

Sermon 7-5-26
Pastor Ray Lorthioir
Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
Sermon for the 250th Anniversary of the United States, July 4th Weekend 2026

Two Hands Versus One

Martin Luther was at the forefront of the Reformation. Thus, he was always being challenged and confronted with new and changing situations. It's one of the reasons, he never wrote a comprehensive theology like later Reformed theologian, John Calvin, did. Comprehensive Lutheran theology was left to the generation of theologians who came after Luther, like Martin Chemnitz, who is sometimes called the second Martin.

However, Luther's thinking was both seminal and revolutionary. After a careful study of Scripture, Luther concluded that the Roman Church was in significant error. Humans are not made right before Yahweh by a mixture of Christ's righteous work on the cross and our own good works — an error Rome continues to teach to this day. Instead, Scripture actually teaches that we are made totally righteous before Yahweh by faith in the completed righteous work of Jesus Christ alone. Our own good works can do nothing to give us righteous standing before Yahweh. In fact, trust in our own righteous works will bring us nothing but condemnation before Yahweh, simply because such faith denies that the work of Jesus, God the Son, is all-sufficient for human salvation.

Because of his teaching, Luther was called before an assembly of high church officials, German princes and the Holy Roman Emperor. Both the bishops and the emperor demanded that Luther publicly recant his teachings and conform to official teaching. Luther knew what Scripture rightly said. He knew the official teaching of the church was in error. As a pastor and preacher he knew that he would be endangering not only his own soul, but the souls under his care if he preached and taught the "correct," but false doctrine of the church. Therefore, on the basis of his own conscience before the Lord, Luther refused to recant the truth and adopt a lie, even if it meant losing his own life. Consequently, Luther taught that both the church and the state have no right to force a person to go against conscience when it comes to God's truth given to us in Scripture.

Nevertheless, both church and state condemned Martin Luther as a heretic and condemned him to death. It was only the life long protection of the German princes who had been convinced by the true Gospel that kept Luther from being burned at the stake. It was the protection of the same princes that enabled the true Gospel to be preached in all the congregations of their lands. Thus, what we know as the Lutheran Church was born.

What is difficult to understand from our perspective now is how the correct preaching and teaching of the Holy Gospel tore apart the entire fabric of the medieval social and political structures. But it did. And so a whole new picture of church, society and government had to be formed. This Luther did from God's Holy Word, crisis by crisis.

But Luther wasn't the only player and he had many opponents. On one side was the Roman Church. On the other side were the radical reformers who taught that Luther hadn't gone far enough in purifying Christian teaching from the errors of Rome. Therefore, it was from the midst of many deep and consequential controversies that Luther gradually shaped

from Scripture what present day Lutherans call the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, also known as the Kingdoms of God's Left Hand and God's Right Hand — or for short, the right and left hand of God. It is this doctrine that answers the question of how Yahweh works in the world.

Central to the doctrine is Yahweh's omnipotent power as the Creator of the visible universe as well as the hidden spiritual universe; and Yahweh's authority over every creature He has made — both seen and unseen. Also central to the doctrine is how Yahweh exercises His authority on this earth over the apex of His creation, namely human beings.

Also important to the doctrine are the three estates of life Luther found in Scripture. Estate number one is the Church. It proclaims the message of God's glorious salvation for sinners. Estate number two is the household — along with its place and authority in the entire economic and general activity of society. Third is the civil government. These three estates describe the jobs, tasks and structures by which God organizes human life on this earth for our benefit. And, it is over these three estates that Yahweh exercises the power of both His right and left hand.

So, here is a simplified version of the doctrine. God's right hand kingdom is His gracious reign in Christ through Christ's true Church. In the right hand kingdom, Christ effects the justification and salvation of sinners through the forgiveness of sins and the creation of saving faith in hearts. By the power of Lord Holy Spirit, the Gospel regenerates hearts and makes humans righteous before Yahweh. Through the Holy Spirit and His Church, Christ's right hand kingdom rules on earth by the preached Gospel, Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, the Lord's Supper, Christian catechesis (which means Christian instruction), and pastoral care. Regenerate Christians living the Gospel also affect the other two estates of life. The spiritual fruit they bear via moral virtue improves society by strengthening households. The disciplined outward conduct of regenerate Christians helps secure the public civil order over which government has authority.

On the other hand, in the left hand kingdom, Yahweh exercises rule over all people for the preservation of earthly life. Sin and the restraint of sin is the reason that the left hand kingdom exists in the first place. Therefore, the earthly mechanisms of God's left hand include civil government, legal structures, public order, household authority, economic life, professional vocations, education, and the ordinary use of reason in earthly affairs. In particular, the task of civil government is to restrain outward wickedness and protect all people from murder, theft, exploitation, fraud, tyranny, social chaos and much more. In this respect civil authority is a divine gift through which society can flourish, for it preserves individual safety within society. Civil government rules by the sword, statute, prison, tax code and political compulsion.

Now, in describing Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms of God, we must not confuse it with the mid 20th century American Supreme Court ruling on the separation of church and state. Scripture knows nothing about a secular state independent of its Creator and outside of His rule. Therefore, neither does Luther.

Theologically, the left-hand kingdom is grounded in the doctrines of God's creation and His providence over creation. Therefore, in the Lutheran understanding, God remains Lord over all government. Government does not rule on its own. It can only exercise the authority Yahweh gives it. Therefore, all disobedient rulers and authorities will come under Yahweh's judgment if they refuse to righteously do their duty.

In creating the doctrine of the two kingdoms, Luther also had to find his way through the minefields created by his opponents and various circumstances. Contrary to the papacy, Luther understood from Scripture that the Church has not been given political power over kings and government. It is not itself a political power. Contrary to the radical preachers of the Reformation, Luther understood that Scripture in no way abolishes civil government, property, courts, legal punishment, and marriage. It does not forbid the Christian to serve in the police or military and does not forbid the Christian to hold public office. Concerning the matter of conscience, Luther came to the conclusion that the state has no jurisdiction over individual consciences in matters of true Christian doctrine. Luther also insisted from Scripture that private persons may not take the vengeance of the state into their own hands as vigilantes or rebels. Thus, he urged the princes to crush the peasant rebellions that occurred early in the Reformation.

Feeling dizzy after all this? So am I. A lot goes into the doctrine of God's right and left hand. But, I bring all this up on this 250th anniversary July 4th weekend for two reasons that pertain to the future of the United States of America. First is the role of Islam. Second is the role of the Church. How shall we approach each?

At the National Convention of The American Association of Lutheran Churches held two weeks ago, a resolution was brought to the floor that created some controversy based on the doctrine of God's right and left hand. It's entitled "Resolution regarding the dangerous Invasion of Islam in Western Christian culture."

After a series of valid, researched reasons, the document urges The AALC "to call upon all Christian churches and individual believers to take seriously the Islamic threat to Christian Faith and Freedom and to our civilization, founded on democracy and Judeo-Christian beliefs and values."

In its original form the document called upon The AALC "to where possible, encourage the use of Constitutional and legitimate political and legal means to oppose the illegal and deceptive methods employed by the Islamists." And it was this section that caused the most controversy. It was replaced by vote.

Finally, in its original form, the document resolved that in obedience to the command of Christ, we should all "share the Good News of the Gospel with Islamists and trust that in the blood of Christ shed upon the Holy Cross, there is forgiveness for radical Islamists, if they allow the Holy Spirit to turn their hearts in repentance to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord."

After spending quite a long time on this resolution, the majority finally voted to refer it to The AALC's standing Commission on Doctrine and Church Relations for further review and editorial rewriting. One of the main reasons this happened was the majority felt that this resolution violated the doctrine of the two kingdoms.

In reflecting upon the controversy, I begin with an ironic historical footnote. Thursday, June 25th was the day this resolution was brought to the convention floor. June 25th 1530 was the day the Lutheran princes of Germany presented the primary confessional document of Lutheranism, The Augsburg Confession, to the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V, by a reading of it at a public meeting.

Now, the direct reason for the 1530 meeting at Augsburg was that the year before, 1529, the Muslim armies of the Ottoman Empire, in their attempt to conquer all of Christian Europe, had laid siege to the Austrian city of Vienna. The terms the Muslims offered to the besieged city were surrender and convert to Islam or die. And in the surrounding

countryside it is estimated that Ottoman troops captured and kidnapped into slavery about 20,000 people. According to Wikipedia, the Ottomans reportedly preferred to abduct young boys and girls and members of the clergy.

Now, because the Turks attempted the siege in October, the Lord had a surprise for them. The annual fall rains of Eastern Europe were extremely heavy that year. As the Turks marched toward Vienna they had to leave behind cannons, equipment and supplies stuck in deep mud. The weather led to a lot of sickness and discontent among the Turkish troops as the siege dragged on. Therefore, a final all out assault by the Turkish forces was attempted. Although they outnumbered the city defenders by more than two to one, the Turkish assault miraculously failed, and the Turks retreated. Vienna was saved.

But now alerted to the Muslim threat on the eastern flank of his empire, Charles V set about raising 80,000 troops to counter it. For this, he needed the cooperation of the Lutheran German princes. Therefore, the purpose of the 1530 meeting at Augsburg was to win the German princes back into the Roman Catholic fold and get them to supply troops. Instead, the Lutheran princes stood their spiritual ground declaring that they would never return to the theological errors of the Roman Church. They would remain Lutheran. As far as I know, they did supply troops. So, the irony of The AALC's convention on June 25th was that we were having trouble passing an anti-Islamic resolution on the very day the Augsburg Confession was presented in 1530 as part of Charles V's attempt to deal with an emergency caused by Islam.

The Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms of God is sound. But when dealing with Islam, we have a problem. Their false god, Allah, does not have a left and right hand. He rules with only one hand. And that one hand calls for the complete subjection of all non-Muslim people under a unified Islamic religious and political theocracy. The best example of this in our time is the government of Iran, where the religious clergy rule the government.

And religion is what makes the government of Iran so dangerous. They take seriously the commands and end time prophecies of Allah written in the Koran. And they're willing to act on them. Thus, their Hamas proxy perpetrated the grisly attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023. And what about the Iranian attempt to develop a nuclear weapon? Because of the word of Allah given in the Koran, would they not hesitate to erase Israel from the map if they could? Would they not hesitate to eventually use such weapons against the West, including the U.S.? Our present administration carefully considered these possibilities and said it shall never be.

But does Islam need the bomb when it has something just as powerful — namely unlimited Muslim immigration into Western nations? Muslims remain very quiet when they're in the minority. But once enough collect in one place, they attempt both political and religious domination. They're finding this out in Europe.

It wouldn't be so bad if Islam believed in the separation of church and state. For then, they could be like the Orthodox Jewish communities upstate. They could impose their way of life in a certain area and we probably wouldn't mind. But with Islam that's not possible. They must rule the entire township, the entire county, the entire state, the entire nation, the entire world. Sharia Law must prevail and make second class citizens out of all non-Muslims. This is the creeping danger. And now that Islam has successfully allied itself with outright Marxism in the form of New York City Mayor Mamdani, the creep is all the more dangerous. It looks like the 2026 election cycle will produce a small but dedicated group of

big city Marxists in Congress. Both Islam and Marxism publicly reject and despise the principles on which the United States was founded.

However, there is a problem opposing Islam via government. Religion is protected under the First Amendment. Therefore, Islam can hide its political intentions under the cover of religion. For that reason government may not be able to do much. Nevertheless, the fact must be faced that Islam is a political movement masquerading as a religion. And they're no longer quiet about it.

So, should the Church stay silent? Other conservative denominations don't have the doctrine of the two kingdoms. They won't stay silent. But, we don't exactly have to either. I'm certain Martin Luther would have urged his prince to raise an army against the Ottoman army if the Muslims had made it that far into Germany. Therefore, I think we can urge our political leaders — God's left hand — to do something about the Islamic threat — like entirely curtailing immigration from Islamic nations.

Yesterday, as I looked at one of our family pictures from July 4th, 1976 — the 200th anniversary — I thought about that time fifty years ago. Islam was something far away that we knew little about. Marxism was certainly gaining traction in the wake of the Vietnam War protests. However, in the midst of the Cold War most people still understood Marxism to be the enemy of all people. It would not have been possible then to elect an open Marxist to Congress, or as mayor of New York City. But, how things have changed!

So, what can the church do? The immense spiritual power in the right hand of God has not disappeared. Several days ago I encountered the 20 something secretary at my chiropractor's office whom I hadn't seen in several months because of schedule changes. Back in the winter she told me that she had started attending a bible study at the invitation of a friend. The change in her since then was tremendous — her dress, appearance, the light in her face, everything. So we got to talking. I asked her, how do you think attending the study has affected you? She answered, "you come to despise yourself." I knew immediately what she meant. Being exposed to the light of Christ had caused her to see the life she had been living for what it was — deadly darkness. We talked a little bit about the forgiveness of sins. And she said, "I think people use that as an excuse." Again, I knew what she meant. Forgiveness of sins is not an excuse to continue in rebellious sinning against our holy, and righteous Creator. That she already understood this made my day.

Now, she is only one person who is hopefully on her way. But God is stirring her generation. The lies of atheism, secularism, feminism, Marxism, hedonism, no fault divorce, narcissism, abortion, new age and much more are bearing the poisoned fruit they were destined to bear. And it seems the toxicity has finally reached a level where something has to give. Apparently the way, the life and the truth is being sought by an increasing number of young people. Therefore, Messiah's Church can introduce such seekers to the One they seek — the One who says He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And once that happens, such people can serve the Lord Jesus in the left hand kingdom as Christian secretaries, moms, dads, laborers and even politicians. If enough find Jesus, they can even right the nation from its current path to destruction.

And then there is what is happening in Islam itself. It's estimated by Islamic leaders that about one fourth of their young people are leaving Islam in the West — many for Christianity. Here the Church has tremendous opportunity for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

On the original July 4th there was tremendous danger ahead for the nation. A deadly war for independence had to be fought. And there has been danger ever since. The dangers

facing the nation on this 250th anniversary also cannot be ignored. Those who know the nature of the dangers lurking in the darkness need to proclaim it from the housetops so that all may know. The Church certainly has this task as it proclaims Law.

The founders of the United States knew that no republic of the people by the people and for the people can long survive without a virtuous population that knows the true difference between good and evil as defined by our Creator God. Therefore, the Church has the task of creating a virtuous population as it proclaims the Gospel. For, only Jesus can liberate human hearts and minds from the evil bondage of being our own gods. Only His Holy Spirit can remake children of the devil into children of God. And Yahweh has established things on earth so that only His true Church has the means of His grace able to accomplish this — namely the preached Word and the rightly administered Sacraments. Therefore, let us rejoice in the right hand of God — the Church and the Holy Gospel — as it does what nothing else on earth can do — save souls. Let us also do all we can through the preaching of the Word to apply the holy medicine of the Gospel to those sickened by the toxicity of evil. Through Jesus, the true and living God will overcome all false gods. Amen.