



**Intersecting the Two Kingdoms**  
a think tank for Lutheran Higher Education

## **One Kingdom Teaches the Other: The Two Strategies of Lutheran Education**

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(adapted from *Learning at the Foot of the Cross: A Lutheran Vision for Education*, Joel Heck and Angus J.L. Menuge, eds.)

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural. —Flannery O’Connor

The best known kingdom among our students, young and old, is the magic kingdom of Disney that bills itself as the happiest place on earth. For many, a Disney theme park is a fun place to visit but, of course, it’s not a kingdom and it has no king (as Disney Company stockholders know). We may wonder, then, what ideas our students have about kingdoms in a world where today few working kingdoms exist, especially since we are called as teachers of a kingdom that is both here yet not here and for a King who also is here yet not here.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible’s doctrine about God’s kingdom is not easy for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians to grasp or teach. We just don’t operate today in functioning monarchies. What’s more, Scripture teaches about not one but two kingdoms, and—more complications—both kingdoms are God’s kingdoms. Further, the Lutheran teaching ministry operates in both of these kingdoms, does so simultaneously, and uses one kingdom to teach the other but does so with a deliberate imbalance and bias toward one of those kingdoms. And the two kingdom doctrine defines the context, direction, and goal of Lutheran education which makes Lutheran teaching genuinely distinct and meaningful in ways that our mission-and-ministry statements often neglect.

This chapter first examines the two kingdoms as a key New Testament theme and as one of the Reformation’s central insights about the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> We then consider what implications the two kingdoms have for teaching and teachers of the church. Understanding both kingdoms will alert us to useful insights and practices from many sources but also to the dangers of secular drift in Lutheran teaching. Perhaps the chief

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<sup>1</sup> The opening material is adapted from “The Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” by Russ Moulds, *Teachers Interaction*, Spring 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Chief among Reformation writings that address the two kingdoms is Luther’s essay, “Secular Authority: to what extent is should be obeyed.” This document, while very readable, is subtle and nuanced, and Luther uses at least three different ways to discuss the work of God’s left and right hands, one of which is the two kingdom imagery.

concern the two kingdoms raise regarding Lutheran educators today is our tendency to identify with public education while mimicking private education. More positively, understanding the two kingdoms also clarifies our purpose and philosophy of education as an authentic Christian education that keeps us engaged with the secular so that we can engage the world with a new, come-and-coming kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

### **God's Two Strategies**

Jesus begins and ends his ministry as a ministry in two kingdoms:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mk. 1:14-15).

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate (Jn 18:33-37).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of what was written and said about God's two kingdoms (including our catechetical and doctrinal instruction) was simplistic and misleading.<sup>4</sup> Often this profound Biblical teaching was reduced to views about the separation of church and state, the so-called "real world" and our hope of heaven, science and religion, or public policy versus private belief. But these oversimplifications wrongly divorced God's two kingdoms as though each has nothing to do with the other and that God himself is somehow divided in his own interests and aims.<sup>5</sup> Today, Lutheran education has some distance to go in correcting this compartmentalizing confusion when teaching the two kingdoms.

We have some distance to cover because Scripture's teaching about the two kingdoms extends not only to social, political, scientific, educational, and personal concerns but to every dimension of both the Christian's and non-Christian's life. (Consider Paul's exhortations in Eph. 4:1-16 and Acts 17:22-34.) More recent studies of the two

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter assumes the reader can make the basic distinctions between Law and Gospel and so will not clarify those distinctions for each issue discussed. See FN 25.

<sup>4</sup> The two kingdoms have always presented a challenge for the church. For further introduction see *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*, Angus J. L. Menzies, General Editor (Concordia Publishing House, 1999) and *Christ and Culture Revisited*, D. A. Carson (Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> For example, in his widely used *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Concordia Publishing House, 1952), E.W.A. Koehler includes a generally useful section on civil government. However, his discussion of separation of church and state demonstrates a conventional oversimplification: "The State preserves outward peace in the community, and secures for all its citizens the enjoyment of their civil and religious liberties; the Church offers spiritual blessings and brings the peace of God to troubled souls. The State is interested in the temporal affairs of its citizens; the Church is interested in the spiritual and eternal affairs of its members. The power of the State is world-centered; the power of the Church is heaven-centered" (p. 282). Contrast his bifurcation with, for example, Lk. 1:46-55 and 4:16-21 where God's right hand touches the civil, temporal, world-centered left-hand kingdom.

kingdoms have recognized this breadth and address the two kingdoms from several vantages such as God's two works, modes, realms, spheres, swords, orders, and perspectives.<sup>6</sup> These studies recognize that what God is doing *with* this world through His word of providence (compare Luther's Large Catechism, the first article of the Creed) and *toward* this world through his word of salvation (Large Catechism, second and third articles of the Creed) is multifaceted and comprehensive. Meanwhile God does these works while keeping the two kingdoms distinct yet related. To understand this distinct-yet-relatedness, we will consider the two kingdoms in terms of God's two strategies.

The Biblical texts above and many others confirm that God is running a couple of operations or strategies simultaneously.<sup>7</sup> Luther's understanding of the Gospel is fundamentally influenced by this insight about God's two "kingdoms" or strategies which Luther sees as God's response to the fallen human condition described in Genesis 1 - 11. His reading of Genesis finds humanity imprisoned in sin and captive to the devil within the context of God's fallen creation, sometimes called God's "left-hand kingdom." Humanity can in no way reason, battle, bargain, progress, invent, or discover (scientifically or otherwise) its way out of this captivity. And this captivity captures and corrupts everything about fallen humanity: beliefs, rationality, morals, emotions, and even (especially) human will. If sinners are in fact and indeed captive, Luther insists our will is not free.<sup>8</sup>

But also in Genesis, God commences a campaign to inaugurate another kingdom coming with Christ to free us and restore us to a right relationship with him in Christ's new right-hand kingdom. Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress," describes this spiritual strife between God and the devil. The hymn reminds us that there is no neutral ground for us sinners (see Rom. 6). Still, whatever may come in the kingdom of this world, the new kingdom remains ours in Christ.

To accomplish his campaign, Scripture informs us of two strategies God is using to free humanity captive to the devil: one strategy sustains the present world with opportunities for the Gospel, the other advances the Gospel in the world.<sup>9</sup> These strategies work

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<sup>6</sup> See for example "Secularization and the Two Kingdoms Doctrine: Maintaining a Lutheran Balance," by Eric Moeller in *Lutheran Education Journal*, Vol. 137, No. 4, Summer 2002; "Civic Participation by Churches and Pastors: An Essay on Two Kinds of Righteousness," by William W. Schumacher in *Concordia Journal*, July 2004; "Re-appropriating Luther's Two Kingdoms," by Craig L. Nesson in *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. XIX (2005); "The Two Kingdoms Distinction: An Analysis with Suggestion," by James Arne Nestingen, *Word and World*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, Summer 1999; and "Living in Two Kingdoms," in *The Spirituality of the Cross* by Gene Edward Veith, Jr. (Concordia Publishing House, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Other oft-cited two kingdom texts include but are not limited to Mt. 22:21, I Cor. 15:24-28, Jn. 17:14, Rom. 13:1, and Paul's Letter to Philemon.

<sup>8</sup> This point baffles many Lutherans today. The issue of free will was debated by Erasmus and Luther during the Reformation and culminated in Luther's publication of a key Reformation document, *The Bondage of the Will* in which he refutes Erasmus' claim that the sinner's will remains free. Rom. 6 is a central text for this discussion. See also Melancthon's discussion in *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article XVIII, Free Will, in the Book of Concord.

<sup>9</sup> I use this description of the two kingdoms often in my instruction and writing. It is not the only or especially the best explanation, but it serves to put most of the ideas in place just a few paragraphs. Note that rather than

together and not independently since they are both God's strategies for his single purpose of our salvation. All education and schools, including Lutheran schools, are part of that first, "left-hand" strategy. An issue for Lutheran schools today is whether and to what extent they understand that they are also part of God's "right-hand" strategy. Before examining this issue, we'll summarize the two strategies.

God's left-hand strategy is to create some temporal arrangements—Luther cited marriage, civil government, and the church as examples we can confirm from Scripture—generally to do three things: 1) keep the sinful world in check to prevent it from collapsing into chaos; 2) promote as much common good and justice as can be had under the circumstances of human sin and the devil's grip on the world; and 3) provide opportunities by which any person, Christian or not, can contribute to promoting that common good and justice. This strategy doesn't defeat the devil, redeem creation, or accomplish anyone's righteousness and salvation before God. Not even the church as an institution can do that. But this strategy does sustain the present age—the "kingdom" of this world, God's left-hand kingdom—as the campaign zone for his right-hand work. Note also that even though these temporal arrangements are human activities, they are actually all God's short-term good works that he does in his own hidden way.<sup>10</sup> He does these things to sustain the present age so he can employ his other strategy to defeat the devil, make us righteous, and redeem creation.

God's other strategy, his right-hand strategy, is to propel some additional, peculiar news into the present age of his left-hand kingdom. The news is that, without our contribution or co-operation, a carpenter's life, ministry, death, and triumph over death has and continues to come between us and the devil, undo his hold on the world, take us out of that captivity, return us to God, and put things right between heaven and earth. Like many powerful news stories, this news has a power to change people. Its particular power is that of promise and hope, hope boosted by God's own pledge standing behind the promise (see Eph. 1:13-14). God delivers this curious news in his own personal way in Jesus and continues to circulate it just as personally through Jesus' disciples using word-of-mouth plus a few ways to concretize those words (the sacraments and written Word). Even though this news flash comes through the likes of us, it is, like the first strategy, also all God's work done in his own hidden way for accomplishing his long-term aim of restoring the world and everything in it to his good graces.

So both strategies are God's strategies. God inducts us very actively into the first, like workers given vocations, and absolutely passively into the second, like babies being born

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"God's two strategies," some commentators on the two kingdoms prefer the description, "God's two-fold strategy," to help us recognize the unity of God's ultimate purpose in the Gospel—a valid point. Also, God may use more than two strategies (or a two-fold strategy) in his campaign but, if so, Scripture doesn't tell us, and so we shouldn't speculate too much, since Scripture, not our speculation, is our source and norm for our teaching.

<sup>10</sup> See Dt. 29:29. The concept of God's hidden work is important for better understanding his activity in both kingdoms but is beyond the scope of this chapter. Luther called these left-hand movements in which we are active God's "masks." Thus, the left-hand kingdom is essential for God's entire plan of redemption and not to be regarded as peripheral. For a brief treatment, see "The Hidden God and the Revealed God" in *The Theology of Martin Luther* by Paul Althaus (Fortress Press, 1966).

or dead men being raised.<sup>11</sup> God provides us with all the needed resources for the first: food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day. For the second strategy, God imparts to us his Word from which, like a small child with no initial decision or intention, we learn to speak and then grow to speak with others within God's left-hand strategy and kingdom. His aim is to get us out of the strife between him and the devil and simply with him, then enlist us in his campaign to deliver others from this strife. And that's the two kingdom doctrine.<sup>12</sup>

God works both these strategies together in a way that for him, of course, is interactive and complementary (Isa. 40:21ff; Rom 8:28), but we do not experience the two strategies that way. For now, we who do not "sit above the circle of the earth" (Isa 40:22) continue in tension between the two kingdoms: "The old evil foe now means deadly woe." Meanwhile, we live in the hope, faith, and trust that God is accomplishing his entire campaign (Rom. 8:18-25, 2 Cor. 5:6-9), even as we put that tension to work on behalf of that campaign.

### **The Intruding Kingdom**

These two strategies differentiate the Christian teaching ministry from all other kinds of education and distinguish it as a ministry of the church rather than merely a rehash of public or private schooling. Some biblical examples of God's right-hand saving strategy intersecting into his left-hand maintaining-the-world strategy will help us see how God's two operations create the "lesson set" of tension for developing Christian faith and growth—sometimes in peculiar ways. Perhaps the most extreme example (that we have now tamed into "happy holidays") is the infinite, almighty Lord of the universe born as a human infant in an animal stall. Consider a few of many other examples from Scripture.

Just before God sent Judah into exile and while Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonians, Jeremiah invested in local real estate (Jer. 32). What must have looked like foolish speculation to many was actually a concrete proclamation of hope for Jerusalem, a hope fulfilled seventy years later when Judah returned from Babylon (Jer. 29:1-14, Ezra 1 – 2). God used the Babylonians as his left-hand instrument for punishing Judah's injustice and idolatry (Jer. 7 – 10). But God also intervened in this left-hand event with his right hand of mercy through Jeremiah's land purchase and prophetic promise. God's right-hand work is not merely "spiritual pie in the sky." It is not fluff—it is as real and immediate as the real estate Jeremiah bought and paid for.

When Judah returned from exile, Ezra imposed a disturbing left-hand / right-hand intersection when he commanded the mass divorce of Jewish men from their non-Jewish wives in order to stem the influence of idolatry (Ezra 9 – 10). We today find this religious intolerance distasteful and distressing. But Judah had returned not just from

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<sup>11</sup> Creating faith is God's work alone. Living out that faith is our response impelled by the Holy Spirit. For a lucid discussion of our active and passive righteousness, see *The Genius of Luther's Theology: a Wittenberg way of thinking for the contemporary church* by Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand (BakerAcademic, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Luther finds many points of correspondence between the two kingdoms/two strategies and God's two words of Law and Gospel. See his "Secular Authority: to what extent it should be obeyed."

exile but also back to its idolatrous ways, ways which threatened to derail God's messianic promise made to Judah through David's family (Isa. 11). Ezra applied God's right-hand strategy by a drastic interposition on the left-hand institution of marriage, and most of Judah understood why he was doing this (Ezra 10:1-5, 18-44).<sup>13</sup>

The Gospel is Good News but also an alarming stressor. Paul tells us—and not as a figure of speech—that the Gospel truly is a scandal (1 Cor. 1:23, *skandalon*). For example, when Jesus confronts the Legion demons in Mark 5, he dismisses them into the swine. The possessed man was saved—but the herdsmen sustained a financial loss of 2000 head of livestock and asked Jesus to go away. God's right-hand strategy is an expensive intrusion on his own left-hand kingdom as these herdsmen, doing their proper left-hand ministry, try to make a living and provide sustenance for others' livings.

In Paul's ministry, he refused to accept any salary or material support from his congregations in Corinth and Thessalonica (though he gladly accepted support from the church at Philippi). The conventional left-hand / right-hand arrangement for ministry is that "those who proclaim the Gospel should get their living by the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:14) which, itself, demonstrates how the two kingdoms, though distinct, do interrelate. But in 1 Cor. 9, Paul says that sometimes to express the Gospel more clearly, he will set aside Jesus' own command that those who proclaim the Gospel should get their living by the Gospel (Lk. 10:7). And in this case, we see a peculiar and powerful instance of the right-hand strategy imposing on and altering the usual and otherwise proper left-hand practice of compensation for church workers. (See also 1 Thess. 2:1-12.)

### **What Kind of Intersection?**

The proclamation of the Gospel is itself, then, the intersection between the two kingdoms. While it is God's greatest gift and blessing, it is also costly to both those in the left-hand kingdom who receive it and those who share it. Thus, the tension.<sup>14</sup>

In Scripture, God's right-hand strategy intervenes into his left-hand kingdom across episodes from the flood, exodus, history of Israel, exile, Jesus' incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and into the early church's ministry. Again and again we see God's right-hand strategy (choose your preferred verb for incursion) intersecting, permeating, penetrating, infecting, invading the left-hand realm. Throughout history and today also, no domain in this world—private, public, scientific, cultural, political, personal, communal—is exempt from the reach of God's right hand.

The goal of the right-hand strategy, however, is not to transform the left-hand kingdom into the kingdom of Christ. This supposed aim is a common misunderstanding of the two kingdom doctrine that has been popularly promoted by many Christian books, speakers, and organizations, particularly within American evangelicalism. In fact, this

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<sup>13</sup> If the reader is troubled by this incident (as is your writer), we should recall C.S. Lewis's observation that God is not nice—he is good, but he is not nice. Lewis's point is fitting as we consider other incidents such as the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and later Jerusalem, and the death of the babies at Bethlehem.

<sup>14</sup> The modern classic on this cost is *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 1995).

misunderstanding is so wide-spread that it is taken for granted by many Lutheran teachers and preachers. But a moment's reflection on the second article of the Apostles Creed ("He will come again to judge both the living and the dead") reminds us that only at Christ's second coming will the two kingdoms be united. When in Acts 1:6 the apostles ask Jesus if he will now restore the kingdom to Israel (that is, fully activate in this world his entire kingdom of grace), he tells them that this timing is none of their business. Rather their (and our) business is to be his witnesses, announcing this come-and-coming kingdom which he alone will fulfill at the close of the age yet teaching how to live in it already today. Paul expresses this same point in Eph. 1:3-10 in which he says that God's plan for the fullness of time is to unite all things in heaven and on earth. Meanwhile, we continue to live in the tension between these two kingdoms, working the left-hand strategy of maintaining the current creation as our context for advancing the right-hand strategy of introducing and instructing for the new come-and-coming kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the goal of God's right-hand strategy is not to stand isolated and compartmentalized away from life after Eden. This world's everyday life, individual and collective, is the target of his right-hand strategy. When government postures itself as the ultimate authority, the right-hand strategy proclaims another kingdom and King to whom all must ultimately answer. When the sciences exceed evidence, data, and theory and begin making ultimate claims about the nature of existence itself, the right-hand strategy reminds us who is the Author and Lord of life. When Wall Street begins to look like either it is paved with gold or has become the road to perdition, the right-hand strategy erects a detour sign that takes us along the way of the cross. And when we compartmentalize our own lives as though God's Word speaks only to our personal, interior, "spiritual" self, the right-hand strategy reasserts God's claim on us in baptism: "We were buried therefore with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

### **Mary or Martha?**

We do not leave the two kingdoms separate and compartmentalized. We also do not try to merge them together, trying to transform society into God's kingdom of grace or making God's kingdom of grace merely another province in this world. Then what are we say about the two kingdoms? We keep them intersecting with each other with the tension this generates. We then use this tension to help others notice the difference between the two and be drawn by God's promises to his new and coming kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rom. 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind," is not a proof text for either transforming the left-hand kingdom ("be transformed") or compartmentalizing it from the right-hand kingdom ("Do not be conformed"). Rather, after his eleven chapters on the nature of the Gospel, the substance of Paul's next discussion is how the Gospel is the transformative "power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16), that is, how disciples and their communities are transformed to exhibit and practice the Gospel and not merely know it.

<sup>16</sup> John's Gospel can be read insightfully from this perspective. For example, see John 12 where Jesus says, "And when I am lifted up from the earth [crucifixion? ascension?], I will draw all men to myself" (v. 32). Then read the supper account in chapters 13 – 17 with particular attention to the work of the Holy Spirit, with Luther's meaning to the third article of the Creed in mind: "The Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel...."

For many years I have asked Lutheran teachers and professors whether they identify more with Mary or Martha.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." (Lk. 10:38-42)

Even the few who at first say "both" usually capitulate and agree that we seem to be like Martha, anxious and troubled about our left-hand responsibilities and not enough like Mary, concerned with matters of the right-hand strategy. Jesus clearly distinguished and prioritized the two: "Mary has chosen what is better".

But note that it is Martha's left-hand activities as a gracious host (her good and proper left-hand service in God's left-hand kingdom) that gave the Teacher his opportunity to contrast the two kingdoms. That is what we are to do with the two strategies in the two kingdoms. We employ the typical left-hand activities used in learning and education within the realm of this world to call attention to another realm, the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus that is now already arriving and due to arrive in full. When we select or create opportunities to do this work and use them to articulate God's own Word and promises, sinners notice the difference between these two realms or perspectives. They find this sort of teaching peculiar and become puzzled and perhaps a little uncomfortable. They experience the tension.<sup>17</sup>

Here God's words of Law and Gospel that he commits to our use (II Tim. 2:15) can do their efficacious work of creating, challenging, and strengthening faith. Government and private schools teach for the sake of the left-hand kingdom—and they ought to do this as God's instruments in his left-hand kingdom. The Lutheran teaching ministry also uses education in and for the left-hand kingdom but does so in order to feature and advance the right-hand kingdom. We often act and look like Martha. But with Mary and Jesus, we further use such activities to distinguish and prioritize "what is better." We use our teaching to draw others' attention to differences between the two kingdoms. We use this contrast to share God's promises with them in conventional and unconventional ways. And the Holy Spirit uses that Word of promise to do what only the Holy Spirit can do, creating and furthering faith. In this way, we do the teaching of *both* kingdoms that public and private education cannot and should not do.

### **Some Two-Edged Questions**

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<sup>17</sup> Luther called this response "*anfechtung*" or spiritual anxiety and regarded it as a healthy initial reaction to God's words of Law and Gospel.

All sorts of typical classroom and education activities can serve our aim.<sup>18</sup> Depending on the subject area and instructor's knowledge and experience, faith integration lessons can explore ways that God's revelation—and especially though not always the Gospel—may intersect the things of this world. For instance, do numbers really exist or are they our ideas without any real substance? If they are simply our ideas without substance, does that make them less real than, say, a piece of granite which seems solid but consists mostly of empty space and proportionately few atoms which are sustained by sub-atomic forces, forces that have energy but have no substance? And what do we mean by substance? Do we mean the same thing when we say in the Nicene Creed that God the Son is “one substance with the Father”? So would the person who questions whether God exists because we seem to have no tangible evidence for God also question whether numbers exist? Perhaps she would, perhaps not. But she may now also re-consider the nature and permanence of the world around her. The point is not that numbers or that world are merely illusions. The point is that, from pre-school to graduate school to parish education, we develop all sorts of age-appropriate ways to bring believers, seekers, and interested skeptics of all ages to intersections of the two kingdoms.<sup>19</sup>

Through excellent preparation and instruction in our left-hand content areas, we create attention-getters in our curriculum for a hearing of God's right-hand strategy in the Gospel. Beyond the curriculum, school practices and activities may be even more effective for this two-handed ministry. Do class elections develop goal-oriented community service as an expression of the Second Great Commandment to love your neighbor as yourself? Or do they foster self-aggrandizing popularity contests that divide community and undermine Scripture's encouragement to “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit but count others better than yourselves” (see Phil. 2:1-11)?

Does an honor roll communicate to those included and those not included that we are all stewards of all the gifts God has entrusted to us, including intellectual gifts? Does a dean's list serve as simply one of many ways by which we echo Jesus, saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt. 25:21)? Or do such practices create a meritocracy by which we distinguish some sinners (that is, some of God's children) as more honorable and worthy of our emotional resources (praise) and material resources (scholarships) than other sinners? (See Lk. 17:7-10.)<sup>20</sup>

Here the point is not to abandon such practices. The point is that our ordinary practices in education provide practical intersections of the left- and right-hand kingdoms by which we encounter the tension between the two. As for the preceding questions and others like them, the answers depend on why and how teaching ministers are using such practices

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<sup>18</sup> This discussion is elaborated in *Teacher of the Church* (2007), Chapter 4, “God's Two Strategies: Part II—Our Peculiar Ministry.”

<sup>19</sup> I have deliberately used a mathematics example here because while math is not “Christian,” its concepts provide ample opportunity for exploring theological concepts. Nevertheless, we do not want to burden the math teacher with contriving strained religious analogies and examples as though that were the purpose of teaching this content of God's left-hand kingdom. The mathematics of God's creation is ample reason for teaching math.

<sup>20</sup> Other ready examples can be drawn from such practices as competition for valedictorian or first chair in band; detention, suspension, and expulsion; academic tracking; athletic eligibility and cuts; and use of token systems.

and whether they are using them to make disciples for a crucified king or merely to replicate uncritically what we see schools in God's left-hand kingdom doing.<sup>21</sup>

### **What Does This Mean?**

What, then, does a two-kingdom education mean for the teaching ministry? Three features are evident (and more may be considered beyond this chapter). First, our teaching looks conventional most of the time as we teach the subject content and use the practices (including discipline) typically found in all education. What's more, our content instruction—language arts, science, history, mathematics, and all others—will, of course, be nothing less than excellent because it is God's own content for his left-hand kingdom and we are his teaching stewards. But this is not our ultimate or even predominant purpose in education. If it was, then Jesus and his kingdom would become merely an add-on and afterthought to a left-hand ministry already conducted by many public and private schools.<sup>22</sup> We would become Martha's, and our schools would be superfluous.

Instead, often—often enough to make the difference for the right-hand kingdom—our content and practice is a bit peculiar as we bring the right-hand strategy of Christ's new kingdom to bear on these normal practices. (See the Flannery O'Connor quote at the beginning of this chapter.) Using the light of God's Word, we devise age-appropriate ways to re-examine the conventional in the left-hand kingdom. With the prophets and the apostles, we will sometimes step out of the ordinary and alter the ways our curriculum, classroom, school, or parish community operates, sometimes to the discomfort of other participants.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps we will replace honor rolls and awards assemblies with blessings celebrations to thank God for all his gifts (and not just academic, athletic, or musical gifts) to all members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:4-26, *nota bene* vv. 5-6). Perhaps we will replace class elections with an activity that reflects our congregation's call process, or the deacon selection process in Acts 6, or the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15.

Another feature is imbalance. A common confusion about the two kingdoms is that we are to keep the two in balance. That is a serious failure in strategy and a misunderstanding of Law and Gospel. We are simultaneously equipped with both God's

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<sup>21</sup> Public and private schools are also God's schools doing the work of his left-hand kingdom for which we give thanks to God. If we conclude that they are not doing that work well, then as part of our entire Christian vocation, we can pursue left-hand strategies to alter that condition.

<sup>22</sup> Whether public or private schools currently provide an adequate temporal education for God's left-hand kingdom is an important issue about which Lutherans should be concerned. Whether the church should supplant public or private schooling with its own left-hand educational ministry for Lutherans, non-Lutherans, and non-Christians is a related but separate issue.

<sup>23</sup> Many Biblical texts illustrate Scripture's use of peculiarities to distinguish how God is doing something new in his salvation history. Some examples to consider though not necessarily emulate include Lev. 25 in which every seventh year (the Sabbath year) Israel did not plant crops as an indication of trust in God's providence; Lk. 14:8-14 which we discuss later in this chapter; Acts 4:32-37 in which the early church shared all its possessions in common; and Acts 11:19-26 in which the church at Jerusalem, apparently disturbed by what they have heard, sends Barnabas to reconnoiter the Gentiles' new and different worship at Antioch.

left-hand and right-hand strategies, but this does not mean that we constantly employ both in equal proportion.<sup>24</sup>

Rather, we initiate our ministry in a world of “food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and all I need from day to day” as Luther says—that is, in the left-hand realm. In our teaching we use many conventional forms of education that are familiar to all participants. Thus we begin in a state of imbalance between the two kingdoms, the way the world has been since the fall when the wholeness of God’s creation was split by sin.

We then devise ways to work God’s right-hand strategy in our left-hand context for the sake of sinners who need a new and coming kingdom. We don’t do this to create a balance between the two. Instead, God’s aim though us is to create another imbalance, but a different imbalance, by intruding on the world with his right-hand strategy. In this way God both sustains the world he loves *and* seeks to redeem it by interposing the saving work of his right-hand kingdom, yet without divine force or coercion. This new imbalance calls the sinner’s attention to this new thing that God is doing in Christ (Isa. 43:19, 2 Cor. 5:17), a condition of attention that the Holy Spirit can then leverage for creating faith in sinners and growth in sinner-saints.<sup>25</sup> But only at the close of the age will he finally bring all things together again and resolve the tension (1 Cor. 15:20-28).

Therefore, a third feature of our two-kingdom education is that one kingdom teaches the other. The left-hand kingdom, for its part, presents to us events and conditions to which we may apply a right-hand strategy and call attention to God’s other kingdom. The right-hand kingdom, for its part, intrudes, sometimes uninvited, on the left-hand kingdom, announcing a new coming order of existence that is now already taking place in individuals and communities. But note that the relationship between the two kingdoms is not compartmentalized, conflicted, or merely adjacent. Neither is it mutual, symbiotic, complementary, nor is it always—though it can sometimes be—reciprocal. (These are other common confusions about the two kingdoms). The relationship is basically bilateral.<sup>26</sup> The left is our temporal context, content, and opportunity for teaching about the right. The right is our ultimate content (not an add-on or extra—yet another common confusion) that we bring into this temporal context to fulfill our ministry of Good News.

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<sup>24</sup> In the closing paragraphs of his *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, Luther elaborates three strikingly different modes of instruction to be aimed at three different spiritual conditions in which we find those to whom we minister. In addition to those who are progressing effectively in their Christian life and faith (implied in Luther’s discussion), we also teach the weak and ignorant, and we must “yield to their weakness until they are more fully instructed.” A third group is composed of stubborn legalists who persist in subverting the Gospel by their false means of justification. Here Luther insists, “These [we] must resist, do the very opposite [to what they prescribe], and offend them boldly lest by their impious views they drag many with them into error.”

<sup>25</sup> The reader is encouraged to review *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* by C.F.W. Walther (Concordia Publishing House, 1986). Walther explores several dimensions of addressing sinners in various spiritual conditions.

<sup>26</sup> The reader likely has already recognized we are doing a standard Law-and-Gospel analysis here, but using the imagery of kingdoms, one of the Bible’s devices for explicating God’s two words to us.

It is the reason we do Lutheran education, so that the Gospel predominates in the lives of us sinners.<sup>27</sup>

### **Teachers and Students with Two Strategies but One Purpose**

One Sabbath when Jesus was dining with some Pharisees, he deliberately healed an invalid (perhaps one of the servants) in order to draw a reaction from those present. He instigated this event to create an imbalance in their left-hand context and get their attention. He then indelicately criticized the way they jockeyed for the seats of honor by teaching a parable to expose their failure to import an understanding of the right-hand kingdom into their left-hand kingdom context. In addition, he rather bluntly told his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (see Lk. 14:1-14). Jesus was not being hypothetical or hyperbolic. He plainly meant what he said as he used this event in this left-hand realm to call attention to a different realm and a very different version of existence, a version he called them to put into practice. This dinner party was probably a rather tense affair.

With Jesus, like Jesus, Lutheran teaching ministers teach the two kingdoms. Lutheran teachers are often compared to school teachers and professors in public or private education. But Lutheran teaching ministers are no more or less like teachers in public and private schools than pastors are more or less like insurance agents or mental health counselors at public or private clinics. (Take a moment to analyze this comparison in terms of God’s two kingdoms and strategies.)<sup>28</sup> Teachers of the church are about the church’s task of *didache*, God’s provision for the act of teaching Christians. They are skilled at teaching those in our schools, colleges, and parishes to better understand that God’s Word is not merely an add-on or extra in life but how Christ *is* life itself and life abundant now and forever (Jn. 10:10). It is the same Word that is present and powerful in our public preaching and the sacraments.

Teacher identity, then, is a critical feature of two kingdom education. The church needs such teachers because we not only have the Gospel to teach, we also have much to teach about the Gospel. Without both this community perception and the teacher’s self-

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<sup>27</sup> Several specious or insufficient rationales for Lutheran education include supplanting or avoiding public education, providing inexpensive private education, creating a sanctuary from sin, operating a sanatorium for troubled students, and pursuing academic excellence with a religious veneer.

<sup>28</sup> Readers are sometimes puzzled by this comparison. If puzzled, pause and consider two points. First, does the reader assume that today’s public education is the “default setting” and the unchallenged standard against which we compare all education? If so, reconsider that assumption and note that the church has been educating for 2000 years while our public education system has been in place for less than 200 years, and that public education is undergoing much change and possible decline. Second, the comparative phrase used here is not “no more than” but is “no more or less than.” The phrase invites us to analyze all roles and offices in terms of both their left-hand and right-hand activities—and the pastoral office engages in countless left-hand activities all week long. Dismissing the comparison invites sacerdotalism.

understanding of identity as a teacher of the church, our education will lapse into secular drift and simply regress to the mean. And the norm today in education is not a healthy or positive one—at least by all accounts of efforts at school reform and policy revision for the past several decades. Teaching that merely identifies itself with public education or mimics private education is certainly not the two kingdom education that the church needs. To accomplish a two-kingdom education, at least a sizeable and increasing minority of our teachers need self-identity and community recognition as teachers of the church.

The aim here is not to aggrandize the teaching office—a notion entirely contrary to such texts as Mk. 10:35-45 and Phil. 2:1-11. The point is that rightly handling the word of truth is distinctive work for those who present themselves for approval by the church (2 Tim. 2:13), and this work is for the sake of the whole church’s effectiveness with the Gospel message. As C.F.W. Walther has written, learning to rightly distinguish God’s words of Law and Gospel (and its work through God’s two strategies) is a difficult skill to learn.<sup>29</sup> But Luther claims that this is the very work and intended outcome of Christian education, for he concludes his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* by declaring,

Youth need to be restrained and trained by the iron bars of rules and regulations lest, in their unchecked ardor, they rush headlong into vice after vice. On the other hand, it would be death for them always to be held in bondage to these rules, thinking that these justify them.

Notice the two kingdoms in what he says. Luther was so convinced about this two kingdom scope and sequence for the church’s education that he also famously wrote,

I greatly fear that schools will prove to be the great gates of hell unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, engraving them in the hearts of youth.  
and

I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign supreme. Every institution in which men are not unceasingly occupied with the Word of God becomes corrupt.<sup>30</sup>

These are strong words, perhaps a bit more strident than our sensibilities allow today. Nevertheless, Luther’s purpose for Christian education is clear. The aim is to help students understand and appreciate what God is doing in both his kingdoms and strategies, and learn how to devise their own strategies—personal, professional, familial, and civil—by which they can interpose God’s right-hand kingdom into the left-hand realm. This is education for a life “worthy of the calling to which we have been called” (Eph. 4:1).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Walther (1986), “Sixth Evening Lecture,” Thesis III.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, “An Appeal to the Ruling Class,” Part III, Section 25, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, John Dillenberger (Anchor Books, 1962).

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to my student, Sarah Wolff, for challenging me to find fresh ways to articulate Lutheran education as a two-kingdom education.

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you express God's two kingdoms to 21<sup>st</sup> century young people or adults in a way that would clarify rather than oversimplify this Biblical concept?
2. To what extent do those who teach in Lutheran congregations, schools, and colleges do so with an awareness and understanding of the two kingdoms?
3. Luther's insight about the bondage rather than freedom of our will is unfamiliar to many Christians including Lutherans. How might confusion about such freedom or bondage influence what we teach young children, how we present content in high school and college, and our educating adults in the parish about their vocation?
4. "An issue for Lutheran schools today is whether and to what extent they understand that they are also part of God's "right-hand" strategy." Do our schools see themselves as chiefly a left-hand operation, a right hand operation, a balance of both, or both with one predominating?
5. Try paraphrasing God's left-hand strategy and his right-hand strategy.
6. The chapter says that in both strategies God is at work "in his own hidden way." Luther maintains that God uses the work of both Christians and non-Christians as his "masks" for his continued work in the world. (See footnote 10.) How might we discuss this work without implying that we can also somehow reveal what God keeps masked and hidden?
7. The chapter includes several Biblical examples of the right-hand kingdom intruding on the left-hand kingdom in ways that distinguish and accentuate the right-hand kingdom. Are you able to identify any such intrusive examples in your own ministry that create tension and make Lutheran education distinct from other education?
8. God's right-hand strategy does not transform the left-hand kingdom into the right-hand kingdom, at least not yet. What does Paul mean, then, in Rom 12:2, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."
9. How does this chapter distinguish Lutheran education from public and private education? Is this distinction correct?
10. Government and private schools conduct the valid ministry of education for God's left-hand kingdom. How is education in your congregation, school, or college substantively different from their education? Are your right-hand strategies more than just window dressing?
11. In Luke 14, Jesus directs his followers to "count the cost" of following him in his kingdom. If Lutheran education essentially replicates public or private education in the left-hand kingdom, is its cost justified? If it conducts a genuine ministry of the right-hand kingdom, is its cost justified?
12. Analyze your instruction and some of your conventional school practices in terms of your left-hand strategy and right-hand strategy. Do you find many effective intersections of the two kingdoms that serve to direct others to God's right-hand kingdom? How might you adjust instruction and practice to make your education distinctly Lutheran, that is, an imbalance toward a predominating right-hand strategy?
13. "Lutheran teaching ministers are no more or less like teachers in public and private schools than pastors are more or less like insurance agents or mental health counselors at public or private clinics." Is that really correct? If so, how so? If not, why not?
14. "A sizeable and increasing minority of our teachers need self-identity and community recognition as teachers of the church." Do you agree or disagree with this prescription? How would you characterize the way Lutheran teachers currently characterize their office and their ministry?
15. If public and private education already conduct God's left-hand ministry of instruction for this world, and if congregations already provide God's right-hand means of grace for free, why exactly do we need or want Lutheran schools and colleges?