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Two Kingdoms (I)

How does a Christian respond to evil? It is a most difficult question, raised for us especially by the recent horrific events of our nation. But it is not a question without an answer, even if the answer itself is very hard indeed.

No better answer arises in the history of the Church than that given by the great Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin. Devoted to the supremacy of Scripture, mindful of and respectful of the tradition, yet not without criticism, these theologians made crucially important distinctions when it came to the Christian response to evil.

The Christian lives, they thought, in two realms: the spiritual realm of the Kingdom of God, and the secular kingdom of the state. These two kingdoms require two kinds of response to evil. In this, these Reformers articulated and developed in various ways what had been anticipated already by the great architect of western theology, St. Augustine.

To begin with, in facing the fact of evil, there was the necessary distinction between the act of the individual and the act of the corporate life of the nation. Luther described these two acts, that of the individual and that of the nation, as the proper response of "two kingdoms: the temporal, which governs with the sword and is visible; and the spiritual, which governs solely with grace and with the forgiveness of sins." The kingdom of the sword is that of national life, executed by the authority of rulers, which is given them by God, as both St. Paul and St. Peter teach. The kingdom that governs by grace and forgiveness is that of the individual who experiences this rule through the Spirit.

Calvin's understanding of the two kingdoms, or two governments, was similar. One government was spiritual, that which had to do with piety and the reverence of God, extending to the conscience of the Christian. The second government was temporal and had to do with the political realm, "whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men."

Within the context of the two kingdoms, both Luther and Calvin taught that it was not the nation but the individual who was responsible for the highest spiritual admonitions and teachings of our Lord as they appeared, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Resist not evil" and "Love your enemies" were our Lord's commands to individual Christian men, on whom the responsibility was laid to act as children of their heavenly Father. Theirs was to be a spiritual and personal response to evil, which relied on profound faith in Jesus and the discipleship of the cross.

Such a personal response could not and should not be expected of a nation, although as we shall see, this exalted moral ground would have an influence on the extent of a nation's reaction to evildoers.

For Calvin, such a personal response stemmed from the intention not to react for revenge, but to turn the other cheek, and to allow oneself to be taken advantage of. The important aspect of this ethical choice was the desire to manifest the new character of the child of God, to seek to forgive first of all, and to bless one's enemies, just as Jesus had done to us and for us.

Luther's position with respect to the Christian man was essentially the same as Calvin's, but was more explicit in the extent of a Christian's non-resistance to evil. The spiritually minded man should be prepared not to retaliate, even to the point of suffering harm.

Therefore, crucial to both of these, Calvin's intention and Luther's suffering, was the spiritual and ethical will of the individual. This was what they understood it meant to be truly Christian and to live as the child of God in His Kingdom.

The other kingdom, the temporal kingdom of the sword, involved another kind of response to evil. For Luther, the Christian, acting in the world as neighbor meant that he or she would defend another person against evil to whatever extent might be necessary.

The Christian might act as policeman or soldier. This did not eliminate the Christian identity of the child of God, but rather the focus of intention. The intention now in this temporal world of the sword, the objective divinely given authority of the state to administer justice, was to act for the sake of another's benefit and welfare.

Responding to evil for someone else, a member of one's family, or fellow citizen, Christians would fight not for themselves, but for the sake of their fellow men. In this way, the Christian's intention, whether as individual or as citizen of an earthly kingdom, was conformed to charity.

Calvin took this idea of the benefit and welfare of the citizen and expanded it in the role of the state. One of the principal reasons for the state to wield the sword was to provide protection for the Church. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin places the discussion of the state under the section that treats of the external means by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein.

In this view, the welfare of the state has a direct bearing on the welfare of the Church. It is the same idea that we Americans hold so dear and guarantee in our Constitution as a fundamental right of our citizenry, namely, the freedom of Religion. We are free to seek the face of the Lord, and to enjoy His every blessing, each and every day, both in our splendid Church, and in our personal lives, because, in charity,

brave men and women have given us the protection of their courage,
and the offering of their lives.

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