

## **Toward a Distinction between Lutheran and Secular Approaches to Education**

+ + + **Introduction** + + +

Readers of *Logia* will likely include those who are struggling to introduce, restore or maintain a Lutheran character to a Lutheran parochial school. Such efforts will encounter opposition from the creep of secular educational philosophy, pressure to broaden the appeal of a Lutheran school to non-Lutherans, as well as apathy to that effort on the part of parents and congregational members. Unfortunately, the unique and vital character of Lutheran education is lost to many, who may only view Lutheran schools as a haven from the moral permissiveness of public institutions—a “clean” school with the same textbooks and a little religion thrown in.

Those who struggle to bring a Lutheran character to a Lutheran school may hope to return the school to a classical format; however, realism dictates that such a laudable goal will take years to accomplish. In the meantime, it is helpful to articulate clearly some differences that set Lutheran education apart. This is the purpose of the following article: It introduces no profound discovery, but seeks to demonstrate some distinctions between Lutheran and secular education. One hopes this might serve as a practical tool for articulating the uniqueness and necessity of Lutheran education. The lack of theological jargon and appeal to documentation is intentional, in the hope that it might serve as an elementary tool for the pastor to teach in simple way, without need for extensive revision.

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### **1. Education and the Existence of God**

What are the benefits of a Lutheran school? There are, of course, the advantages of smaller class sizes and better teacher-student ratios. More to the point, there is the opportunity for prayer, chapel, religious instruction and devotions; but the differences actually permeate each subject of the school day, including those one would classify under the First Article of the Creed.

One might suppose that God is absent from textbooks because of a “separation of church and state,” but this is only a symptom of a deeper ill. Secular education is built on the premise that God is out of the classroom picture; either He doesn’t exist at all (atheism) or He is so distant that we really can’t know about Him (agnosticism). Since secularism holds that education is about what we can know, and man cannot know God, God is removed from education. Therefore, education is man’s invention and endeavor (since there is no God to provide it) in order to understand a universe that happened by accident (since there is no God to create it).

Christian education is built on the premise that God is the Creator of all things and the Giver of knowledge (Prov. 2:6). Therefore, education is not man’s invention, but man’s reception of what God makes known through His Word and His creation. It is *His* creation, not a random accident; therefore we can be confident that the Lord is at work, behind the scenes. Through His Word, the Lord declares that this is true; but even more, through His Word He declares to us His love and salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ.

From there, the differences grow between secular and Christian education. However, the difference is not just one of philosophy, but one of faith. One might argue that, because of a secular education, man contends that God doesn’t exist. This is the cart before the horse: Sinful man, desiring that God not exist, develops a secular philosophy of education (cf. Rom 1:18-25).

One must appreciate and give thanks for the efforts of Christian teachers who labor in secular educational settings—hardly an easy task. For the purpose of this article, this fundamental difference goes on to present stark contrasts between Lutheran and secular education.

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### **2. The Origin of the World**

Perhaps nowhere more spectacularly do we see the two collide than in the debate of the origin of the world. Lutheran education teaches that the heavens and the earth were created in six 24-hour days. This is possible because God exists and makes this account known in His Word. Secular education normally offers that the earth is a product of a “dynamic series of happy accidents;” in other words, we exist by chance. This version is necessary to secularists because of the premise that there is no God who creates.

Opponents of the Scriptural account of creation usually offer two arguments against: First, the origin of the world is a scientific question, and God is not within the realm of science. Second, scientific study shows the earth to be millions of years old—at odds with the Scriptural account. To the first, Christians respond that true science does *not* rule out what it cannot prove, but leaves it a possibility; therefore, it is bad science (but good secularism!) to rule out the existence of God. To the second, Christians note that nothing prevents God from creating an “old earth;” the Lord, who created grown trees and an adult Adam and Eve, is certainly capable of creating a mature planet, too.

Arguments against the theory of evolution are too numerous to record here. However, one should note that, while evolution posits a development of the earth, *it still fails to account for the origin of the earth*. In other words, if all things developed out of “primordial soup,” from where came the “soup”? If it came from a “big bang,” from where came that primal outburst? After all, one cannot create matter out of nothing: This law of physics is held true by the same secularized science that rules out the existence of God. All that exists had to come from somewhere, and secular theories cannot give an account.

Parents and educators must be aware of the infiltration of evolutionistic theory into even the preschool classroom. Four-year-old boys seem universally to have a fascination with dinosaurs; nearly every dinosaur book designed for that age group will begin the indoctrination that the creatures lived millions of years ago, long before man walked on the earth. It is good and proper, then, to respond by teaching our children the First Article of the Creed: *I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth*. This article of faith confesses God’s Word and refutes the notion of an accidental creation. Furthermore, the fact that there is a Creator means that there is also law, morality, and accountability for those who live in this creation. Even more importantly, there is Gospel and salvation when we depart from this world.

When it comes to these theories of creation, the difference is clear. Thanks be to God, the Maker of heaven and earth.

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### **3. Human Nature**

God created man and still preserves him, we learn in Luther's explanation to the First Article. We now come to another distinction that profoundly affects education: Is man naturally good or not?

Lutheran education teaches that the answer is no: Man possesses a sinful nature, and death is a consequence of sin. Behaviors that arise from a sinful nature are naturally sinful, and must be curbed and disciplined. More importantly, they must be confessed and absolved for the temporal and eternal good of the sinner. Secular education, on the other hand, normally teaches that man is basically good. Behaviors that arise from a good nature are naturally good; therefore, most behaviors should be tolerated—they are not wrong, just different. Some behaviors by basically good people—namely, those that infringe upon the “freedom” of other human beings—need to be corrected. Furthermore, as we will discuss below, death is not a consequence of sin, but rather part of life.

Why are the two theories of education so different when it comes to human nature? Because one accepts the existence of a knowable God while the other denies it. In Christian education, God declares the nature of man—and God declares in His Word that man is sinful and in need of redemption. Furthermore, He declares that sinful behaviors must be restrained, providing His Law and ruling authorities to do the curbing. Secular education, however, denies the existence of a knowable God; therefore, it is up to man to determine the quality of human nature. Man determines that man is basically good; why would he do otherwise? Therefore, behaviors that appeal to man are good, too—because he abrogates the authority to call them good.

Examples run through society today. As one colleague noted, prisons were formerly called “penitentiaries,” existing for the purpose of encouraging penitence among criminals; they are now called “correctional institutions,” with the goal of correcting aberrant behaviors in “basically good” people. Closer to this discussion, the dispute regarding man's nature on parenting books is tremendous: An author who believes in original sin will emphasize discipline and training, while an author who believes in the basic goodness of man will speak more of freedom and discovery.

Within a school, the difference is profound, perhaps most noticeable in matters of morality. In Lutheran education, morality is determined by God, and immoral behavior is to be admonished and avoided. In secular education, the individual is free to determine what is morally good for him and bound to tolerate what others determine to be good for them. Classroom discipline will assume different forms based upon different theories: Where secular theory may, for instance, encourage the student to work out a plan so that he overcomes misbehavior, a Lutheran educator can apply Law and Gospel to the situation to encourage the student to repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

We might address one more topic within this locus, that of self-esteem. Students in secular schools are often encouraged to believe in themselves because they are good (and because there is no greater God to believe in); and to regard whatever hinders them as an outside influence. When students get into trouble, they may be diagnosed as having a low opinion of themselves; when they excel, it's because they believed they could do it.

Why ought Lutheran education be wary of the emphasis on self-esteem? Because such an emphasis implies that man is naturally good, a lie that leads to disaster. Those who trust in themselves may excel; but as long as they trust in their natural goodness, they see no need for a Savior from sin. Those who fail to excel have two options: They can fall into self-pity, blaming all else but their [good] selves for their failures; or they can fall into despair, told that they are inherently good but knowing that to be a lie.

If Lutherans warn against self-esteem, it is not that they advocate depression and shame as a good learning environment; rather, they warn against believing that our “self” is naturally good. Instead, Christians point to Jesus. In encouraging students to excel, they teach them that they have been redeemed by God in Christ. Therefore, they are set free to make use of their God-given talents, which will vary from student to student. They will make mistakes, and they will sin—but while that damages self-esteem, it does not alter the grace God has for them. It is when we count ourselves as rubbish with St. Paul (Phil 3:8) that we see the glory of the new life Christ has given to us.

A system that declares the basic goodness of man is appealing and permits people to do what they wish; however, it provides no hope. Though Christian education may declare the unpopular doctrine of original sin and judgment, it also continually declares the hope that the knowable God provides in Christ: The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

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### **4. Right and Wrong**

Secular and Lutheran theories of education collide on another pivotal question: Is there such a thing as truth?

Lutheran education says yes: Absolute truth exists, because God is the author of truth. The Law of God reveals what is right and wrong, holy and sinful. Furthermore, we also know the importance of preserving truth, because truth is marked for destruction by the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. (How did the serpent begin the first temptation in Genesis 3:1? By questioning truth: “Has God *really* said...?”)

Secular education inevitably questions the existence of absolute truth: If God does not exist or can't be known, then He can't make His truth known. Therefore, He places no laws upon man, and it logically follows that it is really up to man to make up the rules—rules which may differ from man to man, culture to culture.

For instance, is dishonesty acceptable? Not according to Christian education, because the Lord has commanded us to speak the truth and avoid falsehood. However, in secular thinking, lying may be permissible in some situations. After all, what is true depends on one's own personal beliefs; what is true “for you” may not be true “for me.” If God does not exist, it is up to man to decide what is true. This philosophy defies logic, yet remains popular despite its failure: Left to his sinful nature, man will choose expediency over truth.

For another example, is it proper to defend what is true? Lutheran education says it is most salutary and appropriate to do so. A secular approach answers differently: In the words of a cartoon geared for children, “It's good to take a stand for what you believe, as long as you keep an open mind.” In the statement and its context in the show, truth is personalized; one is permitted to believe his own truth—as long as his truth does not infringe upon the beliefs of anyone else.

We give thanks to God for the gift of His Word and the truth that He declares. The Law's truth of sin chafes, but it serves the purpose of showing man's need for a Savior. The Gospel goes on to proclaim that Savior: Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

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### **5. The World—Environmental Issues**

Environmental issues are often in the headlines: One can rarely go for long without hearing about global warming, the ozone layer or deforestation. A woman is lauded for spending a year in a redwood tree to prevent its dismantling for timber; groups lobby for the rights of animals, while there are even eco-terrorists who attack man on behalf of Mother Nature. On the other hand, there are instances where land and sea truly are badly damaged for no good reason.

Lutheran education regarding the environment is built upon the truth that God has created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). He has entrusted His creation to man (Gen 1:28-29). Because of sin, this world is decaying and will come to an end (2 Pet 3:10).

Because creation is a gift from God, the Christian is to treat the environment as such. Rather than be wasteful or destructive, the Christian should make use of the world as best he can in service to God and to others. He is to make use respectfully of the resources the Lord has provided in order to be a servant to all. Therefore, Christian education will teach stewardship of the environment, in service to God and others, out of thanksgiving for the gift God has given.

Secular approaches to the environment are diverse, but usually share a common theme: Since secularism holds that God does not exist or can't be known, this earth is all there is. It must be maintained and defended because there is no other source for life. Therefore, stewardship—sometimes militant stewardship—of the earth is necessary.

Note how quickly a secular approach makes a god out of the planet! The Triune God is no longer the Maker and Preserver of all things; rather, the earth is. A feminized “Mother Earth,” not God the Father, becomes the source of life and help. Rather than caretakers, people are often portrayed as enemies of nature.

Ironically, both Lutheran and secular approaches to the environment teach the need for care of nature. One, however, makes such stewardship a matter of thankfulness to God; the other makes such stewardship a service to a false god. Once again, parents are well-advised to teach their children to rejoice in the truth of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed: “I believe that God has created me and all creatures...and still preserves them.”

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### **6. Purpose in Life**

Is the world coming to an end? Yes. On this point Lutheran and secular approaches to education agree. But *how* the world ends—and the impact of its end upon life now—are subjects of disagreement between the two.

Lutheran education acknowledges that temporal life and the world are both temporary: All die and the world will end upon the return of Christ. Death is because of sin; however, physical death and the world's end are not the end. Christ will return in judgment to deliver His people to everlasting life in heaven, while condemning those who reject Him to everlasting death. This is no end: Eternal life continues.

Popular secular thought teaches that people die as part of a natural cycle, and denies a resurrection of the dead. Likewise, it proposes that the world will eventually end. Life is temporary, and this life and world are “all there is.”

All of this may seem to have little impact on education in the classroom, but consider: Because Christians teach the return of Christ in judgment, there is accountability. The Law calls upon us to hear and obey God's Word, to serve Him and our neighbor. We fail to do so as we should, of course, so we rejoice in the Gospel, the news of the grace Christ has won for us. But because Christ has redeemed us and promised to return, life has a purpose—service to God and others within one's God-given vocation. Furthermore, death is not final; it is in fact deliverance from the troubles of this world. Though Christians must combat all of the trials that come with long life in this world, such troubles may serve only as reminders of the deliverance to come.

Consider the outcome of the secular approach, where this is “all there is.” Such an approach encourages selfishness, not servanthood; if “you only go around once,” then it makes sense to look out primarily for oneself. Rather than accountability, this approach offers license: There is no judgment for sin, so anyone can do—and should do!—whatever he wishes. Furthermore, since death is final, it is to be feared; and along with the terrifying inevitability of death comes the bothersome unavailability of aging, which announces that death is drawing closer. Therefore, secularism glorifies youth, fitness and plastic surgery. Commercials bid us constantly and selfishly to devote time and resources to staying young, as if growing old were a terrible transgression. This glorification can easily lead youth to a feeling of smug superiority, not respectful servanthood, as they see adults laboring so hard to appear like them.

One can easily imagine the collision of these theories in the guidance counselor's office, or even some of the standardized testing used to determine a child's potential in different vocations: Will the student be encouraged to train for opportunities to serve, or to look out only for his own interests? Lutheran education teaches servanthood. The end is coming, and Jesus will return to judge the quick and the dead. Recognition of this can lead to joyful service as we wait for eternal life, or self-service and fear of finality.

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### 7. End of Life Issues

End-of-life issues become matters of discussion throughout the school years. Storybooks for young students tell of death and dying, often teaching that it's simply part of life; while topics like euthanasia become the subjects in high school speech and debate class. At times, students may have to cope with the death of a classmate because of disease, accident or suicide. Sheltered or not, children think about the end of life. *What* is taught about end-of-life issues largely depends on whether or not it is approached from a Lutheran or secular philosophy of education.

Much is said in secular circles today to make death into a "friend." It is described as a stage of life; doctors may advise that allowing a patient to die is simply "letting nature take its course." Since secular philosophy teaches that life should be free from distress, it follows that death delivers the anguished patient from suffering and affliction; therefore, it is a means of relief to the one who is distressed. On that basis, for example, physician-assisted suicide is promoted as a matter of compassion.

Lutheran education strongly disagrees. God's Word declares that death is neither natural nor a friend, but an enemy—the wages of sin (Rom 6:23). Death does not deliver—the absence of life cannot by definition. Death remains an enemy, though Christ has conquered this enemy by His death on the cross and now uses it to deliver us to eternal life (I Cor 15:20-28); nevertheless, it is clear that it is Christ who delivers us. Suffering is also the result of sin, and to be an expected part of life in this sinful world. Therefore, the Christian does not look to death as a choice to escape suffering, but prays that the Lord would provide comfort until He chooses to call his servant home. Physician-assisted suicide is therefore a sinful attempt to play God.

These differing philosophies filter into the education of children. Lutheran education has a far better proclamation than that of the world: Death is swallowed up in Christ's victory on the cross.

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### **Conclusion**

Further comparisons could follow, including approaches to each subject of the day. Is mathematics a human invention to make order out of chaos, or God's gift to help man make the most of His orderly creation? Are history and social studies explorations of different, though equally-valid, cultures; or studies of different manifestations of man's interaction with God's Law and Gospel? Secular and Lutheran answers will be markedly different.

Revision of this article for submission was part of the "To Do" list for September 11, 2001. Instead, the author spent the bulk of the morning watching students view coverage of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. A Lutheran school setting provided opportunity to speak of the tragedy in terms of Law and Gospel, to comfort the children with the Lord's consolation under the cross. Secular education cannot, by definition, offer such comfort, but can only dwell on the disaster and offer a restless peace that is no real peace.

Whether one ponders these issues from the standpoint of an administrator of a parochial school or a Lutheran parent with children in a secular school, it is important to note the distinctiveness of each theory of education. Clearly, Lutheran education is more than the addition of a religion curriculum to the day. It is, in fact, the opportunity to proclaim the gracious favor of God, for the sake of Christ, throughout the entire school day.

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## **Toward a Distinction between Lutheran and Secular Approaches to Education**

### **Conclusion**

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