secular authorities. As to his own defiance of both pope and emperor, he had done it legitimately, for he had been duly called as a Doctor of Bible, and had only claimed his

right to speak and teach freely. Perhaps a bit disingenuously, he laid responsibility for the ensuing tumult on the Word — or on Satan, depending on the context. But as for the peasants, they could appeal to no legitimate calling, except to be good peasants, i. e., docile peasants.

The tragic upshot was that the political cause of human justice and dignity, and the theological cause (together with its own legitimate political priorities), went off in two different directions. The political situation (that is, the interests of the Reformation cause itself, in its precarious state of 1525, as well as the selfish interests of the territorial princes) seemed to demand Luther's strong intervention in favor of repression. He was unable to break through, as he had done before, to a theology of liberation which might actually have ameliorated the social and political situation in Germany. In terms of theology as well as soldiers, the princes held all the cards and their position was immensely strengthened by what Luther said and did in that situation.

Luther's political theology — stated ever more sharply in terms of the doctrine of the two kingdoms — has since then always managed to appear on the more conservative side of the theological-political spectrum, and much more edifying to social classes fortunate enough to live above grinding poverty and oppression. One might object that we are now talking in purely political terms, and not of matters that concern theologians.

But I have tried to show that, at the beginning of his movement, Luther was not so fastidious about distinguishing matters that concerned only "souls," and those that concerned bodies. He had released

¹⁴ LW 45, p. 96.

¹⁵ See the *Admonition to Peace* (1525), LW 46.

people from many concrete constraints, that, although primarily religious, concerned their bodies, actions, and economic and social relations as well as their inner state. He himself had been content to ignore the imperial ban, and to accept the protection of an elector who also ignored it.

The political character of Luther's theology has to be judged against that of the Bible, which in its repeated calls for justice and righteousness and in its concern for the poor and oppressed makes no distinctions between bodies and souls, but proclaims a Gospel for the whole man. The Lutheran doctrine of the two realms evades that calling by narrowing that Gospel. The fastidious depoliticization of the doctrine of justification, via the two-kingdoms doctrine, has served the church's interest well — politically. But how has it served the world?

ABOUT THE FUTURE

Luther was profoundly pessimistic about the world's prospects. Through his two-kingdoms doctrine, he set the kingdom of this world in stark, almost Manichean opposition to the kingdom of God. Evil is incorrigible. Its power holds sway as long as the earth lasts. Through the Word of God's promise, we hear of an eschatological kingdom in which justice and righteousness will finally prevail, but that justice is gaining no ground here and now. Luther had a lively dread and hope that the world was coming to an end. But nothing in history was actually moving in the right direction, as a kind of sign or movement pointing toward God's kingdom. Not even the visible church. His lack of an ecclesiology for the visible church reflects his

general mistrust of institutions, and it left Lutheranism without a viable theology for church politics which might not only establish the church's autonomy in the world, but also embody some tentative link between the Christian community, with its commitment to social justice, and the coming kingdom of God, and so give the church some real stake in the future. Church polity belongs to the secular realm in Luther's thought. That same temporal realm, whose sword was brought down so sharply upon the peasants, represented the final, intransigent reality in a world that would be forever unchristian.

We now live in a different world, having the capability of affecting the future — for good and ill — far beyond anything Luther could dream of. We are accountable to the future of mankind to a far greater degree than any medieval man could imagine. Surely this is part of the reason we have so many "theologies of the future" these days. This phenomenon is not merely symptomatic of a new simple-minded optimism. It signifies a growing sense of Christian responsibility for man's possible future. The churches cannot wash their hands of this future.

In light of this, and extending our historical perspective, it is worthwhile to take note of two of Luther's opponents in the context of the peasant uprising, Müntzer and Carlstadt. Both of them, on theological grounds, took a different course of action from Luther's, and both apprehended the possible future in a different way. Furthermore, both have their counterparts in our time, as does Luther. Müntzer, siding with the peasants, appealed to the apocalyptic texts of Scripture and proclaimed a time of divinely sanctioned

violence against the powers that were cruelly oppressing God's children. They, under his leadership and inspiration, were to be the vanguard of the new age. The results, as you know, were a disaster; indeed, the slaughter on the fields of Frankenhäusen was probably worsened by Müntzer's prophecy that some miracle would come between the peasant forces and the armies of the Swabian League.

Carlstadt made the better move. He also identified himself with the common people — not merely sympathizing with them from the sanctuary of a university chair, but leaving Wittenberg and joining them in person as a pastor. As the revolt materialized, he held firmly to a pacifist position eschewing the violence of armed rebellion.

Luther, Müntzer, and Carlstadt were, so far as we can tell, equally moved by "doctrine," as each of them understood it. All three made their cases on the basis of Scriptural texts, from which they drew their visions of the mission of the church. Luther's doctrine was that of the two kingdoms; Müntzer's that of the apocalyptic shootout. As for Carlstadt, perhaps it is not too far wrong to identify his idea with that of Father Daniel Berrigan (assuming, as I do, that he is innocent of the bombing and kidnapping charges against him); I refer to his doctrine of "shared jeopardy."¹⁶

¹⁶ Daniel Berrigan, S. J. and Robert Coles, "A Dialogue Underground," *New York Review of Books*, 11 March 1971, pp. 19—27. This dialogue has since been published in full under the title, *The Geography of Faith* (Boston, 1971). My essay was written in April 1971; not long after, the indictment against Father Berrigan was dropped.

Father Berrigan's doctrine is a simple one: Christians are called to identify themselves in deed with the suffering, the danger, and insecurity of those who are oppressed. They are bidden to move out of their positions of security to the edges where, like Jesus Christ, they are in real danger of suffering the fate of subversives and criminals.

That poses an intensely theological question, one which arises from the moral struggle of real life and is therefore an intensely political question as well.

We have seen with Luther how theology on the offensive, against institutional forms of repression and corruption of the Gospel, is liberating, daring, joyful, even visionary, but that theology on the defensive can become rigid, uncaring, self-serving, and ideological.

Radical gestures like that of Luther at Worms, Carlstadt at Wittenberg and Orlamünde, or Berrigan at Catonsville put a hard question to those who wish to be faithful guardians of good doctrine. It asks whether that doctrine serves best the politics of God, or that of institutional self-interest. Is its function merely to preserve the churches — strengthen, even harden them, as though they were self-justifying entities in the world, and to reinforce the Christian's sense of security and rightness therein? Or can this severe intellectual labor really serve the "doctrine of the Gospel," which has to do with entering redemptively into the suffering and jeopardy and injustice of the world?

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