

Luther, Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed (1523)

In this text written in German Luther, after reminding the reader that obedience is due to the temporal power, asserts here that there are two groups of humans: the true Christians and the others. As such, the former should have no need for either human law or human power. But they are so rare that such a possibility remains purely theoretical. The biblical quotes' references are placed in square brackets.

First, we must provide a sound basis for the civil law and sword so no one will doubt that it is in the world by God's will and ordinance. The passages which do this are the following: Romans 12, " Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. " [Romans 13, 1-2]

The law of this temporal sword has existed from the beginning of the world. For when Cain slew his brother Abel, he was in such great terror of being killed in turn that God even placed a special prohibition on it and suspended the sword for his sake, so that no one was to slay him. He would not have had this fear if he had not seen and heard from Adam that murderers are to be slain. [reference to Gen. Ch. 4]. (...)

Here we must divide the children of Adam and all mankind into two classes, the first belonging to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world. Those who belong to the kingdom of God are all true believers who are in Christ and under Christ, for Christ is King and Lords in the kingdom of God, as Psalm 2 and all of Scripture says. For this reason he came into the world, that he might begin God's kingdom and establish it in the world. Therefore, he says before Pilate, "*My kingdom is not of the world, but everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.*" [John 18:36-37]. In the gospel he continually refers to the kingdom of God, and says, "*Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*" [Matthew 3: 2] and also: "*But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness*". [Matt. 6:33]. He also calls the gospel a gospel of the kingdom of God; because it teaches, governs, and upholds God's kingdom.

Now observe, these people need no temporal law or sword. If all the world were composed of real Christians, that is, true believers, there would be no need for benefits from prince, king, lord, sword, or law. They would serve no purpose, since Christians have in their heart the Holy Spirit, who both teaches and makes them to do injustice to no one, to love everyone, and to suffer injustice and even death willingly and cheerfully at the hands of anyone. (...)

All who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law. There are few true believers, and still fewer who live a Christian life, who do not resist evil and indeed themselves do no evil. For this reason God has provided for them a different government beyond the Christian estate and kingdom of God. He has subjected them to the sword so that, even

though they would like to, they are unable to practice their wickedness, and if they do practice it they cannot do so without fear or with success and impunity. In the same way a savage wild beast is bound with chains and ropes so that it cannot bite and tear as it would normally do, even though it would like to; whereas a tame and gentle animal needs no restraint, but is harmless despite the lack of chains and ropes.

If this were not so, men would devour one another, seeing that the whole world is evil and that among thousands there is scarcely a single true Christian. No one could support wife and child, feed himself, and serve God. The world would be reduced to chaos. (...)

It is to be noted that the two classes of Adam's children, the one in God's kingdom under Christ and the other in the kingdom of the world under governing authority, as was said above-have two kinds of law. For every kingdom must have its own laws and statutes: without law no kingdom or government can survive, as everyday experience amply shows. 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. Therefore, where the temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads souls and destroys them. (...)

You must know that since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince ever rarer. They are generally the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth; therefore, one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good, especially in divine matters which concern the salvation of souls. They are God's executioners and hangmen; his divine wrath uses them to punish the wicked and to maintain outward peace.”

From a translation provided by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) through the ISN. Another translation is available @ <http://beggarsallreformation.blogspot.co.uk/2005/11/secular-authority-to-what-extent-it.html>