

The Lutheran Tradition and the Two Kingdoms

(from the Home page)

Why the domain name about "intersecting"? What does this participle have to do with instruction that is Lutheran and [the Lutheran ethos](#)? The Lutheran tradition's emphasis on Law and Gospel gives its teaching ministry a distinct purpose and character as it educates church and world about the world's encounter with the Gospel. This encounter is comprehended and interpreted through a distinct Law/Gospel concept called the two kingdoms doctrine. And the word that characterizes the two kingdom concept is *tension*. In Lutheran teaching, tension tells the tale.

God is running not one but two kingdoms. This essential Biblical theme is, at first, puzzling. We are familiar with thinking about Christ's coming kingdom of grace as the kingdom of God. But Scripture also affirms creation as God's realm, a kingdom which is his province and in which he is doing his work. So an old quip among us goes, "When it comes to God's kingdom, you can't say one thing."

The two kingdoms theme is a powerful analytic tool. It enables us to consider simultaneously the world and its current conditions as well as the impact of the Gospel's promises not just for us personally but for all creation--and not just for the future but for the world's conditions now. Across the ages, thoughtful Christians have considered how to relate these two kingdoms. The Lutheran tradition has worked out this two kingdoms concept to manage multiple views without collapsing the two kingdoms into any single perspective. That is, a Lutheran exegesis holds the current condition of the world and God's come-and-coming kingdom of grace in tension with each other while recognizing the first as *penultimate* and the second as *ultimate*.

Some examples of applying a two kingdoms analysis are obvious; others are more subtle. Conspicuous examples include church-and-state relationships, science-and-religion, and media-and-morals. The Lutheran tradition enables us to avoid oversimplified responses to concerns about these issues and recognize that non-Christian as well as Christian voices have contributions to make to disputation and response. At the same time, the two-kingdoms emphasis on the Gospel as active and ultimate shows the Christian (and we hope others) an intersection between our mutual current condition and God's "doing a new thing" (Isa. 43:19) among us.

And this new thing, this news of the Gospel, gives us a practical orientation and direction at these intersections of the two kingdoms. Church-and-state matters are not merely about local legislation and Supreme Court cases. They are about working effectively for the Gospel in the context of God's "governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1ff) without yielding the very last word to those governing authorities. This two kingdoms posture often enables the Christian to work cooperatively with the governing authorities but sometimes in dissent when those authorities move to usurp God's higher authority.

Science-and-religion discussions are not simply about concluding that these two "domains" are complementary, contradictory, or compartmentalized. The two kingdoms doctrine moves this discussion to how these and other views exhibit the tension between things temporal and things eternal. The two kingdoms doctrine also creates the working space for investigating both matters

of faith and matters of human knowledge by acknowledging that through God's intrusion on the world in the work in Christ, the temporal and the eternal intersect in the life and the work of the Christian. What's more, such matters may or may not always be resolved--they may remain in a working and virtuous tension, or they may coexist with some degree of conflict. The Lutheran tradition sustains and articulates such various conditions.

Media has gone from print to broadcast to desktop to a smart phone in the hands of a ten-year-old, and the church must constantly re-assess how behavior shapes culture and culture shapes behavior. People of faith are now challenged to understand how their convictions which do not change relate to a culture now with few norms but with beliefs that change constantly, conveyed instantly to us through 24/7/365 media. Faith and conduct plainly are related, and people of faith have always struggled with interpreting one through the other, often tempted to respond with fundamentalist or privatized religion. The Bible's teaching about the two kingdoms enables us to avoid these temptations and instead live and thrive (though not always in comfort) with the tension of a fast-changing culture and God's enduring promise of grace already present with us in this world.

In these and other ways, the two kingdoms doctrine provides a distinct and practical understanding of the Gospel that can inform instruction and education across all topics and disciplines. Because it sustains both of God's kingdoms in the present and does so in tension, this tradition is not an easy perspective to apply. Among the church's historic theologies, the Lutheran tradition is often regarded as the most difficult of the traditions to grasp and practice. But through its focus on the Gospel, it serves to avoid much confusion in faith and in life, and this theological ethos has been maintained for five hundred years as a blessing to both the entire church and the world. Please take your time, visit and re-visit these pages, and explore the ways a grasp of the Lutheran tradition can enrich our instruction and our practice and policy as a Lutheran university.