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A Startling Injustice in the Protestant Reformation: The Contrasting Theologies of Martin Luther and Thomas Muntzer as Seen in Their Responses to the Reformation of the Common Man, 1525

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A Startling Injustice in the Protestant Reformation: The Contrasting Theologies of Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer as Seen in Their Responses to the Revolution of the Common Man, 1525[1]

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Abstract

Compares the theologies of reform held by Thomas Müntzer and Martin Luther specifically as their theologies played out in response to the Peasants' War of 1525. Müntzer and Luther. This comparison places Müntzer over and against Luther.

For very different reasons, Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer are two powerful voices of reform in church history. They are all the more interesting for the way in which their contrasting theological convictions informed their vastly different approaches to reform. As the Reformation unfolded in the early decades of the sixteenth century these two men, who were well known to each other, came to hold divergent views on the responsibility of Christians for ecclesial, social and political reforms. This paper will explore a striking feature of Luther's theology through a careful comparison of Luther and Müntzer's theological frameworks that lead to their practical responses to the Peasants' War of 1525, sometimes called the Revolution of the Common Man. As it shall be seen, Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms caused him to hold unswervingly to his position that a Christian should always act in obedience to temporal authorities that are ordained by God. To do so demonstrates faithful obedience to God's will, as God acts

in and through temporal authority. In this understanding, Martin Luther's theology was fatally flawed because it lent support to a social system of oppression and injustice that was antithetical to the model of justice that is upheld in the Christian Scriptures.

The Historical Context

The Peasants' War of 1525 took place during the late Middle Ages when medieval social order was in a period of great flux. Social constructs were rapidly changing in sixteenth century Germany. Prior to this point in history, the feudal and manorial systems of the early Middle Ages had offered a well-understood social structure that provided stability among the classes if not universal prosperity. However, by the sixteenth century, challenges to the roots of feudal social and political order revealed rifts in those structures. The shift to an exchange economy had initiated changes in social structure across France and England throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but the changes were slower to occur in Germany.[1] This shift from an agrarian society to the rise of a more commercial and capitalist economy created a free peasant class that was no longer considered a dependent of the manorial system.[2] It would be incorrect to assert that the economic changes that occurred prior to the Peasants' War were the sole reason for the peasants' uprising, what is true is that "the Peasants' War simply cannot be grasped if socioeconomic factors are omitted."[3] This is due to the fact that changes in the economic structure that manorialism provided meant the peasant class experienced a sense of economic pressure that had not applied to them when they were dependents of the manor.

The changes in economic structure and the shifts in social structures that followed created additional tensions leading toward rebellion among the peasant class. The basis of feudalism was a

landed aristocracy, which often saw the peasants as pawns but nonetheless clearly delineated their place in the social structure. But with the breakdown of manorialism, peasants were released from being dependent upon a noble. While this granted peasants more individual freedom, the downside of this was that it created more ambiguity in social order and class structure.[4] In Germany, the nobility lived on larger estates than in other places, which meant that the peasants were more scattered throughout the countryside. This created a dynamic where the nobility were socially removed from the peasants, which caused a distinct lack of understanding about peasant life, which in turn contributed to the rising tensions between these social classes once peasants became separated from the manorial social structure. [5] This was true despite the fact that the German nobility did not seem to hold the peasants with the same contempt, as did the nobility in other parts of Europe.[6] From the perspective of the nobility, the newly independent peasants could not be granted land to farm nor marry into the noble class. From the peasants' perspective, independence only resulted in crushing economic burdens that could not be satisfied. The overall impact was to further the rising social tensions within the region.[7]

However, rising social tensions were not the only product of the peasants' economic situation. With economic changes came political changes that were made manifest in newfound freedom for the individual. Individual freedom meant that monarchs and other aristocracy could no longer exert the same influence over their subjects.[8] The peasants began to participate in village-self governance such as demanding the right to use common pastureland. Any success for the peasants in these confrontations over governance raised their political expectations.[9] However, regional variations played a role in the intensity of expectation around political independence.[10] As shall be seen, in areas such

as Thuringia where the tensions were greatest, Thomas Müntzer's theology fueled a political crisis that was already brewing.

Nowhere were the ideological dimensions of this sociopolitical crisis better championed than in *The Twelve Articles* of the peasants written in the early spring of 1525. Although it was distributed anonymously, it was almost certainly written by a furrier of Memmingen in Upper Swabia named Sebastian Lotzer, assisted by a Lutheran preacher named Christoph Schappeler.[11] This document distilled the peasants' grievances regarding the unjust policies of the lords into twelve points while also outlining a program of reform. The full title was poignantly revealing: *The Twelve Articles; The Just and Fundamental Articles of All the Peasantry and Tenants of Spiritual and Temporal Powers by Whom They Think Themselves Oppressed.* What *The Twelve Articles* most clearly expressed was the peasant goal of an alternative sociopolitical order in which the ruling nobles were to treat the peasant class with fairness and justice. The strong direct language of this document conveyed the peasants' stand for power, fairness, freedom, justice, and the cessation of oppression. But most importantly it is clear throughout the document that this new sociopolitical order "should be exercised in a Christian and brotherly fashion."[12]

The leaders among the peasants clearly emphasized the importance of a Christian understanding of justice based on principles from the Scriptures. In *The Twelve Articles* it is revealed that the main goal of the peasants was to establish a just sociopolitical order according to divine law.[13] Within this order, the nobility would be called upon to govern in ways that met with the standards of the Word of God and as a result justice would be enacted. In the peasants' response to the economic, social and political shifts of the sixteenth century there was a shift from the law of feudalism (where the peasants only demanded

what they could justify legally under feudal law) to the divine law that the Reformers were preaching. Once the peasants realized the extent of moral justice offered by the Reformers' views, the peasant uprisings became grounded in Scripture that provided a moral justice for all.[14] The shift from feudal law to divine law further contributed to rising tensions around the related issues of authority and justice.[15] As known leaders of reform, both Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer were sought for their spiritual leadership in order to address the issues of authority and justice as tensions neared explosive capacity in the spring of 1525.

The Theological Response of Thomas Müntzer

Thomas Müntzer's response to the peasants must be framed by the role he felt compelled to play in the crisis. Many historians do not know how to characterize Thomas Müntzer, indeed he leaves behind a complex record of writings and actions. He was by all accounts "a driven and restless spirit seeking a faith that would transform the world. Born into a time of radical changes, he tried to come to grips with these changes as a theologian in a church challenged by Luther's reforming movement…[he was on a] quest for a faith that might withstand the pressure of history."[16] Regardless of whether he is honored or vilified for his role in the Reformation, and particularly in the Peasants' War, history can claim with certainty that Müntzer was both a scholar and a pastor. Both of these roles played into his response to the sociopolitical changes that were impacting sixteenth century views of authority and justice. The records of several universities show that Thomas Müntzer, the scholar, spent the decade before the Peasants' War on a continual quest for truth. In fact, for two years he read church history and mysticism (Flavius Josephus, Eusebius, St Jerome, Augustine, letters of councils, as well as parts of Canon Law

and the German mystics) in his search for religious certainty.[17] Müntzer's movements and his studies suggest that Müntzer the scholar was well educated for his time, yet Müntzer the man was "primarily a seeker, restless and curious, driven by the desire to meet divine reality in a direct and personal way."[18] In the course of his search for truth, Müntzer and Luther first crossed paths in Leipzig in 1519 where Müntzer learned more about the new Wittenberg theology and Lutheran reform.[19] In fact, Luther played an important role in Müntzer's career. Despite the fact that Müntzer initially hesitated to join with the church reform proposed by Martin Luther, Luther saw him to be a good candidate for a pastorate in Zwickau in the Thuringian basin, and he recommended Müntzer to the post.[20]

In his first career post as a pastor, Müntzer began to assert the need for reform in the church through his sermons. Müntzer's study of the German mystics had shaped his pneumatological view of the church especially the power of the Spirit to inspire and direct Christians. His understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in the church and the world drove Müntzer's desire for reform. This pneumatological perspective was evident in a document he wrote in 1521 called *Prague Manifesto*: "For anyone who does not feel the spirit of the Christ within him, or is not quite sure of having it, is not a member of Christ, but of the devil."[21] Müntzer believed the Spirit was intimately and inseparably connected with the true church.[22] Any member of the clergy who did not profess the indwelling of the Spirit should be cast out of the church. This was because in Müntzer's view, a Christian who was purified by the Holy Spirit would be compelled to act and lead in ways that brought about the kingdom of heaven. Müntzer's concern was the need to reform the church by separating out spiritual authorities that had not been purified by the Holy Spirit.[23] With this view in mind, he accused both Catholic and Lutheran leaders of propagating a

dead faith, because to Müntzer, "faith was the result of the direct transmission of divine truth by the Holy Spirit."[24] This divine truth, as experienced in visions, would compel Christian leaders to bring order out of the sociopolitical chaos in the regions where Müntzer preached. Accordingly, Müntzer argued in the Latin version of his *Prague Manifesto*, "How can they [the clergy] be servants of God, messengers of His Word, when they deny it brazenly with a prostituted mind...For all true priests are to experience revelations in order that they may be confirmed in their convictions."[25] Scholar and Müntzer translator, Peter Matheson asserts that Müntzer believed: "this denial of personal revelation, by refusing entrance to one's soul of its true 'possessor', the Spirit, makes nonsense of faith."[26] The experience of personal revelation became a lynchpin to Müntzer's understanding of the purified church. It is clear throughout Müntzer's preaching that in his theology, the key requirement to reform the church and subsequently bring social and political stability was for the clergy to be purified.

For Müntzer, the key was to purify individual Christians (but particularly the clergy) in order that they may receive divine revelations and visions from the Holy Spirit.[27] Müntzer's idea of reform differed from Luther, for Luther the key to reform was in reforming doctrine or the magistrates. But Müntzer's view contained a mystical premise. Without sincere reform that included a mystical piety for those in spiritual authority, he felt none of the followers of God would experience the Holy Spirit even as the Holy Spirit was required for establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. If the Holy Spirit was left out of teaching and preaching then the church could not be purified. In this he felt Luther's reformation had not done enough to bring about the purification of the church.[28] From his study of the mystic tradition and scripture Müntzer was convinced that the Holy Spirit was closely tied to the reestablishment of the Apostolic Church and the only way to purify

the church was by the return of the Spirit to all of God's elect.[29] This return was critical because the Spirit revealed the mysteries of God to the clergy, including an understanding of the Bible and visions. In Müntzer's view, spiritual authorities that functioned without the Holy Spirit were guilty of usurping the Word of God, blindly leading the blind and even preventing the growth of faith.

In his role as a pastor, Müntzer sincerely felt the followers of Christ had in fact, been deprived in the failure of the clergy to teach the mystical power of the Holy Spirit to effect both the spiritual and temporal world. The work of the Spirit in the world would reorder the world and orient it toward a Christian society. As described earlier, Müntzer's role as a pastor influenced his understanding of how the sociopolitical changes impacted societal views of authority. Müntzer had a sincere pastoral concern for the spiritual lives of the members of the church, but his spiritual care also extended to their everyday lives.[30] The economic and social changes of the sixteenth century created anxiety among the social classes and the need to focus on subsistence distracted the poor from their life in God.[31] Müntzer's response to these social concerns was a deeply held pastoral desire to reform the church with a mystical theology that would lead to a Christian reordering of social structures, thereby creating not only individual renewal in Christ, but also in the world. At its very core, this mystical vision of reform was to bring about a renewal of all society in order to usher in the kingdom of heaven. But in a very practical and immediate sense, Müntzer's reforming response was an urgent call for Christians to enact justice.

Thomas Müntzer held a mystical theology, evident in the pneumatological view with which he addressed the chaotic times in which he lived. Both Luther and Müntzer brought into sharper view the eschaton and the representation of the kingdom of God on earth. But Müntzer's sense of urgency for the kingdom of heaven

to be manifest on earth was in many ways second to his desire for a mystical cleansing of the clergy through the Holy Spirit.[32] In July of 1524 Müntzer preached *A Sermon before the Princes* in which he used a text from Daniel 2. This sermon revealed his deeply held pneumatological requirement for spiritual authority in the church. "It is true, and I know it to be true, that the Spirit of God is revealing to many elect, pious persons a decisive, inevitable, imminent reformation [accompanied] by great anguish, and it must be carried out to completion."[33] This pneumatological view, paired with Müntzer's eschatological belief that the kingdom of heaven was imminent suggested that Müntzer's vision was focused beyond the church. As Hans-Jürgen Goertz suggests, "he was striving for the Kingdom of God on earth and not really for a new 'church' or confession. He did not contribute to ecclesiology," at least not in an earthly sense.[34] Müntzer was more concerned with building the kingdom of heaven on earth through the purification of spiritual authorities by the Holy Spirit.

Müntzer's vision of a purified Body of Christ was based on the understanding that when a pious Christian, whether clergy or prince, experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit, then he or she would have visions that would reveal how to live as a Christian in the world. When Christians in authority lived this way it would transform the world and begin to usher in the kingdom of heaven on earth. This is why, for Müntzer personal experience of the Holy Spirit was indispensable for spiritual reform in both the sacred and the secular realms. The cleansing work of the Holy Spirit enabled pious Christian leaders to receive and then act on spiritual visions. For as Müntzer states: "it would never be possible, for true preachers, dukes and rulers, to act in every respect blamelessly and correctly, unless they live by the revelation of God such as Aaron received from Moses, and David from Nathan and Gad."[35] Müntzer drives home the important role of visions as precursors to

the imminent reign of God in his *A Sermon before the Princes,* he writes: "where God is clearly speaking...of the transformation of the world. In the last days he will bring this about...and pour out his spirit over all flesh; and our sons and daughters will prophesy and have dreams and visions."[36] This is Müntzer's pneumatological and eschatological understanding of the coming kingdom of God.

Importantly, Thomas Müntzer's theology of God's kingdom on earth was apocalyptic, which resulted in a chiliastic separatism. Müntzer's studies of the German mystics tied with his awareness of the chaotic times lead him to believe that the apocalyptic age was close at hand.[37] He anticipated a golden age in which Christ would reign on earth: with that in mind, he argued that all Christians should withdraw from worldly social structures (whether clerical or temporal), receive the Spirit, and then work with the Spirit toward actualizing the golden age of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Müntzer's apocalyptic vision brought him to believe that human social systems and institutions, including government and the church, must be radically changed.[38] As Müntzer said in his *Testimony of the First Chapter of the Gospel of Luke*, radical change was necessary so "that this earthly life swings up into heaven."[39] These views lead him to urgently seek reform in every sphere of life, beginning with the clergy but also turning to the need for reform among temporal authority. Müntzer's clear view of the need for radical reform thus lead him to address the gross failure of temporal powers. He saw the exploitation of the peasants, their bitter disappointment in the social ineffectiveness of the Reformation, and the lack of response among the aristocracy.[40] In his *Sermon Before the Princes* in which he tried to urge response from the nobility, he states: "Now if you want to be true governors, you must begin government at the roots, and, as Christ commanded, drive his enemies from the elect. For you are the means to this end..."[41] Later his admonishments took on a more hostile tone that

can be heard as a rising voice for social and economic justice: "Everyone should properly receive according to his need. Any prince, count, or lord who refuses to do this even when seriously warned should be hanged or have his head chopped off."[42] For Müntzer, unjust governing represented a significant obstacle to establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. As a result, it became his view that for the sake of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, the followers of God must take up their responsibility to fight for change where temporal powers failed to act justly.

Müntzer's drive to fight against temporal powers revealed his eschatological belief that the actions of the elect could speed the kingdom of heaven to earth. To rise up against temporal powers by addressing injustice for the sake of the common good was to advance the kingdom of heaven to earth. Where Martin Luther advocated that more drastic measures should wait until the time was ripe, Müntzer urged other reformers in writing, "Christendom truly has no more time to lose. Beloved brethren…multiply, it is time. Wait no longer, summer is at the door…do not [even] toady to your princes, otherwise your work will be subverted."[43] Müntzer pressed that it was in fact, God's will for the elect to work for the purification of both spiritual and temporal authorities and an additional benefit of this would be socio-economic justice. In his *Open Letter to the People of Allstedt, 26/27 April 1525* Müntzer called for the elect to raise their swords against the princes and nobles who had perpetuated injustice against the peasant class.[44] By permitting unjust social and economic conditions to persist throughout Germany, the temporal powers had distracted the peasants from their true life as the elect in the kingdom of God. Because the kingdom of heaven on earth was imminent it was time, according to Müntzer's eschatology, for the elect to act against the temporal authorities in ways that would usher in the kingdom of heaven.

The Theological Response of Martin Luther

Like Müntzer, Luther was also very aware of the need for reform in both temporal authority and ecclesial authority as he observed the times in which he lived. To Luther, the events and upheaval around him, in both the world and the church, created urgency in his desire for reform. However, Vogel painted a clear picture of Luther's view of the eschaton, and it is a vastly different view from that of Müntzer.

> He [Luther] rejected chiliasm and forcefully pointed out that the "thousand years" of Rev 20 began at the time when the book of Revelation was written. The end of this time period, the release of Satan according to Rev 20:7, he viewed as being the papacy's becoming the antichrist when Gregory VII became pope in 1073 and signaled his desire for world dominion. A second event causing Luther to think that Satan had been released and thus that the end of the millennium had already come was the Turkish threat to the Christendom of Europe.[45]

In contrast to Müntzer's eschatology, Luther believed the millennium of Christ's reign had already ended; he therefore also believed that the kingdom of God was already established on earth though not in its fullness. Thus in Luther's view, the reform of temporal and ecclesial powers played an important role in establishing God's kingdom on earth. This perspective of the eschaton came to bear on Luther's understanding of justification.[46] The Christian was already justified by faith and yet still living the life of a justified sinner on earth, waiting for the fullness of the kingdom of heaven in Christ's second coming.[47] In his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian* Luther offers that a Christian is: "a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none…a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[48] This meant that because the elect were justified in Christ, Luther felt a Christian's natural response should be to prepare the world for Christ's return. This was the

intersection of Luther's eschatology and his doctrine of the two kingdoms, which initially stemmed from a medieval understanding of the estates of the realm.[49]

Luther adapted the medieval worldview of the estates of the realm for his own theological purposes and therefore arrived at his doctrine of two kingdoms, which was the emergence of a classic Protestant ethic of how the world should be ordered; the church separate from the state.[50] This was radically different from medieval thinking on spiritual and secular authority, which were often so entangled that they were difficult to separate. At times the pope would go to war or threaten to excommunicate the nobility to effect temporal matters. Conversely, at times a king or prince would use his power to support a candidate he wanted on the papal throne for his own political ends. Under the doctrine of two kingdoms, Luther's view was that God had ordained both the spiritual and temporal authorities that existed in the medieval world, both were necessary for order, and each had distinct roles; each needed the other to govern the kingdom of earth. God was ruler of the whole world and he ruled using two instruments. In *Secular Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed (1523)* Luther stated, "For this reason God has ordained the two governments; the spiritual, which by the Holy Spirit under Christ makes Christians and pious people, and the secular, which restrains the unchristian and wicked so that they must needs keep the peace outwardly, even against their will."[51] While Luther advocated for the purification of both spheres, he emphasized the purification of the spiritual because that sphere had the most power to ultimately transform the earth.[52] This was essentially how Luther worked out his assertion that Christians should serve God by obeying both secular and spiritual authority, because both were signs of God's care for the world. In Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, neither kingdom had authority over the other, but both

were expected to act according to God's will within their sphere of influence.[53] Luther espoused that if everyone in the world was a Christian and lived by the law of love with the Holy Spirit in his or her heart, there would be no need for temporal authority.[54] However, in Luther's view temporal authority existed because the unrighteous needed governance. Yet, unrighteousness also existed among those in authority both within the temporal estate and the spiritual estate (as expressed in their abuses of power), which Luther interpreted as an increased need for piety.[55] Though Luther pressed primarily for reform in the spiritual realm, in his view the glare of unrighteousness in any realm proved to be a strong motive for reform in both the spiritual and temporal estates.

However, because the authority in the spiritual estate was highly resistant to reform, Luther's doctrine in which he viewed the Body of Christ as a priesthood of all believers played an important role in changing the hierarchical structure between clergy and laity. In his writing *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom, early 1520* Luther attacked what he termed the "first wall" that the Roman church had established to prevent reform. The "first wall" divided people into religious and secular, but Luther's doctrine regarding the priesthood of all believers did away with this division between clerics and laics. "For all Christians whatsoever really and truly belong to the religious class, and there is no difference among them except in so far as they do different work...I Corinthians 12...'We are all one body, yet each member hath his own work for serving others.'"[56] Once this power structure was upset all Christians who were baptized in the faith could participate in the spiritual or temporal estate as one with spiritual authority.

Another aspect of the priesthood of all believers was animated in the freedom of an individual Christian to serve in either estate. In his treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian,* Luther

showed that a Christian who was justified by faith did not need to do anything in order to be justified before God; indeed, believers understood that they could not do any works to earn their salvation. Instead, a Christian who was part of the priesthood of all believers, should act in ways that pleased God out of gratitude for God's saving work of justification. Thus, the freedom of a Christian was first a freedom from the necessity of meriting one's righteousness, but it was secondarily a freedom that called believers to live out the "fruits of their faith" in ways that helped to establish God's order on earth for all people. Luther writes: "A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth...therefore he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor."[57] Because Luther felt a Christian's good works should be done for the sake of his neighbor, the peasants perceived Luther to be the reformer who heralded their own freedoms. But Luther's vision of reform did not land squarely where the peasants thought it should. Instead Luther can be said to have cast a wider net of reform because the Lutheran understanding of doing good work for the sake of others applied equally in both realms of the two kingdoms.

The *Freedom of a Christian* contained helpful theology that Luther applied to how a Christian should work to bring about reform from his or her position in either the spiritual or temporal estate. To do good works for the sake of others, wherever a Christian served, continued the building of God's kingdom on earth. In Luther's thinking, his theology of the two kingdoms did in fact answer the reality of injustice toward the peasants. If the elect among the nobility would only act as grateful servants of God within their sphere of influence, according to the order that God had ordained, God's order would prevail and the nobles would

desire to correct the injustices they had visited on the peasants. Within the two kingdoms, Luther's doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and the freedom of a Christian were woven together to create significant Protestant ways of engaging with the world. They were theologies that played an important role in how the individual Christian was then required to respond to the social and political issues of the world in which they lived as justified believers.

Luther's view of how Christians should respond to the chaotic social and political issues of the Sixteenth Century was revealed in his response to the tensions leading up to the Peasants' War of 1525. The peasants' understood Luther's theology to suggest that as a Christian, Luther himself should have been willing to go above and beyond temporal law in order to bring about ultimate good for the sake of God's kingdom on earth. But in reality, Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms was not structured to promote change in the same way that the peasants desired. Because Luther felt that spiritual authority should have no direct influence in temporal matters, all that Luther's theology allowed him to do was to instruct both the peasants and the nobles as to what their godly behavior should look like within their own sphere of influence. This he did early in April 1525 in *Admonition to Peace (1525)*, his reply to the peasants' *Twelve Articles*.

In *Admonition to Peace (1525)* Luther responded to the peasants by first addressing the injustices perpetrated by the princes. He admonished the princes and pointed out that the chaotic uprisings were the direct result of the ways they had cheated and robbed the common people. But then he also advised them, as he felt a good spiritual authority should: "If it is still possible to give you advice, my lords, give way a little…Try kindness first, for you do not know what God will do to prevent the spark that will kindle all Germany and start a fire that no one can extinguish…"[58] Here was evidence of Luther's belief in the limits of

spiritual authority to effect change within the temporal realm. His role was to preach the gospel to the nobility. But upon hearing the gospel and believing in faith, those among the elect who also held temporal authority should respond as Christians for the common good. Likewise, Luther expected the temporal authority in general to act only within the temporal realm to "arrest, accuse, slay and destroy the wicked, and protect, acquit, defend and save the good… helping to maintain the laws and the State, so that the wicked may be restrained."[59] Under Luther's theology it was up to the nobles to address perceived economic, political and social injustices, just as it was up to the pastors to only address political authorities when their actions were perceived to be outside of God's will, and that would typically have to do with sacred matters. For example, if a prince were preaching a heresy or presuming to take on the role of a pastor in the sacred sphere, he could be disciplined; otherwise the sacred sphere lacked divine authority to discipline the secular. To his mind, Luther had done his part. He expected the princes would do theirs, because in Luther's two kingdoms, both were under God's authority and both were to work toward the common goal of human well-being.[60]

Toward that common goal Luther also admonished the peasants (after an irenic admission that the princes and lords had enacted oppression). Luther believed it was important for the peasants to not just consider the injustice of the actions against them, but to consider their own actions. "…You must most seriously consider…whether you act justly and with a good conscience. Therefore, dear brethren, I beg you in a kindly and brotherly way to look carefully at what you are doing…"[61] Luther did this out of his pastoral conviction that by agitating for rebellion they set themselves against God's will which upset the social structures God had ordained. He believed that for the peasants to take up resistance against the temporal authorities was a failure

of obedience to God. It was their duty as Christians to use their Christian freedom to choose to subject themselves to the authority of the temporal government. He eventually separated himself from the actions of the peasants, and said that they should no longer call themselves "Christians" because what they were doing was not, in fact, God's will.[62] Luther declared the peasants his enemies in this conflict because they were against God's created order.

Ultimately, Luther declared the actions of the peasants to be the very work of the devil. By early May of 1525 when he wrote *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525)*, Luther's stance toward the peasants had become much more sternly corrective than the gentle admonishment with which he had addressed them only a month earlier in *Admonition to Peace.* In his thinking, the political and social conflicts were far less important than obedience to the will of God for the sake of order in the world.

> For rebellion is not just simple murder; it is like a great fire, which attacks and devastates a whole land...let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel... the peasants are not contending any longer for the gospel, but have become faithless, perjured, disobedient, rebellious murders, robbers, and blasphemers, whom even a heathen ruler has the right and authority to punish.[63]

This was the point where Luther's theology of the two kingdoms broke down. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms set up a line of thinking that meant that social order must be maintained as ordained by God. Peasants must obey temporal authority and avoid rebellion, which endangered one's neighbor and the larger social structures.[64] When Christian peasants rebelled against temporal rule in the face of social and political injustice

they set themselves against God and the social structures God had ordained.

There seemed to be a contradiction in Luther's theology, which set the actions of both secular and Christian authorities above the needs of Christian peasants. It allowed for the perpetuation of social, political and spiritual injustice by the nobles toward the peasants. In this respect, Luther's response to the Peasants' War of 1525 was fatally flawed for two reasons, and both stem from the fact that Luther's understanding of Christian freedom seemingly contradicted other areas of his theology.

Luther's understanding of Christian freedom was rooted in an understanding of justification by faith alone which meant that a Christian's justification was not dependent on their actions.[65] When Luther characterized the peasants' rebellious actions as the work of the devil it was because he felt their actions fundamentally imperiled gospel freedom. "They become the greatest of all blasphemers of God and slanderers of His holy Name, serving the devil, under the outward appearance of the Gospel, thus earning death in body and soul ten times over."[66] However, it would seem that Luther's doctrine of justification did not fit with his assertion that the peasants' souls were in peril. If the peasants were justified by faith alone, how would they lose their gospel freedom if they acted outside of God's will? If they were justified by faith alone why would they need to show complete obedience to temporal authority, even in the face of injustice? Surely their justification was not in jeopardy if they did not do so. The peasants' civil disobedience was in actuality an example of their status as both saint and sinner. As has already been shown, according to Luther's writing in the *Freedom of a Christian* Luther expected the peasants to respond in obedience to temporal authority out of gratitude

for their justification, but their obedience was not efficacious in itself, it was a rightly ordered response. This contradiction between Luther's theology and his reaction to the peasants' uprising suggests a weakness in Luther's position. His view of the rebellion co-opts his view of Christian freedom (e.g. that a result of justification is that Christians freely choose to obey how God has ordained the world out of gratitude) and instead makes standing before God dependent on right *behavior*, essentially turning freedom into a necessary kind of works righteousness.

Another weakness in Luther's doctrine of Christian freedom is found in his assertion that a justified Christian would act on behalf of the common good merely out of gratitude. By Luther's own anthropological understanding, a Christian was both a saint and a sinner *(simul justus et peccator)*. His anthropology meant that, left to their own devices (even if admonished by a spiritual authority such as Luther himself) Christians could often fail to act in the interest of justice for the common good. Wanda Deifelt suggests this is a common human condition: "The paradox of human existence—a reality of already and not yet, of being sinner and saint at the same time—prevents humanity from doing good works solely out of human concern."[67] Yet Luther's anthropological understanding was at odds with his understanding of Christian freedom, which expected a response of obedience to the social structures, which God had ordained. Thus, Luther's sole response to the Peasants' War was an admonishment to both the peasants and the princes to live as saints in obedience to the authority structures God had given them. In Luther's response as a spiritual authority he fell far short of actually bringing about true justice in God's kingdom on earth because according to Luther's own anthropology, Christians did not always have the capacity to enact true justice. Thus his inadequate admonition to "live in obedience" ultimately

revealed the ineffectiveness of his theology.

Luther's theology could not adequately hold the tension between his eschatology (two kingdoms doctrine), his understanding of the freedom of a Christian, and his human anthropology: thus the weakness in his theology ultimately surfaces in examples of Christian responses to seemingly unjust conditions in the secular sphere. Perhaps even more unsettling was his assertion that those in rebellion should be slain, as he wrote in *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525)*:

> If a man is in open rebellion, everyone is both his judge and his executioner; just as when a fire starts, the first man who can put it out is the best man to do the job. For rebellion is not just simple murder; it is like a great fire, which attacks and devastates a whole land...therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you...[68]

In Luther's understanding those who chose to rebel were acting outside of the order God had ordained in the two kingdoms structure. This placed them in the category of the unrighteous and in Luther's view, the temporal authorities should act to "arrest, accuse, slay and destroy the wicked." Luther does not provide a direct theological warrant for the violence against the peasants except to suggest that they were disrupting the ordained order in such a way that violence was a justified means to arrest their action.[69] In the end, not only did Luther's theology break down, but in the face of Christian disobedience to temporal authority he failed to offer compelling rationale for the violence which he recommended.

Müntzer's conception of spiritual cleansing and preparation for the new age approached justice in a more defensible way than

Luther's thought. Despite Luther's "loathing for the man who [he thought] transformed the Reformation into a political revolution," Müntzer was in effect, living out Luther's expectation that a justified Christian would go above and beyond temporal law for the sake of the common good.[70] Müntzer's eschatological position that the kingdom of God was imminent inspired him with an urgent view that Christians had to take action "so that this earthly life swings up into heaven."

For Müntzer, this urgency meant that taking action included the possibility of violent rebellion. He preached directly to the princes,

> I know this for a fact, that if the plight of the Christian people really came home to you and you put your mind to it properly then you would develop the same zeal as King Jehua showed, 2 Kings 9, 10...and I know this for a fact that you would have the very greatest difficulty not to resort of the power of the sword."[71]

For many Christians the idea of resorting to the sword would be repugnant or in the very least, against biblical assertions of justice. But Müntzer did not struggle to justify the use of violence; in fact, he called upon the very words of Christ in the gospels to support his means of achieving justice. Again, he preached to the princes,

> Don't let us have any of these hackneyed posturings about the power of God achieving everything without any resort to your sword; otherwise it may rust in its scabbard. Would that this could happen! Whatever any scholar may say, Christ speaks clearly enough in Matthew 7, John 15. 'Any tree which does not produce good fruit should be rooted out and thrown into the fire'.[72]

Interestingly in this text, Müntzer shows no distinction between sacred and secular spheres. On the contrary, he argues

that the secular princes are charged with rooting out the trees, which lack good fruit or, good works, done by the Christian in the world. He also preached from Old Testament texts, "Do not, therefore, allow the evil-doers, who turn us away from God, to continue living, Deut. 13, for a godless man has no right to live if he is hindering the pious. In Exodus 22 God says: 'You shall not let the evil-doer live.'[73] Whether or not Müntzer was using the appropriate hermeneutic in his interpretation of scripture, it is clear that in his mind a theology of justice and the freedom of a Christian surely included violence when needed to establish God's kingdom on earth. Though his use of these biblical passages show up in his *Sermon to the Princes*, later when it came to his defense of the peasants he had already made a biblical case for the use of violence in their rebellion against the magistrates; for Müntzer, violence was acceptable when a Christian is faced with injustice that goes against Scripture.

When Müntzer's biblical evidence for the use of violence in the peasants' rebellion is held up in contrast to Luther's inadequate response to the peasants' cause, it appears that Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, where Christians must obey God's divinely established order, effectively rendered Christians impotent in the struggle to establish God's just kingdom on earth, at least in the context of rebellion. In the struggle for God's kingdom Müntzer was willing to disregard temporal authority as outside the divine order even as Luther saw it as firmly fixed by God. Müntzer's eschatology resulted in a chiliastic separatism between Christians and earthly government that actually released him to fight against injustices perpetrated by the temporal authority. Ironically, Luther's eschatology lead him to a doctrine of the two kingdoms and a social philosophy in which the Christian's public life was separated from his or her spiritual life.[74] That separation,

which was dramatically different from the separation Müntzer championed, resulted in a chilling indifference and even offense toward resistance to the injustices of temporal authority. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms actually released him, as one with spiritual authority, from the need to define social and political justice, as he believed it was the role of the temporal authority to constrain evil.[75]

Finally, the role of temporal authority to enact justice from a Christian perspective appeared to be the hinge upon which the gate of response was to swing in the Peasants' War of 1525. Luther's theology appeared to define the role of temporal authority as directed by Divine Providence whereas Müntzer's theology appeared to call the Christian to completely withdraw from the temporal structures responsible for justice inasmuch as they were not part of the kingdom of God. Where Luther's Christian social policy appeared to lack action and a heart for justice, Müntzer's social policy appeared to lack a Christian or spiritual emphasis on transforming the temporal world. The intersection of these two contrasting theologies and social policies should perhaps have been found in an alternative or third response to injustice that was enlivened by a will to work in ways that transformed the world, ultimately responding to the chaotic and changing times in ways that prepared the earth to be inhabited by the kingdom of heaven. In a book chapter in which Steinmetz discusses the problems with Luther's dualistic doctrine of the two kingdoms he offers: "Ironic evil is the evil which men and women bring about because of their virtues and in spite of their good intentions."[76] Luther's virtuous theology of the two separate kingdoms lead him to an unequivocal conclusion that separated the Christian's spiritual life from their life as a citizen of earth. Luther's doctrine suggested that because God ordained temporal authorities, Christians must obey temporal

law and are unable to resist policies or programs that would be considered unjust by the standards of Scripture. That conclusion lead to Luther's flawed response to the injustice that led to the Peasants' War of 1525. Yet, as has been shown, there was another theology suggested in Thomas Müntzer's sermons and polemics that could have informed the Christian response to the social and political upheaval of the age. Though this theology had problems of its own, it did offer a pastoral response to temporal injustice. If these two theologies could have wed, they might have birthed a Christian response that could have corrected injustice in the chaotic sixteenth century world and subsequently enlivened the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Notes

1. James Thompson, "German Feudalism," *The American Historical Review* 28, no. 3 (April, 1923): 449.
2. Thomas Greer, *A Brief History of the Western World* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 284.
3. Peter Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 6.
4. Greer, 284.
5. Thompson, 449.
6. Thompson, 449.
7. The conflict that came to be known as the German Peasant War of 1524-5 began in earnest when the peasants sought to right injustice by initiating the first physical uprisings in May 1524 in Forchheim, Franconia and the Black Forest. By June 1524 Luther condemned Müntzer's involvement in the peasants' affairs. On July 13, 1524 Müntzer preached his *Sermon to the Princes* on his home ground in Allstedt, condemning them for their injustice toward the peasants. In August 1524 further rebellions occurred in Muhlhausen in Thuringia, which was also near the center of the religious Reformation. In March 1525 the peasants in Upper Swabia wrote and distributed a list of grievances called The Twelve Articles, which fueled a firestorm of uprisings throughout the region in April and May. On April 19, 1525 Luther responded

to the violence of the peasants with his *Admonition to Peace* and again on May 5 Luther responded with *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. On May 15 Müntzer led a group of peasants in the battle of Frankenhausen, following this he was captured and on May 27 Müntzer was executed in Muhlhausen. By September 1525 all fighting had ended as well as the punitive action against the peasants.

8. Greer, 284.
9. Blickle, 88.
10. Blickle, 89.
11. Blickle, 23.
12. Anonymous and Denis Janz, *The Twelve Articles, in A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 168-170.
13. Blickle, 188.
14. Blickle, 93.
15. Hans Jürgen Goertz, "Mystic with the hammer: Thomas Müntzer's theological basis for revolution," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 50, no. 2 (April 1, 1976): 89.
16. Eric Gritsch, *Thomas Müntzer: A Tragedy of Errors* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 111.
17. Eric Gritsch, *Reformer Without a Church; The Life and Thought of Thomas Muentzer, 1488?-1525* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967),13. Müntzer undertook theological studies at the University of Leipzig in 1506 where many reformers studied Humanist philosophy. However, by 1512 he was at the University of Frankfurt. Though there are no existing records regarding the degrees he obtained, it has been assumed that he held the highest academic degrees from Frankfurt – the Master of Liberal Arts and the Baccalaureate of Holy Scripture.
18. Gritsch, *Reformer Without a Church*, 18.
19. Tom Scott, *Thomas Müntzer: Theology and Revolution in the German Reformation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 10.
20. Gritsch, *Reformer Without a Church*, 18.
21. Thomas Müntzer, and Peter Matheson, *Prague Manifesto in The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 358.
22. Abraham Friesen, *Thomas Muentzer, a Destroyer of the Godless: The Making of a Sixteenth-Century Religious Revolutionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 129.
23. Friesen, 112.

24. Gritsch, *Thomas Müntzer: A Tragedy of Errors*, 38-39.
25. Friesen, 113.
26. Müntzer and Matheson, 355.
27. Friesen, 126, 129.
28. James Stayer and Werner O. Packull, *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer* Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co, 1980), 106.
29. Friesen, 112.
30. Friesen, 131.
31. Stayer and Packull, 116.
32. Scott, 29.
33. Müntzer and Janz, *A Sermon Before the Princes* (13 July 1524), 166.
34. Goertz, *Mystic with the Hammer*, 85-86.
35. Müntzer and Matheson, *Interpretation of the Second Chapter of Daniel*, 243.
36. Müntzer, *Interpretation of the Second Chapter of Daniel*, 244.
37. Friesen, 128; Goertz, *Mystic with the Hammer*, 89; Müntzer and Matheson, 355; Stayer and Packull, 105, 116.
38. Hans-Jürgen Goertz and Peter Matheson, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalyptic, Mystic, and Revolutionary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 21.
39. Müntzer, *Testimony of the First Chapter of the Gospel of Luke*, 278.
40. Goertz, *Mystic Hammer*, 89.
41. Müntzer and Janz, *A Sermon Before the Princes* (13 July 1524), 166.
42. Blickle, 148.
43. Friesen, 129.
44. Müntzer and Janz, *Open Letter to the People of Allstedt*, 26/27 April 1525, 167.
45. Vogel, 256.
46. Vogel, 249.
47. Vogel, 261.
48. Martin Luther and John Dillenberger, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in *Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 53.
49. Peter Blickle and Cathleen Catt, "Peasant Revolts in the German Empire in the Late Middle Ages" *Social History* 4, no. 2 (May, 1979): 239.

    The struggle for power between temporal authorities and spiritual authorities was a struggle that had already gone on for centuries. The medieval understanding of authority tried to address this struggle with a hierarchical worldview of society termed "the estates of the realm." This model drew a distinct separation of authority between the clergy and the nobility. Spiritual

authority rested in the medieval hierarchical structure of the spiritual estate, or the church, that flowed from the pope through the bishops down to the local priests. The role of the spiritual estate was divinely established to create order in Christendom, however it also had the power to intervene in the temporal estate if temporal authorities were not doing their job according to God's will. The nobility took the role of secular authority through the temporal government, which rested in the medieval hierarchical structure of monarchism and the aristocracy. Actual governance was expressed in the hierarchical structures of feudalism. The role of the temporal estate was also divinely established to create order in the secular world and but it was not allowed to intervene with the church or spiritual authority (these waters were muddied when, for example, emperors called councils). For the sake of clarity in this discussion, the third estate should also be defined. The medieval world considered all non-clergy or non-aristocracy to be the third estate; in other words, the third estate was made up of commoners. Note that the peasant class, of particular relevance to this discussion of the Peasants' War, does not even figure into the estates of the realm. In fact, integration into the estates was one of the goals of the peasants when they agitated for justice.

50. Shawn Colberg, "The Lutheran Reformation" (classroom lecture, St John's University School of Theology, Collegeville, MN, January 30, 2013).
51. Luther and John Dillenberger, *Secular Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed* (1523), 370.
52. For a more complete discussion of Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms please see the chapter "Luther and the Two Kingdoms." In: *Luther in Context*. By David C. Steinmetz. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1995, 112-125.
53. Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms highlights the divergence between Luther and Müntzer. Luther's two kingdoms were God ordained for the sake of order in the world, temporal authority was necessary because the unrighteous needed governance, but Luther was not as concerned about reform in the secular sphere. In contrast, Müntzer did not draw such a sharp distinction between sacred and secular, in his view all of the elect were responsible for working to usher in the kingdom of heaven no matter in which sphere they found themselves. This was why for Müntzer, reform was much more critical in both spheres.
54. Luther and Dillenberger, *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, 369.
55. Scott Hendrix, "Martin Luther, reformer," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity 6 Reform and Expansion: 1500-1660*, ed. by Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007) 3.
56. Luther and Dillenberger, *An Appeal To The Ruling Class Of German Nationality As To The Amelioration Of The State Of Christendom*, 407.

57. Luther and Dillenberger, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 73.
58. Luther and Janz, *Admonition to Peace* (1525), 171.
59. Luther and Dillenberger, *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, 381.
60. Wanda Diefelt, "Advocacy, political participation and citizenship: Lutheran contributions to public theology," *Dialog* 49, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 111.
61. Luther and Janz, *Admonition to Peace* (1525), 171.
62. Luther and Janz, *Admonition to Peace* (1525), 171.
63. Luther and Janz, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525)*, 177.
64. Gottfried Seebass, "The gospel and the social order: Luther's understanding of the gospel according to his writings on the peasants," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 14, no. 3 (December 1, 1980): 109.
65. Luther and Dillenberger, *Freedom of a Christian*, 55.
66. Martin Luther, "Works of Martin Luther--Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants." full text located on Bible Explore.com http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther_d18.htm [accessed April 16, 2013].
67. Diefelt, 112.
68. Luther and Janz, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525)*, 177.
69. In the primary sources studied for this paper, Luther offered no biblical evidence as support for this course of action. It may be that he assumed no response was needed from the spiritual realm, as his doctrine of the two kingdoms would suggest disciplinary response should come from the temporal realm. According to his doctrine it was the responsibility of the temporal realm to "restrain the wicked" and "keep the peace outwardly." There is a case to be made for further exploration as to whether or not Luther was able to justify his call for violence from a Christian perspective.
70. Gritsch, *Reformer Without a Church*, 8.
71. Müntzer and Matheson, *Interpretation of the Second Chapter of Daniel*, 246.
72. Müntzer and Matheson, *Interpretation of the Second Chapter of Daniel*, 247-248.