

Millennialism and Open Questions

by
Kristofer Carlson
April 2007

Some fancy that the Lutheran Confessions do not teach against millennialism; and therefore millennialism (including its modern form, dispensationalism,) remains an open question. These are false statements. The Augsburg Confession says, "Rejected, too, are certain Jewish opinions which are even now making an appearance and which teach that, before the resurrection of the dead, saints and godly men will possess a worldly kingdom and annihilate all the godless" (AC XVII). This is the position of Dr. O. Hallesby, who buttresses his argument in a paper entitled *Last Things* (1928), wherein he refers to certain "*fanatical movements current at the time of the Reformation which espoused enthusiastic socialistic ideas of world improvements. There arose at the time of the reformation false prophets who proclaimed then and there the golden age of a rejuvenated world which would follow the destruction of the Papacy and the Kingdoms of this world*" (Hallesby, *Last Things*, 1928.) This description of Hallesby is certainly true. But it is not exclusively true, in that AC XVII means much, much more than that.

That AC XVII is meant to apply to millennialism in general, and not only the specific form extant in the time of the Reformation, can be shown through the way the Kingdom of God is described throughout the Confessions. In the Apology Articles VII and VIII, the visible, temporal church is described as *containing* the Kingdom of God, but not made the *equivalent* of the Kingdom of God. This is demonstrated through the parables. "*Christ is talking about the outward appearance of the church when he says that the kingdom of God is like a net (Matt. 13:47) or like ten virgins (Matt. 25:1). He teaches us that the church is hidden under a crowd of wicked men so that this stumbling block may not offend the faithful and so that we may know that the Word and the sacraments are efficacious even when wicked men administer them. Meanwhile he teaches that though these wicked men participate in the outward marks, still they are not the true kingdom of Christ and members of Christ, for they are members of the kingdom of the devil.*" Thus the Church of God on earth, that part of the church which is visible, participates in the Kingdom of God, in that church which is invisible; and that only the faithful, whose faith must therefore be invisible and not a matter of outward marks, are members of the Kingdom of God. We recognize the visible church by the marks of the church (AC VII), while the invisible church is seen through saving faith, which is known only to God. God alone knows who his subjects are.

In the Formula of Concord we read in support of Divine Election, the following statement: "*Christ, 'the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18), has proclaimed the Father's will and thereby our eternal election to eternal life when he says, 'The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel' (Mark 1:15); and again when he says, 'This is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life' (John 6:40); and again, 'God so loved the world,' etc. (John 3:16)*" (Formula of Concord, 2, XI, 67). The Lutheran Confessions therefore equate the Kingdom of God as being part and parcel with the article of doctrine concerning Divine Election; the witness of John the Baptizer is

quoted as saying the Kingdom of God is at hand. This Word of God is proclaimed as being from Christ himself. The subjects of the Kingdom of God have been chosen by divine decree, that those subjects should have eternal life. "And this is life eternal," our Lord prayed in the garden, "that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

Dr. Luther uses concept of the two kingdoms or realms in a very specific way. In the Preface to the Small Catechism, Luther writes: "*You should also take pains to urge governing authorities and parents to rule wisely and educate their children. They must be shown that they are obliged to do so, and that they are guilty of damnable sin if they do not do so, for by such neglect they undermine and lay waste both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and are the worst enemies of God and man*" (SC, Preface). Thus Luther teaches that parents prepare their children for this life, which is the kingdom of this world; and for the life of faith, which is the kingdom of God. No allowance is made for a worldly, righteous kingdom of God; no, only two kingdoms are in view---one temporal and earthly, the realm in which the devil works; and one spiritual, in which God is at work. This is not to say God is not at work in this world, for as Jesus went about healing and forgiving sins, he told the Pharisees, "*The Kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17:21) Indeed, we serve the kingdom of heaven (kingdom of God's right hand) when we fulfill our vocations within the kingdom of the world (kingdom of God's left hand).

In the Large Catechism, when discussing the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, Luther states that the Kingdom of God is "*Simply what we learned in the Creed, namely, that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end he also gave his Holy Spirit to teach us this through his holy Word and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power.*" He then states that "*God's kingdom comes to us in two ways: first, it comes here, in time, through the Word and faith, and secondly, in eternity, it comes through the final revelation.*" The final revelation is a reference to the return of Christ, as described in the Apology XVII: "*at the consummation of the world Christ will appear and raise all the dead, granting eternal life and eternal joys to the godly but condemning the ungodly to endless torment with the devil.*"

This world is consistently described in the confessions as the kingdom of the devil, and as something opposite and opposed to the kingdom of God (Ap VII & VIII, 16 - 19; LC V, 82). Furthermore the forgiveness of sins which was one for us through the cross is described as being the fulfillment of God's promise to destroy the kingdom of the devil (Ap XII, 55). We seek not to rule in the devils kingdom, but rather we long for our eternal home.

The creeds proclaim no future earthly kingdom, but an eternal one. In the second article(s) we read that our Lord is seated on the right hand of the God the Father almighty, whence he shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end. (Apostle's Creed; Nicene Creed). When our Lord returns, he returns in glory. He returns to judge the earth. He returns to reign forever. We do not look forward to some gilded age, some heaven on earth. No, we long for this corruption to put on incorruption, for this mortal body to be clothed with immortality. Even so come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

We should always examine the historical context in which the Lutheran Confessions were written. We should not, however make the mistake of Dr. O. Hallesby and assume the Lutheran Confessions are only relevant to the particular historic situation in which they were written. To do so undermines the confessional principle itself. We also must not make the mistake of thinking the Lutheran Confessions are a dogmatics text in which every article of doctrine has its own article, and in which each article of doctrine is discussed exhaustively. Instead, as we have demonstrated above, the particular article of doctrine concerning Last Things is dealt with in a variety of ways. We have shown, for example, that the articles of doctrine concerning the church, divine election, vocation and the two realms also have relevance to the issue before us. Thus it cannot be said that Article XVII of the Augustana is restricted to the specific heresies extant at the time of the Reformation. Nor can it be said that millennialism is consistent with a *quia* subscription, or that the issue of the millennium is an open question. Millennialism—including its modern variants known dispensationalism and dominionism—is and remains a gross error.