

INTERSECT

Thoughts and Themes on Teaching the Two Kingdoms



A Temperament for the Gospel

In our recent Table Talk on the Lutheran temperament, we considered several frames in which to characterize our religious demeanor. For example we can consider “the Lutheran temperament” in American Lutheranism of the past two centuries. Or “the Reformation temperament” in 16th century Germany. Or the “Missouri Synod temperament” as shaped by its 20th century challenges. Or we can consider the Concordia University, Nebraska temperament—connected to these other frames but not coterminous with them. We are not isolated from history or other Lutheran contexts, but we are not determined by them either.

This topic was requested by several participants, perhaps out of curiosity, or significant personal experience, or because how we present ourselves and how we are perceived influence the effectiveness of our ministry. And being perceived as insular and triumphalistic by students and constituents will surely limit the effectiveness of our efforts in both God’s left-hand and right-hand kingdoms. Our Table Talk did not detect Lutheran arrogance as a serious problem at Concordia (though we always monitor the old Adam), but we did consider whether to emphasize our Christian identity or our Lutheran identity or both.

Given the assorted Lutheran temperaments noted above and the factionalism and excesses to which institutional religion can sometimes go, we might think it best to emphasize a common Christian identity. This posture has the advantage of avoiding morbid controversy and disputes about words which produce dissension and wrangling (1 Tim 6:4). Paul’s pastoral letters firmly and repeatedly discourage such conduct among Christians.

Yet such a posture may not be in the best interest of Christian higher education, whether Lutheran or some other tradition. This is not to say we should engage in “stupid controversies, dissensions, and quarrels” (Titus 3:9). Neither should we ignore the unity that all Christians enjoy in Christ as affirmed by Jesus’ high-priestly prayer in Jn. 17 and Paul’s sequence on oneness in Eph. 4:1-7. Why, then, a “Lutheran” higher education? And how to conduct it in a concordant rather than dissonant key?

The strategy of a more general Christian higher education, while pursuing commonality, runs the intellectual risk of circumventing Biblically rich themes in the interest of preserving harmony. The history of the church is, in part, a history of controversy (a history every educated Christian should know), but that controversy often parallels a history of enriching exploration and articulation of the Bible’s narrative and its account of salvation in Christ. If our instruction attends only to what Christians have agreed on (which is much, as we see in the church’s creeds, the councils, and confessional literature), then we shortchange students in two ways. First, we leave them with an oversimplified and truncated edition of the church and its many struggles. Second, we deprive them of the deep reflection contained within the heritage of Christian thought, a heritage that has not always led to agreement but has for centuries kept the church capable of addressing a complex and morphing world with the promises of Christ.



Such a robust Christian higher education is a great blessing to the church. This education can be done well by accessing one of the church’s respected traditions and using it not merely to provoke past controversies but to examine the enduring Biblical themes behind those polemics, themes that help us think deeply about what God has done in the world through Christ. Consider (too briefly) two examples.

Any authentic education in and about the church inevitably includes an education about the sacraments. And any instruction limited to, “Well, the Catholics argue this, and the Lutherans argue that, and the Baptists say something else, and none of them can agree so let’s not argue,” is no education at all. Two thousand years of Christian thought about the sacraments is not merely

about different opinions or an exegesis on this or that text. The discussion is about how God does or does not relate to his material creation and how he conveys his promises to creatures made in his image but now limited by sin. However we may agree or disagree, this is a discussion for every generation of Christians and non-Christians.

A second example is free will which most older adolescents (and under-educated adults) are convinced 1) they have and 2) they understand—despite the problem that the disciplines of theology, cognition, philosophy, neuroscience, and quantum physics remain baffled by the nature of the human will. Traditions in the church have addressed the problem of free will in various ways along at least four important lines of thought for all Christians: the extent to which we retain the divine image; how much damage sin has done to human nature; the limits of rationality; and whether and how our will is changed by the Holy Spirit.¹

A thoroughgoing Christian higher education does not skirt these and other significant themes across our several traditions. Rather that education will use its tradition to respectfully and genuinely examine these themes in its own and other traditions because these themes will manifest themselves across so many aspects of personal, community, and professional life.²

Still and all, our identity ultimately is not located in an intellectual or even theological tradition. Those of us who are wary of any “Christian plus...” identities make an important point. Our identity and temperament is located in a source that is ultimately reliable. Here, too, the Lutheran tradition can helpfully direct us beyond “Lutheran.”³

The predominant theme of the Lutheran tradition is that the Gospel predominates. This was the chief insight and recovery accomplished by the Reformation, and it can (though it does not always) characterize a community temperament. This Gospel character provides a local community—CUNE in our case—with a common reference for faculty and student services, from whom students then learn to consolidate their faith and life in Christ.

So, we can define ourselves according to some transient institutional culture, or we can be defined according to the promises God has given us from the cross. As we understand our identity and temperament from the cross (I will know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified, 1 Cor. 2:2) this community understanding will more and more shape our day-to-day life together and

with our students (as Paul counsels throughout both letters to Corinth).

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This Gospel character shapes our temperament, structure, and practice, rather than the Gospel being merely an add-on to some structure and organization that we put in place. When we locate our oneness in the Gospel (rather than in our being part of an organizational chart) this Gospel temperament gives us greater capacity to work together, not fear mistakes, avoid the error of equating disagreement with disloyalty, and provides a common commitment to sustain growth (Eph 4:16). Such a climate and culture does not imply an antinomian lack of structure nor does it imply license (Gal. 5:1-15). Rather it means that our structure and life together is always qualified by the Gospel, especially when we disagree and when we must make hard decisions.

Lutheran temperament? Or Christian temperament? Well, yes. The dynamic of a Gospel temperament empowers us to do both for the benefit of participants from many traditions.

—R. Moulds

1. *The History of Christian Thought* by Jonathan Hill (IVP, 2003) is an engaging one volume introduction to several more examples.

2. See R.R. Reno's column, “The Christian Intellectual,” in *First Things*, Nov. 18, 2013, for another view.

3. For Luther's plea that people not call themselves Lutherans, see his “Against Insurrection,” 1522, from the Wartburg Castle.

A Colleague's Additional Perspective:

We seem to function as a family with shared experiences, a common heritage along with some quirks and even some sacred cows. Many are born into this family and learned from a young age what is important to ancestors. Some came into the family later and learned the history, heritage, expectations and quirks by participation and practice. It takes time and intentionality to help newcomers to the family to own the shared story. And each generation—blending of family traditions, values and quirks, even challenging sacred cows—adds a new dynamic to the on-going story. Some may even adopt the core family beliefs after some intense rejection. But all must know the heritage and hear the stories as the initial step in this dynamic process. A question: Do we view the current climate on campus as a large family reunion or as a large block party of neighbors? It seems we will interact differently at each, choosing what to offer and how to share these important stories and values.

—T. Rippstein