



INTERSECT

Thoughts and Themes on Teaching the Two Kingdoms

Two Kingdoms, Two Strategies, and Creative Tension: A CUNE Rationale

Note: this essay includes several themes that take us beyond its two pages and into further Table Talks.

Lutheran higher education lacks a coherent and practical rationale, a *raison d'être*. For all our theology and tradition, we just don't have a clear working document that articulates how the richness of that tradition guides our education and expresses our identity—and why that matters.¹ But we do have the resources to realize the rationale that naturally issues from our Lutheran tradition. Here is a way to approach it.

The Supreme Court continues to hear a steady docket of cases on religion and society. Carl Sagan's "Cosmos" series has now been revived by the National Geographic Channel with its mix of science and speculation. Hollywood, in the spirit of Cecil B. DeMille, still cranks out religious epics in its own cultural vernacular. These and a stream of other examples from commerce, athletics, education, the arts, and the rest of society provide students with ample content for examining the world around them and for their formation of faith and life.

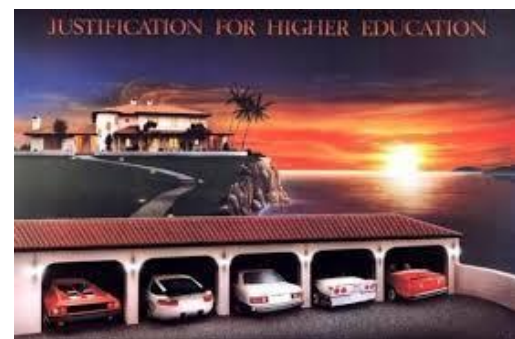
Concordia certainly assists students with this formation. Its 500 year-old theological tradition initiated at Wittenberg University, established within 2000 years of Christian thought, and contained within three millennia of revealed and recorded monotheism has practical insights to offer Christian higher education. Yet an irony of 20th century Lutheranism is that its theology was often expressed as if that tradition had little to offer instruction that wasn't already available everywhere else in higher education.

The two kingdoms doctrine is a case in point. Lutheran colleges and universities in the 20th century typically treated the two kingdoms as if this Biblical teaching bifurcated and isolated God's left hand from his right hand. A reading of that period's Lutheran texts and journals strongly suggests aims such as vesting the Gospel within the institutional church, endorsing an Enlightenment wall of church/state separation, and protecting academic disciplines from ecclesiastical meddling—aims purportedly confirmed by the location of these elements to their proper "spheres." Faith was

interior to the personal believer and secured salvation; knowledge was the province of the academic disciplines and advanced our temporal well-being. God was on his throne and all was right with the academic world.²

We Lutherans in the 21st century can do better than this conveniently artificial compartmentalizing.

In a recent Table Talk we discussed what many have found to be a more helpful [summary of the two kingdoms](#).³ This summary affirms that both kingdoms are God's kingdoms; that he is actively at work in both; that God operates simultaneously but differently in each which produces tension for the sinner (Luther called this *Anfechtung* or spiritual anxiety⁴); and that God engages us as his agents of service for that work.



A popular poster from a few years ago.

Thus, our academic disciplines and student services provide the context at Concordia for our agency (cf. doctrine of vocation) as we operate in and on behalf of both of God's kingdoms simultaneously. This simultaneity often (not always) generates tension as we have noted at our Table Talks in examples from the Two Kingdoms website and from our own practices. And these instances of tension are good because they are our opportunities to exhibit and teach about both kingdoms.

We are now at a point of clarifying in our discussions the relationship between God's two kingdoms as two dynamic strategies (rather than static and dormant conditions) and how that relationship defines what can and should be distinctive about Lutheran higher education. Some further delineation:

For the present time, God by his providence employs his left-hand strategy of sustaining a sin-plagued world while exercising his right-hand strategy of advancing his kingdom of grace into this world he so loves (Jn. 3:16). He does not isolate one from the other ("Christ

transcends culture” or “Christ and culture in conflict”), neither does he conflate them (“Christ transforming culture”), as we noted in our Christ-and-culture talks.

Rather, God’s two kingdoms run parallel with each other for now, yet they often intersect in instances we might describe curiously as an on-going series of “intersecting parallels.” These instances can be seen in many Biblical events, most importantly in the incarnation when God intrudes on Judea, Rome’s client kingdom, much to Herod’s alarm.

God’s two strategies are always interacting with a changing world and this creates the settings in which Christians craft ways to exhibit vividly the strife of sin in this present kingdom and the promise of grace in the new kingdom Christ has inaugurated. God’s right-hand strategy of saving sinners is not divorced from his left-hand strategy of preserving a world of sinners to be saved. The two strategies work in creative tension—that is, as God’s agents, we Christians work the two strategies in creative tension—to preserve the world, keep sin in check, highlight this perpetually frustrating struggle, then announce and enact another, better hope through what God has done in Christ.

God is at work through the institutions of this world (such as family, schools, commerce, and the civic order), and God joins the Christian to that work as an expression of our vocation. But we are at work with God in his left-hand strategy not solely for the sake of these institutions or to locate our identity or meaning in them. Rather we participate whole-heartedly and faithfully in the left-hand kingdom because we understand that this is God’s penultimate strategy of preserving the world for the sake of his ultimate strategy of redeeming the world. The first strategy is not indifferent or irrelevant to the second. It is in service to the second because the One Crucified in this left-hand kingdom will “come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead,” bringing his new kingdom in full. And the judgment he desires to pronounce is, “Innocent, by my mercy” (Mt. 9:13).

Now we see a key feature of how Lutheran higher education differs from other universities. We use education in and for the left-hand kingdom, but we do so in ways that seek to feature and advance the right-hand kingdom. That is, we first use our context of conventional education to draw others’ attention to the difference between the two kingdoms. Then we use this contrast to point them (sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly) toward God’s claim on this world and his promises for them by enacting the unconventional and sometimes peculiar ways of our right-hand strategy.⁵

If we do conventional education for its own sake, we have nothing new to offer: we would merely replicate the essential but temporal education that is already being done in God’s left-hand kingdom. If we only promote the peculiarity of the Gospel, that strategy will fail for lack of a familiar context for many of our students. (This is partly why so many of us rejected the Bible college identity during our first Table Talk.)

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In a liberal democracy, public universities cannot, will not, and should not run a right-hand kingdom strategy. And other Christian colleges and universities have construed their mission rather differently from ours, more often seeking to “integrate” the two kingdoms and transform left-hand institutions into the right-hand kingdom.⁶ These schools are now realizing that the culture around them has changed markedly after the 20th century, and their integrate-and-transform schema won’t work in a society that is no longer interested in deference to religion or propping up the church. They are now less clear about their mission.

Concordia by contrast is moving along the more difficult (Mt. 7:14) but more Biblically sound, adaptable, and ultimately productive path of using both strategies. We need to talk more about how, when, and where to do this. ~ Moulds

1. A selected bibliography for Christian and Lutheran higher education is available at <http://wp.cune.edu/twokingdoms/the-lutheran-tradition>
2. For further background, see *Reasonable Ethics* by Robert Benne, Part 5: Christian Higher Education (Concordia Publishing House, 2005).
3. This summary is listed our Two Kingdoms website at <http://wp.cune.edu/twokingdoms/the-lutheran-tradition>
4. The concept of *Anfechtung* or “spiritual struggle” is a rich theme in Luther’s theology, well worth further study. See, for example, “The Significance of Tentatio in Luther’s Spirituality,” Won Yong Ji, *Concordia Journal*, April, 1989, and *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* by Alister McGrath (Blackwell, 1985).
5. Our Two Kingdoms website includes several lesson and content examples on the content pages and grad page.
6. A standard reference for this perspective is *The Idea of a Christian College* by Arthur Holmes, Eerdmans, 1987).