

Mandatum Dei and lex naturae in Luther's Lectures on Genesis

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This seminar concerned the *mandatum Dei* and *lex naturae* in Luther's Genesis lectures of 1535-1545. Wisely, we began by building working definitions of the subject. We also looked at the discussion of these issues in Luther's 1527 commentary on Genesis and his very important sermons from the same year. *Kjell Ove Nilsson* led the way by introducing the difficulties involved in clearly defining the terms »*mandatum Dei*« and »*lex naturae*«, at least in human terms. The *mandatum*, for Luther, is closely related to God's creating and creative Word, but it involves a proper relationship between God and man or woman. The *mandatum* includes God's will and intention; His concern and love for the creation and humankind. In this regard, the *mandatum* is also closely related to the *lex naturae*. To Luther, the natural law is an expression of God's revelation and creative work and is not a set of any kind of human principles. Nilsson noted that something of God's natural law was found in all written law, though most clearly in the Mosaic Law given to the ancient Hebrews. Nilsson emphasized that the indispensable assumption of Luther's whole theology must be understood from the content of the first article of the Creed: God's mandate and law come before the Gospel with the creation itself.

The group then set out to hear and discuss individual papers. *Bernard Erling*, spoke on »Luther and the natural law«, arguing that, while he mentioned the phrase often, the reformer did not necessarily define it specifically. What he regarded as most important was that God wrote this law on the heart (R 2, 14-16) and one of its chief commandments is that one should love one's neighbor as oneself. Thomas Aquinas, who

gave a more detailed account of the natural law, also agreed that the »neighbor love commandment« (Mt 22, 30) is part of the natural law, self-evident to human nature, whether by nature or by faith. Luther did not explain how such a law is written on the heart. In Jeremiah 31, 33, the new covenant, with the law written on the heart, is promised in the future. It would seem that God »will write it [this law] on their hearts« through human mediation. While dolphins may instinctively seek to save shipwrecked fishermen from sharks, Erling emphasized, human beings need to learn the meaning of neighbor love through the living fellowship of the people of God and through coming to understand this people's history. This suggests that insofar as the »neighbor love commandment« is part of what is called the natural law, it is actually historical in its origin and development.

David Whitford focussed on the two-kingdoms teaching. Recently Luther's commitment to his doctrine of two kingdoms has been called into question. It has been argued that beginning in 1530, Luther began to abandon the two kingdoms in favor of the more traditional idea of the *cura religionis*. Whitford assessed the validity of such a shift by examining Luther's lectures on Genesis. The lectures on Genesis provide an excellent resource for this assessment because Genesis lends itself to discussions of law, sin, government, and authority. Furthermore, the Genesis lectures came at the end of Luther's career and therefore provide an excellent window of comparison between the commitments of the »young« Luther and the »mature« Luther.

William J. Wright presented »Luther's two-kingdoms teaching in the Commentary on the

first three chapters of Genesis«. Eschewing concern with the more well trodden path of scholarship on Luther's political intentions and influences, this paper sought to shed further light on why the idea of two kingdoms was so important to the great reformer. By asking the question, »why would one need such an assumption about the nature of reality in order to understand Genesis«, Wright sought to show that there were important religious and theological reasons for Luther's promotion of the idea that the Christian lives simultaneously in two kingdoms. In short, for Luther, the two-kingdoms understanding of reality allows Christians to believe religious truths with certainty, unchallenged by the Skepticism and Epicurianism that Luther found in his contemporaries.

Russell Kleckley's presentation was entitled, »Mandatum dei and lex naturae in Luther's Commentary on Genesis: some reflections on the nature of nature«. Kleckley called attention to six theses. First, God's action in nature, as well in the course of human salvation, is properly understood as a work of God, created by the Word. Second, since nature is an expression of God's will, the continuing functioning of the laws of nature are contingent upon God's will. Third, human knowledge of God's works in nature has been damaged by the Fall. Fourth, recovery of this knowledge is possible, in part, through revelation and experience. Fifth, the pursuit of theoretical knowledge beyond what revelation and experience teach is dangerous speculation. Sixth, a proper understanding of nature is reflected in the application of the divinely ordered and intended use of creation.

Lubomir Batka approached the question of how Luther's three orders of creation were related to the mandatum and natural law in his paper, »Mandatum Dei and the three orders of creation in Luther's lectures on Genesis, 1535-1545«. Batka treated two major questions. First,

is it possible to understand the creation order of the »ecclesia« and the order of »oeconomia« as the mandatum Dei? Second, what was the impact of the Fall upon these creation orders? What does the corruption after the Fall mean? In response to the first question, Batka pointed out that, in His first words to Adam (Gn 2, 16 f), God already established the »ecclesia«. But in the commentary immediately following, Luther also mentioned the »oeconomia«. God created the Church first, before the »oeconomia«. The creation of the order of the Church before that of the »oeconomia« or household with Eve, however, should be understood as a matter of God's intention, not chronology. The second major activity of humankind is to work and guard God's creation. With these two orders of creation, Luther provided a framework for understanding God's mandate as »manus – datus«, or given in the hand, as God's gift. With regard to the second question, Batka emphasized the importance of original sin for Luther. The orders of creation were corrupted so that humankind, on its own abilities, does not see sin and cannot know God correctly. Hence, »natural man« cannot properly understand either God's mandate or His law.

The attempt of the seminar to reach conclusions about these very complex matters was facilitated by the very useful and reasoned comments of *Gerard Forde* and *James Nestingen*. By and large, the seminar seemed to conclude that much may be learned about Luther's understanding of God's mandate and the natural law from his commentary on the first three books of Genesis. Whether one is concerned with the mandate, the natural law or the orders of creation, one must not forget that, because of original sin and the corruption brought by the Fall, humankind cannot understand these matters perfectly or satisfactorily – with regard to its relationship with God. As the seminar leader put it, one must let God be God.