

SBJT Forum

David VanDrunen is the Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary California. He earned his JD from Northwestern University School of Law and his PhD from Loyola University Chicago. Dr. VanDrunen has authored numerous works, and his most recent books include *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Eerdmans, 2014) and *God's Glory Alone: The Majestic Heart of Christian Faith and Life* (Zondervan, 2015).

SBJT: Martin Luther is famous for his understanding of two kingdoms. What is Luther's two kingdoms view and why is it important for us today?

David VanDrunen: While issues of Scripture, faith, and justification will probably always remain of chief interest for students of Martin Luther's theology, understanding the reformer's historical influence requires wrestling with his doctrine of the two kingdoms. This doctrine grounded Luther's reflections on civil government, its relation to the church, and Christians' ordinary vocations. Luther set forth a striking vision of what we today might call "Christianity and culture," a vision rooted in centuries of earlier Christian thought—and yet without any exact precedent. While I do not believe Luther's vision got everything right, I suggest that its basic features are compelling and remain surprisingly relevant for contemporary Christians.

Luther's famous treatise, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed" (1523), captures the main ideas and implications of the vision. At least four perennially important themes emerge from this treatise.

First, Luther asserts that civil government claims *legitimate* authority. Magistrates bear the sword and enforce the law by God's ordinance. Luther finds evidence for this already in Genesis 4:14-15 and 9:6, and claims that the Mosaic law, John the Baptist, and Christ himself confirmed it. Second, Luther describes civil authority as *distinct*: the *temporal* authority magistrates wield is distinct from the *spiritual* authority by which Christ governs believers. Here Luther introduces the categories of "two kingdoms" and "two governments." In this treatise, Luther speaks of the "two kingdoms" in a way similar to Augustine's "two cities." The kingdom of God consists of true Christians, and the rest of humanity belongs to the kingdom of the world.

The “two governments” refer to the distinct ways by which God rules these two kingdoms. True Christians do not need to be ruled by law or sword, so God establishes a spiritual government over them, by which the Holy Spirit makes them righteous. In contrast, unbelievers need to be constrained by force. Thus, God appoints temporal authority (civil government) to rule them by law and sword, in order to secure “external peace and prevent evil deeds.”

The third important theme requires the most nuanced discussion: Luther believed that believers and unbelievers could wield civil authority in *common*. Luther at first appears to say just the opposite. He describes the Sermon on the Mount as an ethic for all Christians under the spiritual government of Christ. Christ forbids believers from using violence, for the physical sword has no place in his kingdom. This would seem to prevent Christians from assuming civil office. But Luther then encourages them to do just this. If their community needs “hangmen, constables, judges, lords, or princes,” Christians should offer their services. If they do not, they act “contrary to love.” To reconcile this apparent contradiction, Luther explains that believers should never seek such positions to gain vengeance for themselves, but only to advance the peace and safety of their neighbors. In their own affairs, Christians gladly turn the other cheek, as Christ’s spiritual government requires. In this way, Christians serve the purposes of both governments and advance the welfare of both kingdoms.

The fourth and final theme—which Luther calls his main concern in this treatise—is that civil authority is *accountable*. Luther puts the question in terms of how far temporal authority extends. In short, civil authority is legitimate, but only for certain tasks. Magistrates rightly take up the sword, but they are responsible for how they use it. This point is worth emphasizing, since it corrects all-too-common caricatures of the two-kingdoms doctrine. A stereotypical complaint is that the two-kingdoms doctrine makes Christians quietistic and content to submit to civil magistrates no matter how terribly they act. Yet Luther is more concerned here to demonstrate *what kind* of authority magistrates hold than to show *that* they have authority. In fact, Luther laments that the German people “make the mistake of believing that they . . . are bound to obey their rulers in everything.” What is the extent of civil authority? Magistrates have authority only over “life and property and external affairs on earth.” But God alone has authority “over the soul.” When heresy emerges, “God’s word must do the fighting,” for “heresy can

never be restrained by force.”

Whatever tweaks and qualifications Luther’s treatise may demand, each of these four themes is compelling, and Christians today forget them at their peril. Most Christians agree theoretically with Luther that civil authority is *legitimate*—texts like Romans 13:1-7 hardly permit otherwise. But confronted with the daily scandals and abuses of politicians, believers often think and speak in ways that fall far short of Paul’s exhortation to respect our civil officials (Rom 13:7). Paul probably wrote Romans when Nero was emperor, and Luther obviously thought most of the German princes were knaves. Corrupt politicians are nothing remotely new, and the reminder to respect their authority remains timely.

Most Christians today probably also affirm theoretically that civil authority is *distinct* from the spiritual authority Christ gives his church. But have Christians digested just how radically different the church’s spiritual sword is from the state’s physical sword? Luther’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, controversial thought it is, helpfully exposes this radical difference. The church persuades by God’s word and Spirit; the state coerces through physical force. The church disciplines through pleas for repentance and gentle restoration (Matt 18:15-17; Gal 6:1-2); the state punishes by fines, imprisonment, and execution. Yet even in the modern West, where Christians have supposedly learned the difference between church and state, churches and pastors often strive to become political players (or let themselves be played). And many Christians remain nostalgic for the days when friendly governments suppressed distasteful religious voices. Luther’s emphasis on the distinction between temporal and spiritual government remains urgently relevant.

So too does Luther’s emphasis that Christians and non-Christians can hold civil authority in *common*. Government work is not for everyone, but God permits Christians to hold civil offices and uses their efforts for good purposes. In the present, many Western believers, facing cultures increasingly hostile to Christianity, are becoming attracted to neo-Anabaptist voices that forbid Christians from taking up the sword at all or simply call them to withdraw from broader political society into their own smaller communities. Of course, how Christians should respond to a hostile culture is a difficult question, and worth serious debate, but Luther properly reminds us that Christians have a rightful place within government.

Luther's insistence that civil officials are *accountable* also remains welcome. Christians who hold government office must be on guard against the perennial corruptions of power. And although the church should never become a political player, Christians, as responsible citizens, should promote just use of civil authority in whatever way proper to their stations in life. Although called to endure much evil in the present age, Christians must never become indifferent to injustice or forget that governments are the greatest source of injustice in the world.

What is most remarkable about Luther's treatise after five hundred years is perhaps not the enduring relevance of its main themes so much as the balanced nature of its claims and exhortations.

Carl R. Trueman is Paul Wooley Professor of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He earned his Ph.D. degree from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Dr. Trueman has written more than a dozen books, including his most recent works: *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012), *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Crossway, 2015); and *Grace Alone* (Zondervan, 2017). He also writes and blogs regularly for *First Things*.

SBJT: What does Martin Luther have to teach us today about the Christian life?

Carl R. Trueman: One of the dangers of celebrating the Reformation is that perennial human tendency to remake the past in our own image. In doing so, of course, we celebrate not so much the past but ourselves. We also miss an important benefit that proper historical reflection provides: learning from that which is different rather than merely reinforcing our own ideas and

even prejudices by reassuring ourselves that our heroes were really just like us.

Luther is a great case in point. Familiar to many Protestants as the man who started the theological dimension of the Reformation, many of us assume that he was really an embryonic Presbyterian, Evangelical or even Baptist and that, were he alive today, he would be one of us. While that might be a source of reassurance and even encouragement, it also means we miss many of the most important and richest aspects of Luther's theology. His approach to the Christian life is one such aspect—instructive precisely because it is different from so much of our contemporary approaches to the same.

The first thing we might note is that the material conditions of Luther's time inevitably meant that the Christian would have been lived with different emphases. Given low literacy rates and the fact that many books would have been preclusively expensive, the whole idea of a Christian life built on the foundation of private devotions would have been virtually impossible. Christians in Luther's day had one major place where they could have access to the word of God: the corporate worship services of the church. To live the Christian life in any meaningful way meant that church attendance—consistent, regular church attendance—was vital.

This corporate emphasis was not simply a practical response to material conditions, however. It was also the practical outworking of Luther's own theological insights. What is a Christian for Luther? A Christian is one who grasps Christ by faith. That then points to a second question: Where does the Christian find Christ in order to grasp him thus? Luther's answer is simple and straightforward: in the Word preached and in the sacraments duly administered. In short, the Christian needs to be baptized, to hear sermons, and to take communion. Where do those things occur? In the public assembly of God's church.

Baptism was for Luther the gateway into the Christian life. This is not, as is often claimed, because Luther believed in some form of baptismal regeneration. Time and again in his writings he makes it clear that it is not the administering of the water which makes a person a Christian. Rather it is because baptism is the first moment when an individual is confronted with Christ. Granted, Luther had more confidence than I would have that a tiny baby can grasp the promise of baptism by faith but it does not change the fact that he did not believe in baptismal regeneration as taught by, say, the Roman Catholic Church.

And baptism continues to be the foundation of the Christian life throughout the believer's earthly sojourn. When the Devil comes and tempts Luther, his typical response is "I have been baptized!"—shorthand for "I have been offered Christ in my baptism and now cling to him by faith!" Baptism thus remains of immediate practical relevance every day. In addition, Luther sees it as the perfect picture of the Christian life: every moment of every day the Christian is dying to self and rising to new life in Christ.

The word preached is probably where today's Evangelicals feel more at home with Dr. Martin. But again for Luther the public proclamation of the

Word is always more effective than private reading. Though he would not have expressed his thoughts in this way, we might say that he saw private reading as always vulnerable to our innate prejudices and filters, and that these would blunt its effect on our souls. To sit in church and here the Word proclaimed is to be confronted by a Christ that we cannot conform to the dimensions of our own tastes. This “Word from outside,” as Luther’s phrase would have it, is powerful, breaking our self-righteousness and bringing us to Christ in a way that our own reading strategies are unlikely ever to do. The preacher points to Christ. Our own hearts, left to their own devices, will never do so. It is thus vital for Christian health that we are in church.

Finally, there is the Lord’s Supper. This is the point where most modern Protestants will decisively repudiate Luther, most being default memorialists when it comes to the Supper’s significance. I suspect that is unlikely to change but it is worth remembering that the young John Calvin favored Luther over Zwingli precisely because the latter turned communion into a mere memorial. Luther may have been wrong in the way he constructed his understanding of communion, but we need to remember the importance Paul gives to such. Some of those who have eaten the Supper casually have died, so he tells the Corinthians. Does mere memorialism allow us to do justice to such a passage which seems to give tremendous importance to the Lord’s Supper? I am no Lutheran but communion is nonetheless a very important part of my own Christian life. Eating with friends always brings a degree of intimacy which might otherwise be lacking. Eating with brothers and sisters in Christ at the Lord’s Supper draw us closer to them and indeed to the Lord who is himself there present.

There is much more to Luther on the Christian life. He did consider private devotions to be important. He also regarded confessing sins to a priest as being helpful—not for Roman sacramental reasons—but simply because it was useful at times to have that “Word from outside” applied in a very personal manner by one Christian to another. Yet in our age of individualism and personal autonomy we need to remember first and foremost that Luther’s view of the Christian life was ultimately inimical to such. It was at its most basic level corporate because it was in the corporate gathering of God’s people that Christ was to be found: in Word and in sacrament.

Brian L. Hanson is Assistant Professor of Humanities and Theology at Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He earned his PhD in history with an emphasis in Reformation Studies from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Dr. Hanson's research interests include the intersection of commonwealth ideology and evangelical theology and piety in the English Reformation, charity and poor relief in early modern England, and the theology and history of Christian spirituality. He is the author with Michael A. G. Haykin of *Waiting on the Spirit of Promise: The Life and Theology of Suffering of Abraham Cheare* (Pickwick, 2014). Dr. Hanson is also an active published composer of choral music. He and his wife, Johanna, have five children.

SBJT: What impact did Martin Luther have on the English Reformation?

Brian L. Hanson: In the quincentenary of the Protestant Reformation, it is appropriate that much of the focus has been on Martin Luther who posted the Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. However, it is also instructive to consider the marked influence that Luther had outside of Germany. Due to both the burgeoning printing industry in Europe during the early sixteenth century and the anti-ecclesiastical and anti-establishment nature of the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther's name and writings rapidly became widespread across the Continent. The Reformation in

England, in particular, demonstrates close ties with the German Reformation in theological development. While influence is not always cut-and-dry to determine from a point of historical scholarship, I would still argue that the English Reformation felt the influence of Luther in at least three distinct ways: 1) Luther's mentorship of and relationship with the English reformer, Robert Barnes, 2) the English evangelicals' theological development and own assessment of the genesis of the English Reformation in terms of Luther's influence, and 3) the increasing demand for Luther's writings in the English print market. These three aspects directly shaped the early stages of the English Reformation.

The primary catalyst in disseminating Luther's theology across the English Channel was the Cambridge humanist and reformer, Robert Barnes (c. 1495–1540). Three years after his conversion to the evangelical faith in 1525, Barnes dodged the religious authorities in Cambridge and fled to Wittenberg, where he became a close friend and mentee of Luther. Luther invested much time into Barnes' life, and his influence upon the young man was pronounced.

Under Luther's guidance, Barnes began composing pamphlets in both Latin and English that echoed his mentor. Through Barnes' writings and ministry in England, the doctrine of justification by faith that Luther rediscovered in Romans became the center of attention in English evangelical print. Barnes' *Supplicatyon* of 1531, printed in Antwerp, was a comprehensive exposé on solifidian justification and an apology of Lutheran doctrine. Luther's teachings in English arrived in London in the form of Barnes' second edition of *Supplicatyon*, published in London in 1534. In it Barnes promoted Luther's understanding of *imputatio* and reconciliation: Christ "is al[1] oure iustice ... al[1] only the peace maker bytwene god and man."¹

Barnes' activities and writings made a profound impact on the religious scene in England, leading to an initial Lutheran slant in England's Reformation. Barnes returned to England in the summer of 1531 and gained the favor of Henry VIII. While Henry rejected the doctrine of justification by faith alone, he still appointed Barnes as his royal chaplain in 1535. Henry commissioned Barnes to negotiate agreements with the Wittenberg delegation, including Philipp Melanchthon, eagerly seeking Luther's and Melanchthon's approval of his divorce with Catherine of Aragon. While Henry never secured what he desired, Barnes continued to write religious tracts, among them a Latin polemical work in 1536, with a preface by Luther himself, that condemned the papacy in obvious Lutheran overtones. After Barnes was condemned and burned as a "heretic" in London on July 30, 1540, Luther and the Wittenberg evangelicals were so moved by his death that they printed his final profession of faith in German in honor of Barnes' relationship with the Protestant Reformation in Germany.

Second, Luther's doctrine of justification through the tracts of Barnes made a significant mark on the next generation of English evangelicals, including Richard Tracy (d. 1569) and Thomas Becon (c. 1512–1567), both of whom were known for their commitment to Luther's theology of justification.² For instance, Tracy defended Luther's view of justification as a "covering" and "clothing" of Christ's justice so that sinners "appere in the syght of god iuste, and righteous."³ Becon, London cleric and author of popular bestsellers, argued as Luther that *imputatio* involved a double exchange. Not only was there an imputation of righteousness from Christ to sinners, he contended, but there was a transfer of sin from sinners to Christ. Through Christ, "all your synnes shal be layd on his backe."⁴ Christ's perfect, sinless life also

secured one's justification by the imputation of His own righteousness upon sinners: "All that ever he [Christ] shal[1] do, shal[1] be done for your sake. All hys good deeds shal[1] be yours. His ryghteousnes, holynes and godly lyfe shall be yours."⁵

As the Reformation in England flourished, the evangelicals began to assess the roots of the English Reformation, and they acknowledged Luther as the "light" and "instrument" of their own conversions as well as the impetus for the Reformation in England. Besides Barnes, William Tyndale adamantly defended Luther's doctrine of justification by faith. He took Thomas More, lord chancellor of Henry VIII, to task by arguing that the Lutherans were not "heretics." Included in his response to More in 1531 was a point-by-point defense of Luther's teachings on doctrine. Hugh Latimer, bishop of Worcester and martyr, called Luther "that wonderful instrument of god, through whom god hath opened the light of his holy word unto the world."⁶ John Jewel, bishop of Salisbury, wrote with gratitude that Luther was "sente of God to give light unto the world."⁷

Third, the English evangelicals also propagated Luther's works in England by translating them into English and encouraging them to be in print. The 1530s and 1540s saw a steady growth in the print of Luther's polemical pieces in England, indicating a high demand for his works. Though there was a sharp decline in Luther's works in England during the 1550s, due to Edward VI's close ties with John Calvin and Martin Bucer, his writings, particularly his commentaries on the Psalms and Galatians, returned to the English printing presses with full force after 1570, some titles undergoing several editions. Furthermore, the tracts of Luther's friend and colleague, Melanchthon, who became the scholarly voice of the Lutheran Church, flooded the printing presses in London with some of his titles becoming popular bestsellers in England. Melanchthon's writings made a substantial impression upon the English to the extent that the University of Cambridge made his *Loci communes* of 1521 mandatory reading for theology students.

Luther's legacy in England is often underestimated and misunderstood. However, the early English evangelicals realized that he was a "goodly instrument," and acknowledged their debt to him for the Gospel that "beganne first to rise and to shyne" in England through Luther's writings.⁸ Luther's direct contribution to the English Reformation was through his mentoring of Robert Barnes, who in turn popularized the doctrine of justification by faith

in England through print. In this five-hundredth year of remembrance, let us reflect upon the power of Christian friendship and mentorship. And, more importantly, may we never underestimate God's justification of sinners, an act that "by [Christ's] passions and suffrynges we are perfectly made whole."⁹

-
- ¹ Robert Barnes, *A supplicatyon made by Robert Barnes* (Antwerp: S. Cock, 1531) STC 1470, sig. E6r.
 - ² Thomas Becon, *Flour of godly praiers*, (London: John Day, 1550) STC 1719.5, Preface, sig. A4v. Becon called Barnes a "prophet" whom God used "to cal[1] us [the people of England] unto repentaunce."
 - ³ Richard Tracy, *The profe and declaration of thys proposition: fayth only iustifieth* (London: E Whitchurch, 1543) STC 24164, sigs. B4r, B5r-v.
 - ⁴ Thomas Becon, *Newes out of heaven* (London: J. Mayler for J. Gough, 1541) STC 1739, sig. F8r.
 - ⁵ Becon, *Newes out of heaven*, sig. F6r; Becon, *Newes out of heaven*, sig. G2r.
 - ⁶ Hugh Latimer, *27 sermons preached by the ryght Reverende father in God and constant matir [sic] of Iesus Christe, Maister Hugh Latimer* (London: John Day, 1562) STC 15276, sig. S4v.
 - ⁷ John Jewel, *An apologie, or aunswer in defence of the Church of England* (London: Reginald Wolf, 1562) STC 14590, sig. G2v.
 - ⁸ Jewel, *Apology*, sig. G2v.
 - ⁹ Becon, *A newe pathway unto praier* (London: J. Mayler for J. Gough, 1542) STC 1734. sig. Q3v.