

The Two Kingdoms

Rev. Mark E. Sell

“**P**astor,” says the angry single mother, “my ex is such a jerk! I hate dropping the kids off at their father’s house.” She wrestles with her emotions because her son loves his father.

This sinful world is filled with grey, especially in relationships. This is not to say that sin is not sin; however, marriage and family belong to the kingdom of the left (state), not the church. It’s about order, primarily, and sin secondarily.

So much sin is overlooked for the sake of keeping a family together. It just doesn’t seem right. It stuns young pastors. Yet, pastors regularly cross over into the worldly realities of the state when working with marriages. Two-kingdom theology assists the pastor who grapples with complicated lives immersed in sin and emotions. Discerning the truth is often impossible, like separating the bananas from the milk after blending.

Regardless of the ex’s sin—penitent or not—life for the family must go on. Mom is still called to her vocation, as are the children. Even the jerk ex-husband is still father to the children, though not the husband to their mother. It is a life of difficult and convoluted relationships manifested in holidays and weekends.

Two-kingdom theology is fundamental when dealing with broken families. In the kingdom of the left, the goal is to bring as much order as possible into the sinful world. Many times, especially after a recent divorce, pastorally bringing order is a great way to settle things down before you introduce sin and grace. The pastor’s compassion for the brokenhearted family can work to introduce a sense of order and calm for all involved. The Law is applied for the sake of civil order and quietude. Here, spiritual righteousness is not the goal.

It might not be the time to address the father’s sin as a husband. Accepting the lesser of two evils is common—actually, it is how anything gets done in the civil realm. Here, progress, not perfection counts. If the father is willing to be a civilly good father to his children, take it, praise it, and thank God for it. It brings order and continuity to the family. Encourage it with the mother, for it is God’s will that fathers love their children and children their fathers.

As Walther wrote, distinguishing Law and Gospel is taught by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience. Timing is everything. Sometimes rushing to identify the sin is not the first thing to do. Setting the sin aside and addressing order and civility in the home might be the way to go. It could be received as a sacrifice of love and caring.

However, as with all application of Law and Gospel, even when the secondary goal is to bring civility, the primary goal of the church is to identify sin—not to be sure “the jerk gets what he deserves”—rather, that he may repent, be forgiven, and allow spiritual healing and order to enter the family again.

Spiritual order is far different than civil order. It is how a Lutheran pastor brings healing to the brokenhearted. “Do the right thing,” will always lead the person back to sin or rebellion, even when he does his best to do the right thing. Outward civil order is praiseworthy, but even the “best neighbors” are unable to create spiritual order.

Only Christ creates spiritual order through his bride, the church. There, the sacramental life consummates the holy marriage between Christ and his bride. Baptism kills the person and brings life and salvation. The new life of repentance and absolution becomes the daily death and resurrection of the baptized. It leads the child of God to the eternal wedding feast where the resurrected body and blood is given for the remission of sins.

In the presence of God, the best Christian mothers and fathers stand condemned for their sin—even more so for the pastor. Sometimes counseling sessions, elders meetings, sermons, and hospital visits, easily appear to be the Lord’s work and the family is left up to the wife.

This spiritual order of the Christian can not be found in the ministers of the state, but only in the church and her ministers. When the church forgives through pastors and sheep alike, it is the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the right. Here, the marriage never ends and every day is one of rejoicing, for the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is our groom who suffers all things for us. He brings us to the table to eat and drink, to feast on the eternal blessings and rejoice in the comfort of heaven. To earth He comes to make us right.

When the brokenhearted mother walks into your pastoral study, begin in your heart with your own lack of order. Repent of your sin. Be absolved. With the same forgiveness, patience, and grace the Father shows you, begin to understand what is needed for this hurt mother. God’s two kingdoms serve each other according to their purpose and function. For the pastor, he wisely uses both to bring calm and order to the frantic single mother and her family as well as repentance and absolution.

Then, as every faithful pastor practices what he preaches, repent of your own sin in dealing with this family. Lest you think you have no sin, read carefully Luther’s Large Catechism on any one of the Ten Commandments. Now—who is the jerk father, the jerk husband or son? Enjoy your own Baptism and the forgiveness of sins. For your life, too, is one of daily death and resurrection, repentance and absolution.

Your work and compassion are absolved in the blood of Christ.

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