



INTERSECT

Thoughts and Themes on Teaching the Two Kingdoms

Christ and Curriculum: an Intersect Approach

One of our most capable colleagues—an innovator in the classroom, praised by students, and effective academic manager, appreciated by peers—has expressed discomfort about curriculum and the Lutheran tradition. In our conversation, our colleague gently but plainly repeated three times that the idea of including theological themes in teaching "makes me uncomfortable." And we have reasons to share that discomfort.

But if Concordia merely replicates what other universities do, then we have no reason to exist. Colleges that teach only matters of God's left-hand kingdom abound, and many do excellent work, often for less tuition. Our colleague realized this during our earlier Table Talks, and now agrees that Concordia needs to distinguish itself and its purpose from the garden-variety small colleges and the generic church-affiliated colleges. Mere reference to some vague "Concordia experience" (read: Club Concordia) won't fill the bill.



Our situation is further complicated in that we have several "Concordias" on campus: the dorms, the classrooms, Weller, athletics, the faculty, church work, the grad programs, and other domains, each with a function to contribute. But contribute to what? Shall we invoke Paul's one-body-many-parts language (1 Cor. 12, Rom. 12)? If so, we will also have to own not only his aim in the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:19-23) but also his two-kingdoms strategies as he guides his fellow Christians in how to be God's people, active within their *Pax Romana* diversity.

What then sets Concordia apart and makes it worth sustaining? Our faculty studies have presented an instructional approach to Christ and curriculum which selects and features points of intersection between God's two kingdoms. Do we find this approach within our comfort zone?

Those of the Lutheran persuasion are often rightly cautious about Christ and curriculum. We have seen assorted proposals come and go, seeking to bring together the Christian faith and the academic disciplines. In the late 20th century, American evangelicals promoted an integrating-the-faith approach. In this view, all truth is God's truth, human rationality reflects God's own rationality, and we can locate content in the disciplines that integrates with the truths of the Bible.

For example, the beauty and symmetry of mathematics reflects the order and coherence of God's creation. The narrative form of the world's literature is an echo of the story that God is telling in his themes of creation, fall, and redemption. And the social sciences contain and illustrate the Biblical pattern of sin, judgment, and grace played out across human affairs.

However, while faith integration offers a Christian world view and has some valid application, it leaves untouched much of today's research in technical areas and studies in the professions. In fact, schools that originally promoted faith integration are now examining different versions of Christian higher education.

Another approach to Christ and curriculum is allegorizing, a method which recognizes that, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1). Thus, everything we study must in some way correspond to the mind and work of God. In examining the activity of electrons and valence levels in chemistry (*valentia*, L., power, competency), we can analogously glimpse the valence shift of the Second Person of the Trinity from the right hand of the Father to our level of being, and consider his state of humiliation and state of exaltation. A study of human political systems corresponds, however approximately, to the spiritual powers and principalities about which the Bible testifies (e.g., Eph. 6:12).

This approach strikes many of us as the stuff of Bible colleges or even Sunday school. But before we sniff or wince, note that the church used this method for study and teaching for more than a thousand years prior to the Reformation and still managed to be the church. Note also that, in the end, all our words in all our disciplines are finally simile, metaphor, and allegory. The church's scholarly work today does not much rely on allegorizing; nevertheless, we employ allegory in our instruction in many ways whether we notice this not.

A third view to Christ and curriculum is the personalized approach. By this view, curriculum content remains standardized by its scholarly discipline without

reference to Biblical or religious concerns. The spiritual component is adjacent but intentionally present by virtue of our Christian format for the course and our Christian character as an instructor. Those not especially pious by temperament are often uncomfortable with this style and tend to dismiss it as religious window dressing with a Bible verse in the syllabus and prayer at the start of class. We have seen this done superficially and poorly.

However, we also know teachers who are expressive in their faith and have developed a style that effectively communicates God's love to others—even to those of us who are not very pious. Respected authors such as Richard Foster and James K.A. Smith have written extensively on how to apply the church's traditions in piety and spiritual disciplines to instruction. And biblical themes of welcoming the stranger (Dt. 10:19) and the gift of hospitality (1 Pet. 4:9) need not be foreign to the classroom.

Yet integrating, allegorizing, and personalizing still make us uncomfortable. Despite their possibilities, we detect the potential artificiality in these approaches—which brings us to Concordia's renewed studies of our Lutheran tradition. Our studies have presented a fourth approach to Christ and curriculum which selects and features points of intersection between God's two kingdoms, an approach which

- affirms the goodness of creation and our study of it;
- avoids either the conflation or compartmentalization of God's right-hand and his left-hand kingdoms; and
- sustains meaning in all temporal studies by locating them in service to God's ultimate aims in Christ.

By this approach, the aim of the instructor is to include meaningful examples and incidents of these two-kingdoms intersections within course content. These examples exhibit the subject matter in pedagogically sound ways but also—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly—draw the student's attention to the context of God's larger purposes in Christ's coming kingdom.

What would this approach to Christ and curriculum look like? And would we be uncomfortable with it? Unlike integrating, allegorizing, and personalizing, this approach has no formula and is course- and content-dependent. It is not simple and artificial. For example, in a management or technical course, the intersections may have to do with Biblical themes of social justice, stewardship of creation, or a biblical anthropology. In a humanities course, the themes often involve Christian liberty and vocation. And in the arts, the themes of incarnation and the hiddenness of God provide many opportunities.

An intersection approach means that the instructor needs to have a working grasp of the Reformation's several insights about the Gospel (our "List-of-Ten"). In other words, to teach within the Lutheran tradition (or any of the church's other rich traditions), we have to know and understand the tradition. Perhaps this homework is also part of what makes us uncomfortable.

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To suggest one intersection example from the week's news (at this writing), a laboratory at Newcastle University is awaiting government approval to create the first embryo from a DNA combination of three human beings. Doing so may eliminate severe hereditary disorders but will initiate a hereditary line that has never before existed. Issues at stake include the nature of personhood, science and ethics, the Second Great Commandment, the accountability of vocation, and the concepts of Christian liberty and Enlightenment liberty. This intersection example is one that will shape our students' future and is worthy of study through courses in psychology, genetics, ethics, sociology, biology, and business (the biotech implications are enormous.)

We do have reasons to be cautious about putting Christ and curriculum together. We can continue to consider these in later Table Talks and Intersect essays. For now, let the record show that Concordia does have an approach that is both coherent with its Lutheran tradition and versatile within our academic disciplines.

But our colleague gets the last word here, after our conversation and reading this essay's draft: "While yes, this subject does make me uncomfortable ☺, I not only now better understand the approaches, but am also excited about the possibilities of 'intersection'—as long as guidance (and not judgment) is our style."

I couldn't agree more.

—R. Moulds

For additional weekly updates of events and content to use in the classroom, see the home page of *Intersecting the Two Kingdoms*, <http://wp.cune.edu/twokingdoms>. For additional curriculum examples, see the website's dropdown menu for content areas in the academic disciplines.

Photo: Don Sylwester