

## **The Road Ahead: Opportunities, Challenges, Dangers – and Prayer**

Tobin Beck

The political climate in the United States and the new power structure in Washington pose opportunities, challenges, and potential dangers for Christians and Christian education.

The opportunities include the hope that Congress and the White House will make decisions that avoid harmful intrusion into religion. For many, there is hope that Congress and the Supreme Court will do more to protect the unborn against abortion. There is hope that government will enhance the ability of church-run schools to meet the needs of children beyond their traditional pool of students, and hope that government will avoid forcing churches to act against conscience. Among the challenges is how to ensure that President Donald Trump and other leaders will be wise in their governance.

The potential dangers include the unintended and unforeseen consequences of policy decisions that could make things more difficult for churches, policy decisions that could cause undue harm to vulnerable people, backlash that could shorten or close windows of opportunity for helpful policy, and the possibility of increased temptation to view people who hold opposing views as enemies.

In thinking through how to respond to the political environment, it is useful to consider Martin Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. As my former UPI colleague and Lutheran lay theologian Uwe Siemon-Netto described it in a conversation with Concordia Seminary President Dale Meyer in 2008, the Kingdom of the Right is where God has revealed himself in Christ and where believers are redeemed. The Kingdom of the Left is where God has not revealed himself but has given us natural law and natural reason to find our way in the world<sup>1</sup> (<http://scholar.csl.edu/twokingdoms/1> ).

Secular issues in the left-hand kingdom are to be sorted out through reason<sup>2</sup> (<http://scholar.csl.edu/twokingdoms/2>). Siemon-Netto said according to Luther, leaders in the left-hand kingdom need not be Christian but must possess reason. Christians as members of both kingdoms are called to serve their neighbor through their vocations in the left-hand kingdom through application of natural law and reason. Reason cannot tell us about Christ, but reason

allows for order in which the church can function<sup>3</sup> (<http://scholar.csl.edu/twokingdoms/3>). This raises a question: how do we work together in a sinful world to employ reason on policy issues, especially when matters of conscience are involved?

The day after President Donald Trump was inaugurated, Women's Marches protests took place in a number of cities around the world<sup>4</sup>

(<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/01/21/womens-march-aims-start-movement-trump-inauguration/96864158/>).

The protesters focused on issues of women's rights and human rights, as well as pro-choice access to abortion. In advance of the march in Washington, D.C., Gracy Olmstead wrote in *The Federalist* that march organizers told pro-life women that they were not welcome because they opposed abortion, although both groups of women shared many other moral and secular concerns. Olmstead wrote: "I'm not saying it'll be easy to discuss with pro-choice folks who are adamant about their positions – because I'm pretty adamant about mine. But that's no reason to avoid each other, or to avoid discussion"<sup>5</sup> (<https://thefederalist.com/2017/01/18/womens-march-should-welcome-pro-life-women/>). A day later, the March for Life in opposition to abortion and in support of the unborn took place in Washington, D.C. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's *Reporter Online* noted that the march included students from the Concordia University System as well as congregation members and pastors. Jason Becker, a student at Concordia University-Chicago, told the *Reporter Online*: "I am here to march because I love all people – no matter how big or small they are."<sup>6</sup> (<https://blogs.lcms.org/2016/defending-life-in-marches>).

Grace Woelmer, a Concordia University-Nebraska senior who is a music major from Allen, Texas, led 16 other CU Nebraska students to Washington as president of the university's "Bulldogs for Life" group. (The bulldog is the CU Nebraska mascot.) Asked her thoughts about discussing social and political issues with those who don't share her pro-life views, she said, "Sometimes I hear people say that if you are pro-life, it's only about life in the womb, and that you're against things like food stamps and public education. I'm definitely for providing for families in need and education for everyone. I think on both sides there can be a cloud. I think we should be able to reason with them on other topics, but it definitely is hard because we don't have the same basis of thought."<sup>7</sup> Besides the March for Life, the group also attended the LCMS Life Conference in Arlington, Virginia, which Woelmer said focused on the importance of life and "how important it is for the church to reach out and help those in need."

As Christian educators we want and need to give our students a strong grounding in faith and guidance in matters of conscience, and we face the challenge of teaching students the skills to be able to appropriately and effectively apply reason to the issues they will encounter. In a time of

“fake news” and so-called “alternative facts,” it is especially relevant and important that students learn how to discern fact from fiction, separate fact from opinion, and identify bias and prejudice. Otherwise, when we get to a condition where temporal facts are what the speaker says they are regardless of what we experience and observe, and all that matters are the emotions the speaker’s words generate in the listener, we have left reason behind. Without compromising faith or conscience, it is possible -- and necessary -- to teach students how to look at different sides of issues, evaluate the evidence, and draw their own conclusions as to what actions are appropriate, especially in light of conscience and faith.

One of the basic questions that politicians and citizens have wrestled with since before the founding of the nation is how to foster a government that balances individual rights with the need to provide for the common good. We still wrestle with the issue today, particularly as Congress tackles what to do about issues including health insurance, various safety-net programs, education and other issues. We need to teach our students – especially in higher education -- how to navigate through these issues, to show them the process through which to engage their reason. That way we can help them become adept at using critical thinking and information literacy skills to make decisions for themselves, for their neighbors, and for their country throughout their lives.

One issue of much concern is the role of the church in education, particularly as demographics change. Lutheran schools in Milwaukee have been successful in using school choice to bring in students from the community to schools that otherwise would be facing low enrollments from their pool of congregations. The situation has benefited both schools and the community. It also suggests a question: long-term, what is the appropriate level of support for both parochial and public education? How do we help deal with the factors that have hurt public education over the years, especially in cities such as Milwaukee, while also supporting our church-affiliated schools? As Christians and as citizens, is it an either-or question?

We are at a crucial juncture in American government and civil discourse, and face a challenge that is both daunting and exciting: to prepare students to be strong in their faith, to serve their neighbors through their vocations and to be able to reason skillfully to meet the challenges of life. And perhaps most importantly, it should constantly remind all of us to take these things to God in our prayers.

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<sup>1</sup> An Interview with Dr. Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Two Kingdoms, Book 1*. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> An Interview with Dr. Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Two Kingdoms, Book 2*, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> An Interview with Dr. Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Two Kingdoms, Book 3*, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Heidi M. Przybyla and Fredreka Schouten, “At 2.6 million strong, women’s marches crush expectations,” *USA-Today*, January 22, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Grady Olmstead, “The Women’s March Should Welcome Pro-Life Women, Not Shun Them,” *The Federalist*, January 18, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> “Lutherans among those defending life in marches,” *Reporter Online*, January 27, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Grace Woemel, interview by author, February 2, 2017.