

A Brief Summary of the Two Kingdoms



A colleague highly trained in isagogics once said to me, “The more I try to get the two kingdoms doctrine in focus, the more it goes out of focus.” His remark is our cue for considering how we may express this sometimes obvious, sometimes elusive distinction that we call the two kingdoms. Our clarifications begin not with the “two kingdoms” language but with a book title.

The name of Heiko Oberman’s Luther biography is *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. This title captures the larger context of creation, fall, and imprisonment out of which Christ must lead captive humanity (Eph. 4:8). And this is the context—**man between God and the devil**—in which Luther always thinks and writes, though any particular Luther document we’re reading such as his two kingdoms treatise, “On Secular Authority,” may not explicitly say so.

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. These strategies work together and not independently since they are both God’s strategies for his single purpose of our salvation. All education and schools, including those that are Lutheran, are part of that first, “left-hand” strategy. (An issue for the Lutheran university is whether and how it understands itself as also part of God’s “right-hand” strategy.)

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 to 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**. 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 or dead men being raised. 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**. And God works both these strategies together in a way that for him is complementary and interactive, though it doesn’t always look that way to us. He does all this to bring about his aim of getting us out of the strife between him and the devil and simply with him. He then enlists us in his campaign to deliver others from this strife. And that’s the two kingdom doctrine.