

A Book Worth Discussing

Duane Larson

*Ubi Deus Dixit. Where God Has Spoken:
The Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms*

Andrew L. Christiansen

Duane Larson's *Ubi Deus Dixit. Where God Has Spoken: The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms* from the Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology series is well-worth reading as it is fit for many audiences, including Luther scholars, Lutheran theologians, Christian and ecumenical theologians, and those interested in political theology. It is an ambitious work delving into historical-theology, legal thought, continental philosophy, and biblical interpretation. Additionally, it is a work of public theology engaging with current and relevant state of political and societal affairs.

From the outset of his book, Larson is concerned with the domestication of the "Two Kingdoms" doctrine. He also rightfully laments that there was a neglect of a serious consideration of this teaching after the first-generation of Reformers.¹ The corrective he seeks to offer is a "true reading" of the Two Kingdoms.

Overall, what Larson seeks to do in the book should be commended. Much here is helpful, particularly his recovery of natural law from modernity's marginalization of it and his insistence that Romans 13 and the Two Kingdoms be read within an eschatological and apocalyptic framework. At the same time, there are places where Larson's argument could be strengthened, particularly in his definition and critique of Christian Nationalism and in his treatment of Luther, Stringfellow, and the *theologia crucis*.

In my estimation, one of the strongest parts of Larson's book is his call for a recovery of "Natural Law" as a foundation for civil law. Larson recognizes how natural law has gradually lost the place it once held as a guiding principle for governance. Surveying the history of the concept from Cicero to Luther, Larson importantly notes that in Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, he assumed "natural law's provenance in civil governance."²

Larson then traces the concept after Luther to Locke, to Kant, to its marginalization and disappearance in the Enlightenment, and up to recent trends in legal

1. Duane Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit. Where God Has Spoken: The Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms* (Cascade Books, 2025), xxiii.

2. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 81.

philosophy. Larson also notes that Jeremy Bentham's secularizing philosophy, natural law, or the understanding of a higher law that determines what is good and ill—a philosophy that Larson describes as a “removing” of “all religious mystery from analysis of social good and ill”³—was excised from being the basis for governance.

Once this excision happened, social policy and law were to be evaluated primarily according to their measurable consequences for human welfare rather than their conformity to a transcendent moral order. Through Mills, this “utilitarianism” of Bentham was then married to the concept of self-autonomy, or the idea that moral rights “are derived from the basic fact drawn from observation that individuals can and do think for themselves, claim autonomy, and follow one's reasonable intuition as to the trustworthiness of certain public leaders.”⁴ This essentially led to desires of a people presently deemed sovereign to fill the vacuum left once natural law no longer served as the origin from which earthly governance derived.

Through legal philosophers such as Wendell Holmes and especially H.L.A. Hart, there was a return of a universal principle rather than the will of the people for civil laws, but this principle was “the right of all people to be free from suffering.”⁵ Larson importantly notes how Hart gives no substantive justification for this “right.” This “legal positivism” operates with a vague sense of a higher law but never cares to acknowledge or unpack what it is. This unwillingness to recognize such has led to our current situation (in the U.S. and other Western countries) of “textualism” or “originalism” as our legal approach, which bears the inevitable consequence of distraction from the broader purpose of legislating.

Given Larson's incisive observation and diagnosis of this current problem, his call for the restoration of natural law is convincing. However, it would have been good to see more discussion about what this looks like, practically speaking. In concrete terms, what would a governance in modern (or post-modern) society based on natural law look like? It is true that natural law according to the Christian is not particularly Christian but something universal. Indeed, Larson says, “Religious authority is not to export doctrine or practice from its domain into the temporal domain.”⁶ However, given our current situation, would not ardent secularists cry “theocracy!” at notions of natural law, as much as a Christian may insist it's not a specifically Christian notion? I ask this not as a criticism of anything Larson wrote on this matter but as a curiosity I have that I would be interested in Larson and other likeminded thinkers to address.

Another strength of the book is found in Larson's discussion on eschatology, especially in his chapter “Paul's Eschatological Politics” and his insistence on a “recovery” of Pauline eschatology in turn informs a healthy framing of the Lutheran

3. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 90.

4. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 91.

5. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 93.

6. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 11-12.

doctrine of two kingdoms. An eschatological hermeneutic is necessary to properly understand Paul and the Lutheran Two Kingdoms. Without it, the Two Kingdoms morphs into a kind of dualism where the church and state stay in their respective lanes perpetually and without any relationship, “as if the spiritual kingdom were a private place for faith and piety on the same plane as the temporal kingdom’s place of coordinate public life.”⁷ This eschatological framing puts the doctrine in its rightful place and the relationship and boundaries of authorities in their rightful places to avoid any conjoining of “throne and altar.”⁸

In his section on Paul, Larson asks the important question: “Readers of Paul have questioned him ever since he advised unquestioned obedience and respect (to earthly authorities). Did Paul really mean to be so final and so summary in this preciously concise exhortation?”⁹ On a surface level, one could naturally answer that Paul’s resoluteness regarding submission to authority does not necessarily entail that it trumps allegiance to God. Indeed, Paul’s devotion to the proclamation of the Gospel shows that he was committed to activity of which authorities often disapproved. Larson, though, gets to the real heart of the issue: Paul’s vision is ultimately “sparkingly eschatological” and “counsels Christian patience and endurance of the present government principalities and powers so that we would be ready rightly to welcome the coming kingdom.”¹⁰

Larson’s readings of Paul eschatologically and apocalyptically is the corrective to a reading of Paul in which Christians resign themselves to a life conforming to the temporal state of affairs. As “eschatological people,” Christians relate to the needs in this world by promoting the well-being and *imago Dei* of people in the temporal kingdom because we live in *messianic time*: the “time remaining” “between” the chronological time in which we live (*chronos*) and the eschaton. Drawing on the work of J. Louis Martyn, Larson speaks of the “punctiliar” or invasive sense of the Kingdom of God at work now, fully even if not consummately. Correlatively, we can live *fully* in this Kingdom even while in the temporal kingdom because we are on *messianic time*.

Larson says that the “concept of messianic time derives from a person’s momentary experience of and interpreted meaning of Messiah’s ‘untimely’ presence.”¹¹ It is not Larson’s original term but a term coined from the philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his own 2005 commentary on Romans, *The Time That Remains*, that Larson seeks to promote and advance in theological discourse and discussion of

7. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 5.

8. Larson sees a particular contemporary example of such domestication in the form of Christian Nationalism. He calls this a “conjoining of throne and altar” in our own time (*Ubi Deus Dixit*, xxix). This issue will be treated below.

9. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 149.

10. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 151.

11. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 160.

Christian ethics. This is one of the strong points of Larson's book and a helpful integration of a modern philosophical insight with the classical doctrine of the Parousia.

Another kind of time that Larson discusses in the book is worth mentioning: *kairos* time. *Kairos* time is a term used seemingly interchangeably with *messianic* time by both Agamben and Larson. Agamben illustrates the contrast and relation of this kind of messianic time to *chronos* time:

First, you have secular time, which Paul usually refers to as *chronos*, which spans from creation to the messianic event.... Here time contracts itself and begins to end. But this contracted time, which Paul refers to in the expression *ho nyn kairos*, "the time of now," lasts until the *parousia*, the full presence of the Messiah.¹²

Larson believes Agamben's "refiguration [of the relationship between time and parousia] accords well with what we've learned of Augustine's sense of the 'already' of the heavenly city."¹³ In the messianic time, Larson says there is a "sliver like proximity to the eternal to be grasped,"¹⁴ meaning that the fullness of the presence of the Messiah is *imminent*.

However, it is worth noting a further complication when it comes to Larson's engagement with Agamben and other interpreters of Paul. Larson sees Paul as unaware of this understanding of time's relationship to the parousia—the understanding characterized by Agamben as "messianic time"—until his later years in his Romans writing. The eschatology of Paul, Larson says, develops from the time of his earliest writings like I Thessalonians where Paul had a more "linear" eschatology, with a notion of waiting for *chronos*'s ending and *eschaton*'s beginning but with no concept of a contracted time-remaining by the subsuming of the *chronos* into *kairos*, to a more mature eschatology in Romans where Paul "looks toward no parousia.... He does not even use the word"¹⁵ because the kingdom is now. The irony is that Larson relies heavily on the work of L.L. Welborn, a New Testament scholar whose very work Larson cites is a *critique* of Agamben on the very point of "now time," in this section.

In Welborn's view, Agamben's understanding of *nun kairos* "falls short of the apostle's conception" of it."¹⁶ Welborn understands Paul's now-time as the point at which *kairos* "arrests" *chronos*. He sees Agamben as sometimes approaching this understanding but ultimately failing to account for it adequately in his model. Welborn is dissatisfied with Agamben's concept of a contracted time,¹⁷ arguing that it

12. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford University Press, 2005), 63.

13. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 163.

14. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 164.

15. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 161.

16. L. L. Welborn, *Paul's Summons to Messianic Life: Political Theology and the Coming Awakening* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 16.

17. Welborn, *Paul's Summons to Messianic Life*, 15.

is not sufficiently explained and ultimately leads to a conception of *kairos* defined by our “self-consciousness” that never truly arrives in the way that it does for Paul.

Welborn also sees a fundamental difference between Agamben's and Paul's conceptions of *kairos*: “[I]n Agamben, the *kairos* retains a future orientation: the presence of the *kairos* ‘stretches’ time toward its parousia. But for Paul, the *kairos* is a relationship between a past event and a potentiality in the present (Rom. 13:11-12).”¹⁸ One may quibble over whether this is really an either/or distinction. Nevertheless, this is a point where Larson could have engaged Welborn more fully, especially since this very concept of *kairos* is also informed in Larson's work by someone who sees a fundamental difference between Agamben and Paul.

From the outset of his book, Larson is concerned with the domestication of the two kingdoms doctrine, domestication in the sense of conflating of the two kingdoms in a way that confuses the purpose of the kingdoms so that the kingdom of heaven is seen as nothing more than a social or political human project. Larson sees a particular contemporary example of such domestication in the form of Christian Nationalism. This appears to be a concern that really drives him.

Although Larson states from the outset that this book is neither centrally about Christian Nationalism nor the challenge of it, it would've been helpful for him to give a more precise definition of the term so the reader could know exactly what he means. This is not to deny that there is such a thing as Christian Nationalism (or its other iterations in recent history, like Christian “dominionism”). Christian Nationalism is both always a possibility theoretically while existing concretely. Simultaneously, this term has been abused by both the religious progressives and the secular left—those who use it dismissively and avoid engagement with any ideas to the right of them—as if a kind of cultural conservatism that is at least in part informed by one's faith automatically equates with Christian Nationalism.

Larson doesn't seem to give the same amount of attention to other ideologies that are very real threats to the boundaries the Two Kingdoms teaching seeks to uphold. A recent work that is worth noting, one published a year prior to Larson's text, is N.T. Wright and Michael Bird's book of public theology, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies*.

Admittedly, Wright and Bird's book does not engage at all with Luther's Two Kingdoms teaching, but Wright and Bird share many of Larson's concerns with the present state of affairs. Their ultimate conclusion is that liberal democracy and healthy pluralism, while far from being perfect, are the most ideal settings for Christians to experience flourishing and freedom. Bird and Wright identify three ideological trends in recent times they see as threats to this ideal. One is Christian Nationalism. The other two are Totalitarianism and, interestingly, a third type of threat they call Civic Totalism. This is a form of “soft authoritarianism” they argue

18. Welborn, *Paul's Summons to Messianic Life*, 17.

has emerged among the contemporary left in many Western democracies that uses state and institutional power to impose a narrow vision of the good life, one that reflects the progressive values of what they call a “bohemian bourgeois” segment of the population (very upper middle class, college educated, white) that places an excessive emphasis on identity politics at the expense of the unity-within-diversity essential for liberal democracies to thrive. Wright and Bird argue that this creates a system that suppresses dissent and limits ideological diversity by narrowing the scope of what people can say and discuss. By imposing a singular vision of the good life and tending toward dogmatism, it fills the vacuum left in increasingly post-religious societies and, in turn, comes to see religious voices in the public square as nuisances.¹⁹

Wright and Bird’s treatment of the contemporary landscape is holistic. Although Larson certainly acknowledges at times that there are other very real extremes besides Christian Nationalism, including on the Left, it would have been helpful to see him similarly give these concerns equal treatment and consideration.

Even so, Larson is not solely concerned with a right-wing distortion of the Two Kingdoms. He also recognizes the danger of an intolerant secularism that excludes religious conviction from the public square. He points out that in our contemporary culture war setting, the right is misguided when it blames “postmodernity” as a kind of bogeyman behind a kind of chaotic relativism. Larson aptly points out it is “modernism’s atheistic DNA leftovers in postmodernity”²⁰ of which the right is actually suspicious.

It is worth pointing out that Larson *does* acknowledge the extremes of the Left at times. For instance, Larson speaks of the “Jacobins” who would like to “tax the churches whenever spiritual conviction is a stated premise for a proposed (political) resolution”²¹ while also lamenting that there are Christians who try to “connect with today’s Jacobins.”²² It would’ve been productive for Larson to engage with this other extreme in detail, as this kind of soft-authoritarian, anti-religious moralistic progressivism is arguably as dangerous as any kind of rightist nationalism or theocracy.

Larson’s treatment of Luther captures the essence of certain dimensions of Luther’s concept of the Two Kingdoms. For instance, Larson says, “The specific terms of ‘Two Kingdoms’ for Augustine was about the conflict between Satan and Christ. In no way did Luther mean this; we’ve seen that he transposed two kingdoms into the keys of ‘spiritual’ and ‘temporal.’”²³ The statement proves *partially* true.

19. N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies* (Zondervan, 2024), 136-139.

20. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 16.

21. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 12.

22. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 24.

23. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 33.

Luther certainly did transpose the Two Kingdoms into these categories, which is one dimension of how he speaks of the Two Kingdoms. However, Luther also very much understands the Two Kingdoms in terms of a conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the Devil. Marcel Nieten points out that Luther's *Temporal Authority* brings these two concepts together, specifically in the concept of opposing eschatological kingdoms composed of Christians and non-Christians respectively with the concept of complementary regiments of Gospel and Sword through which God rules his entire creation (and against the kingdom of the Devil).²⁴

Indeed, a few sentences later Larson seems to acknowledge this when he notes that Christ's reign is "in larger conflict with Satan's reign."²⁵ If Larson is going to refer to the Two Kingdoms teaching as the "Augustinian Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms,"²⁶ then I think there needs to be the acknowledgement of the common thread between Augustine and Luther. This conflict between God and Satan is arguably equally pronounced and certainly axiomatic in both Augustine and Luther—for instance, this appears in Luther's theology of the life of a believer in which the believer is "ridden" by either God or by the Devil.

While Larson rightly sees that eschatology is the "primary frame by which one should interpret Romans,"²⁷ Larson appears to imply that Luther lacked this in his own reading of Romans. Larson devotes a section of his book to William Stringfellow's work *Conscience and Obedience* and its critique of Luther. Larson writes, "It is odd then, to read Rom 13:1-7 as if it only meant [quoting Stringfellow] 'obedience to whatever regime happens to occupy office, much less an obligation of simplistic or automatic obedience to the person of the ruler.'"²⁸ It is not clear whether Larson is directing this at Luther or those who misread Luther, so taking into account that Larson is giving a Stringfellow-informed critique of Luther leading up to this statement, one could easily interpret the above remark as directed at Luther.

This is not an accurate characterization of Luther's views. There is much to be critical of Luther whether that be his harsh words toward peasants or Jews, his disdain of Muslims and "papists" that inform his own kind of apocalypticism, or how consistent he may or may not have been with how he counseled rulers (which included times where he was all too willing to urge violence). However, to say that Luther urged some kind of blind obedience to any authority in all matters

24. See Marcel Nieten's essay "Martin Luthers Zwei-Reiche-Lehre in kontextueller Perspektive" in *Angewandtes Luthertum? Die Zwei-Reiche-Lehre als theologische Konstruktion in politischen Kontexten des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Edited by Jürgen Kampmann & Hans Otte. (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017), 27-52.

25. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 33.

26. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 36.

27. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 69.

28. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 69. Larson quotes William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming* (Word, 1977), 48.

simply does not fit with the positions Luther actually articulates in his key writings on the matter of obedience.

As much as Larson's work is helpful in its deep awareness of the current issues we face as well as in its employment of recent commentators' insights on Paul and eschatology, some of the problems that Larson alleges are to be found in Luther's teachings on the matter of Two Kingdoms hinge on a critique from Stringfellow that is ultimately unconvincing along with overlooking some important areas of Luther's theology.

Larson mentions "the formally unacknowledged role of eschatology and apocalyptic in his two-kingdoms doctrinal construction" and "the evident absence of Luther's *theologica crucis* hermeneutic" in Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.²⁹ Regarding the former, perhaps this is "formally" true, so one may have to go to Paul to have a stronger sense of the apocalyptic (which Larson does through the aid of modern philosophy of time by Agamben). As such, is it fair to say that the latter is absent? Is not Luther's counsel of passive resistance a theology of the cross? Is not subversion through self-giving not repaying evil for evil? Is not Peter exhibiting through his "forbidding" Jesus from the cross and taking the sword to the soldier's ear the same kind of vengeance mentality of those who would not settle for passive resistance? This is one of the places where Larson's criticism could have been aided by a fuller exploration of the fact that Luther had an eschatology of his own. Perhaps Larson is right that the eschatological and apocalyptic dimensions are not always formally articulated in Luther's treatment of the Two Kingdoms, but this does not necessarily mean that they are absent from Luther's theology or from the framework in which Luther understood Christian life and political authority.

Many scholars, such as Ulrich Asendorf, Torsten Bohlin, and Ebbe Thestrup Pedersen, have argued that Luther's eschatology permeates all of his theology. Luther's eschatology is framed in terms of the reality of creation fulfilled alongside tension due to the constant attacks and assaults of the devil on the faithful. This may seem to be a characteristically pre-modern version of eschatology, but it also speaks to the other side, or dark underbelly, of the *time remaining* motif that Agamben and Larson see in optimistic terms of the *klesis* (call to action). Both of these things, the reality of present evil and the imminence (or 'nowness') of the Messiah, are true. When Larson says, "Messianic time makes the law inoperative so that the law can be restored with potentiality to be fulfilled in Christ,"³⁰ this truth must not be malleated (as it so easily can) into an enthusiast (or antinomian) notion that mistakes the absorption of the *chronos* into *kairos* to mean that we are now somehow above or beyond our bodies that still suffer in the state of *chronos* and are still subject to the operation of the law concerning how we live as sinners.

29. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 64.

30. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 167.

One can see the “now” and the “not yet” in Luther’s eschatological thought. His eschatology is not without its problems. Much of his outlook on the temporal world, especially in his later years, was admittedly bleak. Of course, this can be explained by the political and social turmoil of the time in which he was often either at the center or about which he was consulted. These things weighed on him, and in many ways, he saw the world “going to hell in a hand-basket.” He saw the days in his own lifetime as the “last days” and often read current events as signs of them.³¹ Such an outlook appears, at least on its surface, to lack the *klesis*, the recognition of the “now moment” wherein one is to be awakened. Perhaps Luther is an important sobering reminder to Christians today that the convergence of “now” and “not yet” is both a celebration and a spiritual battle that always tempts us with the path of glory over the path of the cross.

Nevertheless, Larson’s *Ubi Deus Dixit* is a valuable contribution. Larson is right to recover the Two Kingdoms from its domestications and to insist that it be understood eschatologically rather than as a static division between church and state. His recovery of natural law is particularly helpful, especially in light of the way modernity has marginalized the very concept of a transcendent moral order for civil governance. His engagement with Agamben and the concept of messianic time likewise offers a provocative and fruitful way of thinking about Christian life in the present in light of the parousia.

My critiques are intended to push Larson’s project further. I would like to see a more precise definition of Christian nationalism, a clearer differentiation between theocracy and governance according to natural law, and a more symmetrical treatment of the various ways in which the realms can be confused (including the possibility of what Wright and Bird call “Civic Totalism”). Likewise, I think Larson’s treatment of Luther would benefit from greater attention to Luther’s own eschatology and to the possibility that the *theologia crucis* is not as absent from Luther’s understanding of temporal authority as Larson suggests. Finally, his engagement with Agamben and Welborn deserves further consideration precisely because Welborn’s critique of Agamben complicates the account of *kairos* and messianic time that Larson finds so compelling.

The Rev. Andrew L. Christiansen is a PhD student at Christ School of Theology. He and his wife Rachael live in Lake Charles, Louisiana where Andrew serves as rector of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church.

31. An article that touches on this: Andrew L. Christiansen, “Between Two Testaments: Luther’s Shift in Attitude Toward the Book of Revelation” in *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 32, no. 3 (Holy Trinity, 2023), 35-40.

Promissio

A Journal of Confessing Theology



A Call for Papers

Promissio seeks submissions for the upcoming issues:

Volume 2, No. 1 (Winter 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the Fatherhood of God

Volume 2, No. 2 (Spring 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the divine Sonship of the man Jesus

Volume 2, No. 3 (Summer 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the personhood of the Holy Spirit

Volume 2, No. 4 (Autumn 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the Holy Trinity

All submissions should be emailed to the General Editor

All accepted authors will need an account at promissio.ilt.edu

Please see the Submissions Guidelines there for important information!

All questions can be directed to:

Paul R. Hinlicky, General Editor

phinlicky@ilt.edu