

# The Current Synodical Crisis And The Seminary's Role Of Preparing Pastors

## *Part One: Some Key Issues and Biblical Responses*

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***And now I tell the synod in the name of God:*** If we do not take an entirely new attitude toward our mission work, our work in the congregation, in the school, and in the home, as well as in the operation of the educational institutions for the training of pastors and teachers which God has placed into our hands, and apply ourselves to this task with greater zeal than heretofore, then our church (and particularly our own synod) is an unfaithful servant, who has failed to recognize the time of his visitation, and whose future lies not ahead but behind him.<sup>1</sup>

Those words were read aloud by August Pieper in New Ulm, Minnesota in August 1919 at the 15th biennial convention of the joint synod. With his essay, Professor Pieper sought to rouse our synod from apathetic slumber to a renewed gospel joy in Christ and a corresponding zeal for the gospel mission entrusted to us all. Those who read Pieper's essay today are struck by how apropos his words remain almost 90 years later. While many of Pieper's specific examples date his work to the early 20th century, the 21st century believer has the distinct impression that Professor Pieper is standing before us today.

Perhaps what strikes us most is how his words resonate with much that we face in the current crisis facing our synod as our delegates gather once again in New Ulm. The future of the work we do together in our synod as brothers and sisters in Christ is in peril. Deficits in the multi-millions of dollars unblinkingly stare us in the face. We face serious reductions or eliminations of ministries that we all consider vital to the work our Lord Jesus has entrusted to us. What should we do?

It is not the calling of the seminary faculty or of its journal, *The Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, to take upon itself the task of instructing the synod on those issues. Professor Pieper had a call by his commission to present his essay to the synod. That's why through that platform he issued a stirring call to repentance and faith addressed to everyone in the synod.

Yet, as the delegates prepare to gather for the 59th biennial convention, your seminary faculty wanted to assure the synod that we understand the two specific challenges that are before us as members of the seminary faculty. Just as it is for any individual Christians in the synod, it is vital for each of us to take a serious personal spiritual inventory. What do I really treasure in life? What is my God-given purpose on God's earth? And how well does my walk of faith reflect that by God's grace I know the answer to the first two questions? Such questions will lead us to give thanks for all the points at which Christ's cross and empty tomb loom large in our answers. Such questions will lead us back to that same cross and empty tomb whenever our answers reveal reasons for personal contrition and repentance.

But once we have begun with a personal spiritual inventory, all our faculty members recognize that we have another call from Christ. Christ has called us through you to fill a specific role in the training of the next generation of pastors. The current crisis in our synod urges us as your seminary faculty to ask two further serious questions: How does the current synodical crisis highlight for us the spiritual issues we must address if we are faithfully to carry out our task of preparing qualified pastors for gospel ministry here and around the world? And, trusting in Jesus' boundless grace to us, what specific steps can we take to answer those challenges during our students' four years enrolled at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS)?

This article is the beginning of that discussion on our campus. Much prayerful thought and planning and

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\* This article was prepared by the author on the basis of input from the seminary faculty and the faculty's discussions of the current situation facing the synod.

<sup>1</sup> August Pieper, "The True Reconstruction of the Church," *The Wauwatosa Theology, Volume III*, (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House) p. 340.

implementation remain to be done. But this start is being made because we have confidence that we are not helpless victims of current situations. We are rather victors through him who loved us.

What follows in this article is not intended to be a complete and thorough analysis of all problems facing our synod. We do not wish to oversimplify the complexity of the challenges before us. You will notice, for example, that this article does not address how to improve systems of communication in our synod nor how best to organize ourselves administratively as a church body. We are well aware of the significant impact of rapidly rising health care costs on congregational and synodical budgets. Such issues are certainly not unimportant. Yet God has not charged the seminary faculty with solving those issues. It is always a temptation to spend more time finding deficiencies in the way others fulfill their callings than to spend prayerful time considering the calling God has given to us. Such beam-in-the-eye thinking is dangerous for us as individuals and deadly for us as an institution.

That explains what follows in this article. This article addresses the significant spiritual issues that we are convinced underlie many of the surface symptoms in our current struggles in the WELS. These issues are addressed to you for one simple reason. Through you, Christ has given us the responsibility to prepare pastors for ministry in the 21st century. We are accountable to you for how we carry out our responsibility. It is absolutely vital that we consider carefully the challenges before us. It is also vital that we make plans in gospel-inspired confidence to meet those challenges.

That explains the two major parts of this article. The first part will identify the issues (and biblical answers) that our faculty believes must be addressed more directly and thoroughly during our students' years at WLS. The second part will outline the beginning of a broad strategy that could be taken on-campus and off-campus to address these issues.

There is also one more disclaimer needed. A companion article could justly be written to give thanks for all the blessings God has given and is giving us as a synod. Each faculty member has an opportunity to be reminded of that whenever he steps into the classroom. Before him each day in the classroom is a gracious answer to the prayers of parents and many other Christians. Before him each day sits a new generation of workers eager to enter the harvest field. It is always the, temptation of our blind sinful, human nature to stumble into all-or-nothing, thinking. Those who have ever listened to post-game call-in shows following a NFL football game know that, depending on whether that last second field goal sailed wide or split the uprights, the coach is either praised as the reincarnation of Vince Lombardi or panned as the second coming of Lindy Infante. To close our eyes to the gracious blessings of our heavenly Father as members of our church body is just as egregious a sin as refusing to face the very real spiritual and financial crisis before us.

### **Part One: Some Key Issues and Biblical Responses**

#### **A. Under God's blessing we must help our students learn better how to approach issues of financial stewardship with law and gospel on the individual, household, and congregational level.**

Make no mistake about it: what is at stake here is not merely meeting congregational or synodical budgets or avoiding deficit spending. This is not simply about preserving human institutions. Paralysis in approaching this problem boldly, head on, endangers the souls of the people whom our graduates will be called to serve. This is about the eternal welfare of souls. The issue is not primarily about our pocketbooks but about our hearts. If we lose the courage to call people to repentance for "all kinds of greed" (Luke 12:15) that lurk by nature in the hearts of us all, we are in danger of allowing deadly idolatry (Colossians 3:5) to take hold of hearts won and cleansed by Christ. In a country in which almost everyone of us is fabulously wealthy by the standards of much of the rest of the world, we cannot send out graduates for whom fear and timidity make them like mute dogs who refuse to bark where danger threatens (Isaiah 56:10). In other words, we must help our students understand clearly the place of the law as mirror in financial stewardship.

But lest this degenerate into legalism, we must help our students recognize that only the gospel can

produce genuine and joyful fruit in the hearts and lives of God's people. To pry dollars from the pocket-book to which the heart is still attached is to present to God fruit that is rotten. It forgets that the cattle on a thousand hills are his (Psalm 50:10). God is not a beggar who needs our largesse and who doesn't care if it comes to him willingly or not. What delights God are hearts that rejoice in his grace and trust in his mercy. That is why God finds equal delight both in the widow's mite brought to the temple as well as King David's lavish gift which built such a temple. If our offerings to God are primarily financial transactions, they have no place in our worship services. They are to be spiritual transactions. At their heart are hearts wooed and won to take joyful delight in God's mercy as their greatest treasure. Only the gospel can produce that. Our students must learn why Walther's stunning statement remains absolutely correct:

Think of a time when you will be the pastor of a congregation and make a vow to God that you will adopt the apostle's method, that you will not stand in your pulpits sad-faced, as if you were bidding men to come to a funeral, but like men that go wooing a bride or announcing a wedding. If you do not mingle Law with the Gospel you will always mount your pulpit with joy. People will notice that you are filled with joy because you are bringing the blessed message of joy to your congregation. They furthermore notice that wonderful things are happening among them. Alas! Many ministers do not meet with these wonderful experiences; their hearers remain sleepy; their misers stay stingy. What is the reason? Not sufficient Gospel has been preached to them.<sup>2</sup>

Thundering with the law changes no one. Wooing with the gospel wins hearts, changes lives, and alters eternal destinies.

Along with that power of the gospel to comfort and empower, stewardship lives and breathes many other corresponding promises of God. We must help our students learn ever new ways to hold before their future members that "he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion (2 Corinthians 9:10,11). We must help future Lutheran pastors remind God's people of a simple fact. When we are fearful that the pie of our personal finances can only be sliced so thin, then we can remember that the pie came from God through his grace in Christ. God knows how to add extra slices – or a whole new pie – to match the opportunities he himself places before us.

Right there comes also one of the most challenging portions of Scripture for *sola gratia* Lutheran pastors to preach and teach: the rewards of grace that Scripture so frequently lays before us. We must help our students preach with confidence what Scripture means when it promises that our God "will throw open the floodgates of heaven" (Malachi 3:10). We must encourage them to grasp what a powerful encouragement when our Savior proclaims that what will be given to us in return will be "pressed down, shaken together, and running over" (Luke 6:38). In a world that ridicules generous first-fruit, proportionate giving, such, extra encouragements of God's delight in generous hearts must be well known to our people. Jesus did not violate *sola gratia* by teaching such rewards of grace. Nor did he sink to the level of a manipulative TV evangelist hunting for seed money. Neither will we.

There may be one area in particular in financial stewardship that we have failed to make crystal clear to the younger brothers before us. It is this: the same principles (law) and promises (gospel) of first-fruit proportionate giving that apply to the individual Christian apply to the congregation as a whole. If a pastor does not repeatedly teach his congregation that trust in the Lord means for them as a *congregation* to look *first* beyond their own walls, he is, by default, preaching to the *individual* members a message of selfishness. How do we expect our people in their personal lives to believe promises that we cannot seem to put into practice in our very public corporate lives? If our congregations fail to honor our Lord's mission beyond their walls with generous first-fruit giving, should anyone be surprised if we are blunting that message from being heard by each individual and household? Congregations are also called to live by faith and not by bottom lines. God knows how to add slices to congregational pies as faith-born love trustingly serves up generous slices of precious

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<sup>2</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1929) p. 406.

resources for extra-congregational opportunities. We must repeatedly hum to our students the winsome melodies of those promises until they learn to sing those melodies even more beautifully to their people.

Pastors who have committed to memory those melodies of God's promises will not quickly feel as if they are being pressed into service as hucksters for some sneaky synodical syndicate. They will know that it is all about being zealous advocates for the world-wide work of the gospel. They will not give in to the temptation to see themselves as gate-keepers who protect their people from "outside influences." They will be encouragers to their congregations – not just their families and households – to be generous on every occasion. Such pastors will not feel like they have stooped to being shills for a synod. They will see themselves as urging their congregations to be partners whose trust is in the promises of God.

**B. Under God's blessing we must help our students recognize and attack the anti-Christian influences of our American culture.**

Helping our students deal with the previous issue begins to answer this issue as well. The culture around us is an enemy to the faith as it beams and streams thousands of encouragements to our greedy natural hearts every day. While calling America a Christian nation has always been an overstatement, there once was at least the veneer of lip service to outward morality. In the 21st century, almost all such facades are crumbling, revealing ever more plainly the natural wretchedness of the human heart. We must help our students recognize that the sea in which we swim in America, the culture around us, is thoroughly infected by the sinfulness of the human heart. That, of course, is true about any culture. But the challenge is for us to see that clearly about our own culture since "the sea in which we swim" is often unnoticed by us.

The list of challenges in our own culture could be endless, but there are three that appear to be absolutely crucial for us to help our students recognize and deal with biblically. The first of these is our culture's escapism. As American culture moves more and more to a post-modern, post-Christian, evolutionary mindset, the growing meaninglessness of life leads many to ever more frazzled attempts to escape reality. If we are little more than accidents populating a speck in a random universe moving toward an uncertain and unplanned future, then there is no real meaning to anything we do. Then all that is left is to lose ourselves in whatever experiences are most pleasant and entertaining at the moment. Everything is but a meaningless diversion from a meaningless existence.

Perhaps that helps to explain why Americans, armed with their resources of money and time, seem to have an insatiable lust for sports and entertainment of every kind – from the legal to the illegal. Bread and circuses isn't just a trait that accompanied the downfall of Rome. Celebrities and sports heroes become near gods and are rewarded richly in the coin of the realm. How else can we explain how the burial of Anna Nicole Smith grabs headlines for days while debates about nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea are buried on page ten? If we are not aware of this influence, we much more easily get swept up in the tide. We begin to forget our royal positions as priests of God, who are called for an eternal purpose.

We must help our students recognize the crucial differences between a life lived for the weekend, and one focused on eternity for ourselves and others. We cannot fail to help our students analyze what's wrong when hours are spent on the Internet or playing video games while assignments are late or sloppy. If we fail to help them analyze the influence of an entertainment-crazed culture while they are on our campus, they may be far less than helpful in enabling others to recognize what is robbing them bit by bit of zeal for the eternal gospel for their souls and others. We can (justly) find fault with Rick Warren's almost gospel-less tomes, but he is on to something: in the midst of a culture that seems like an endless infomercial, our personal lives and our congregational lives easily drift from God's intended purpose. Only the cross of Christ – and his Church's mission that flows from that cross – can restore to us joy in salvation and purpose for living.

Of course, there is something else that a secular culture is running from. It is the voice of their own consciences that whispers to them that life does not end in meaninglessness and oblivion but in terrifying judgment. That leads directly to a second dominant note of our culture that our students must learn to recognize clearly. It is the fanatical resistance to allowing anything to be labeled objectively as sin. If anyone thinks this

has not affected the church, all one has to do is to notice the neglect of consistent, biblical church discipline evident in too many congregations. We must help our students learn that "the wounds from a friend can be trusted" (Proverbs 27:6). Even though the world – and the sinful nature of members – will scream "Intolerant!" and "Heartless!" we must help our students recognize love as God defines it. Allowing souls to rot on Christ's vine is loving neither to those souls nor to the others infected after being left in too close a proximity to what is rotting.

Such loving admonition must be taught in class, but, perhaps even more importantly it must be learned from experience. It is learned as we urge our students to practice patient, brotherly admonition with their own brothers on campus. If they cannot practice that in the relatively "safe" circle of the seminary family, how will they learn to practice that in the potentially much larger circle of a church family? If we as faculty are content merely to faithfully impart information, while failing to faithfully model a Christian life-style more consistently on our campus, we are in danger of compromising our teaching. From professor to student, and yes, also from student to professor, we must show one another what it means in all humility to urge each other daily to die and rise again in the water of our baptism.

The final influence of culture apropos to our current discussion is the general distrust of leadership. Such distrust always finds fertile soil in which to incubate in proud hearts, but it has been brought to especially full bloom ever since it was culturally popularized by the coming of age of the Baby Boomers. The Baby Boomers on the faculty admit that this is one way our generation has been a unique curse on the church, as every generation is in its own way. The Age of Aquarius brought with it an almost knee-jerk distrust for "the man" that has not left our WELS culture unsullied. While leaders in Christ's church certainly have a powerful gospel reason to "direct the affairs of the church well" (1 Timothy 5:17), our cultural blind spot may need some magnifying glasses to read more carefully the other half of that verse. We still owe such leaders "double honor."

We must help our students see themselves in the weakness of the Twelve that caused Jesus to rebuke them repeatedly as they jockeyed for pride of place (Matthew 20:20ff, for example). We must also help them see that we are no strangers to the envying and boasting of one part of Christ's body against another part (1 Corinthians 12).

Even when leaders come up short of leading well, David's refusal to lay his hands on Saul, or to speak or act in any way that dishonored the Lord's anointed, calls us all to repentance. Our synod is certainly not a monarchy. Vigorous discussion of pressing issues and prayerful voting for those we believe will lead us wisely are privileges of our system of church government. Yet we must not on our campus in any way feed the spirit of anarchy endemic in modern American culture. We professors simply must be mindful of the impact of our words on our students. Our expressions of honest disagreement with synod's direction can subtly morph into a hidden curriculum which undermines the stated curriculum of double honor. In more ways than we may realize, our students' antennas may pick up the former frequencies more than the latter. If they transplant that later into their congregations, it will breed even more rampant distrust.

In a culture that feeds distrust, we certainly have two truths to teach our students when it comes to congregational, district and synodical leadership. All heads in the church must remember that they are in positions that require especially humble and faithful service as they assume callings that place them into positions of being little Christs to the church. Such heads must not "lord it over" the flock (1 Peter 5:3). Yet all those under those heads, do just as well to remember they are in the position of the church to Christ. Four years with our students is not too long to focus on how we can teach both truths in open as well as more subtle ways.

### **C. Under God's blessing we must help our students strive for growth in sanctification for themselves and their future flocks.**

As confessional Lutherans, we are almost instinctively repulsed by any whiff of pietism. And justly so. Pietism's exaltation of deeds over creeds and enforced displays of self-defined piety were (and are) the virulent enemy of true sanctified living.

But is our zeal always based on knowledge? In our pugnacious zeal for showing ourselves the inveterate

enemies of pietism, is true biblical piety knocked to the floor, bruised and bloodied? We justly fear the endless how-to lists of Evangelical piety that often rely on the law or on Christian resolve to produce the fruit of obedience. Yet do we offer little or no direction and assistance in its place? Does our preaching and teaching too often appear confused about how to handle the second half of Paul's epistles? Does our preaching and teaching act as if encouragement and direction for sanctification is anathema to those who preach *sola gratia*? Is our preaching and teaching too often content to use the law as mirror, to use the gospel as comfort, and then ... end ... even when the text clearly has Spirit-given specifics about living to the glory of God? Do our congregations show any evidence that we by default settle too easily for lowest common denominator sanctification? Pietism's analysis of what was wrong with the church was often accurate. Sadly, their cure was worse than the problem! Since the culture of American religion is extremely pietistic, are we inviting a new pietistic backlash in our own churches because we appear to be afraid or confused about urging biblical piety? Do we have the courage to analyze what we have unwittingly allowed to become the unwritten rules for Christian behavior?

Yes, it's true, inspired authors know how to weave the golden thread of gospel power throughout their sanctification imperatives. But they still do speak- those imperatives. Yes, Scripture knows full well that to offer God empty obedience is to offer him glittering sins. But it does not shy away from calling us to "walk worthy of the calling we have received" (Ephesians 4:1). Since it is God through his gospel who has promised to work in us both "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13), we do not need to be timid in addressing what that good purpose may be.

As a faculty, we will do well to remember that last fall's Symposium on Christian Vocation showed us a Lutheran ethic in sanctification that glistens with gospel joy. The teaching of Christian vocation is a much neglected jewel of the Reformation. We will do well to help our students learn how to live and breathe a truly biblical, gospel-centered ethic of sanctification in their preaching, teaching, counseling, and leading. There is the biblical middle ground between saying nothing (and allowing the culture to fill in the void) or speaking with the different spirit of Evangelical legalism (and producing forced fruit). There is much in our rich heritage to help our students reclaim.

#### **D. Under God's blessing we must help our students learn how to disagree as brothers without biting and devouring one another.**

Have you ever considered how astounding it is that Paul issues his rebuke about not "biting and devouring each other" to the Galatians (5:15)? In the context of what was going on in that congregation at that time, you would think that biting and devouring would have been the approved attitude *de jour*. After all, the doctrine by which the church stands and falls was in danger of being tossed aside with the trash.

No, false doctrine is not to be played with. It is gangrene. Amputation of the infection – and of those persisting in causing that infection – must be carried out lest the whole body perish. Could that also explain why Paul could say in the same letter that he wished the *persistent errorists* would go all the way and "emasculate themselves" (Galatians 5:12)?

But do we notice how he speaks to weak brothers? Clearly. Plainly. In words that cut to the heart. No beating around the bush. But he does speak to them as "brothers" (Galatians 1:11). In fact, he addresses them as brothers *eleven* times in that short letter! Paul's words of rebuke came from a brother with a big heart, not a bully with a big stick. Despite the Enemy's plot to deceive them, Paul did not treat them as if they had all instantly donned the sulfuric colors of hell. What they were toying with was dangerous and damnable. But they were still his brothers and sisters.

Consider also Paul's encouragement to anyone who would serve as an elder that "those who oppose him he must gently instruct" (2 Timothy 2:25). Perhaps it should give us pause to consider that it is a tendency of human nature that we typically get most angry and loud when we are least sure of our point. Could that at times be what is behind what J.P. Koehler labels as an arrogant "bravado of orthodoxy"?<sup>3</sup> Such boasting is in reality a

<sup>3</sup> J.P. Koehler, "Legalism among Us," *The Wauwatosa Theology, Volume II* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997) p. 229.

form of legalism. "Since the power of the gospel surely can't win your heart, I'm going to shout you into submission to the truth!" Those who are well instructed and firmly grounded in the truth know that it is a "gentle answer that turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). It is the "the fool [who] gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control" (Proverbs 19:11).

Now if that is true when dealing with disagreements where Scripture has clearly spoken, what does that tell us about when we disagree where Scripture has not clearly spoken? Would we do well to ponder the words of Proverbs 6:16-18? There Solomon tells us that "there are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him." What is the seventh thing listed? "A man who stirs up dissension among brothers."

Yes, that cuts two ways! A brother who runs far ahead of the pack crying "Freedom!" as the excuse for anything he wants to try in ministry, without even bothering to alert those in or near his path, is stirring up dissension among brothers. But so is the one who immediately labels him "Heretic" or "Schwaermer!" without bothering to ask for clarification, information, or explanation.

We need to help our students appreciate the beauty of the fact that God's plan for a synod is not to create thousands of identical parts in the body. "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?" (1 Corinthians 11:17). Thank God for those among us who push us with innovations in ministry. After thorough examination by the more cautious among us, those innovations may just prove to be wise use of gospel freedom in their situation – and maybe in ours too! Such pioneers serve us well. They keep us from enshrining changeable ministry methods and situation specific applications into the canon of biblical doctrine.

We need to help our students appreciate those among us who are more cautious. They help slow us down from experiments that would have blown up in our face – perhaps distorting the gospel in the process while running roughshod over the consciences of others. Such cautious brothers serve us well. They keep us from selling our Lutheran birthright in exchange for temporarily satisfying and apparently effective pottage.

However, do you know what does not serve us well? When pioneers meet only with pioneers and smirk from a safe distance at those who are less "enlightened." When cautious ones meet only with cautious ones and glare over the miles at those who are less "theological." Then watch out! Our strengths prove, as they often do, to be our greatest weaknesses as we no longer have one another to keep us balanced in ministry. If all we do is gather with the like-minded so that we can carp about the others, are we not in danger of the very biting and devouring of one another about which Paul warns? We've just learned to do it *in absentia* rather than face to face. And lest anyone think that we are simply observing what we assume to be happening "out there" in synod from some hallowed safety zone on the hill, we have seen all these attitudes and actions in our little community as well.

So what must we do before we send out our students to sink or swim, or chew or be chewed, in a lake full of potential piranhas? We must teach the beauty of the body of Christ and the perfect package of gifts that God gives to each one.

We must help every pioneer among our students understand that his real best friend is the cautious one who helps keep his feet planted firmly on the theological floor. That friend may be God's tool to prevent him from soaring Icarus-like too high in the intoxicating skies of freedom, only to come crashing down – with himself and others – after having violated the law of love. That pioneer would do well to listen to his more cautious friend instead of assuming that the friend is just being negative.

We must help every cautious student get to know a pioneering peer who can help him avoid missing open doors God is giving him for ministry. That cautious brother may be in danger of locking himself in a self-built safe castle far away from the risky opportunities God gives in messy situations and settings. That cautious student would do well to listen to his more pioneering friend instead of assuming that he is all fluff and no stuff.

Here's the bottom line: We must teach them that they truly do need one another because none of them is the whole body of Christ. We must teach them that Christ did not make a mistake when he gave us the grace of spiritual gifts just as "Christ apportioned it" (Ephesians 4:7). It was his idea not to clone us as duplicate cells in the body, but to give the rich and varied gifts we have. Those gifts aren't for envy or pride – or for excuses to bite and devour – but for ministry.

Of course, there's even more to learn here as we ponder gifts in the body of Christ. Those gifts weren't

just distributed to "clergy type folks." "Now to *each one* the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). That includes everyone in the grand and glorious priesthood of all believers. That includes women as well as men. All of this leads us to more arguments we need to help our students to avoid: royal priesthood vs. public ministry, men vs. women. Yes, God gives direction and guidance about how our gifts are to be used, about how men and women complement and complete each other, and about how the twin gifts of royal priesthood and public ministry function best together. But the church will do well, and so will our students, if we can teach them to see all of this in terms of "both-and" rather than "either-or." As professors, our attitude in the classroom will go many miles toward helping our students respect and partner with every supporting ligament of the body. Being "zealous both to nurture and to equip the saints" must not be lip-service in the objectives listed in our seminary catalog. It must be lived out in the teaching and example of every professor that acknowledges repeatedly the glorious truth that Christ's body functions best when the gospel empowers *every member* to function as Christ designed him or her to function.

**D. Under God's blessing we must help our students toward an optimistic theology of the cross that is unafraid to evaluate our ministry.**

We are well aware of the damage a theology of glory inexorably does to any who pursue it. Our Lutheran theologians have at times called the theology of glory the most subtle form of millennialism. A theology of glory tantalizes us by claiming that if we followed the correct methods, forged an optimal organizational structure, and found all the right dynamic and charismatic leaders, the church would have a day of flowering, growth, and prosperity the likes of which hasn't been seen in the church since Pentecost. While George Barna is an excellent pollster, and often has insightful comments on what is out there in our culture, listen to his conclusion which stumbles to this most subtle millennialism.

Most of all, we have a crisis of Christian leadership. I contend that all these other crises would not be crises but simply opportunities for radical transformation – if we had true leaders leading the Church. Leaders would inspire widespread, genuine interest in Christianity through the strategies and structures they would facilitate for the faith to become real in people's lives. People would become intensely Christian, committed to knowing, living and sharing their faith if they had leaders who modeled that faith in action and who empowered them to do the same.<sup>4</sup>

We want our students to grasp clearly the double-edged danger such false theology brings with it. If I'm successful in ministry, I easily grow proud as I forget that I may have watered, but "God made it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6). And what if, after all my efforts, I don't believe' that the kingdom of God has come with power as the guru's manual told me it would? Well, of course, then I must be the problem. So I end up either frantically searching for the next great extreme ministry make-over that will turn me from a frog into a prince, or I sink into despair under that crowded broom tree where Elijah and a whole host of God's other discouraged prophets join me, in hiding until the Lord calls us home. Such pride or despair both lead easily to a quick exit from the ministry for our students.

But of course, we cannot fail to remind our students that truth is always a narrow beam. Lutheran theology does not want to overcorrect and fall into error in the opposite extreme. A true biblical theology of the cross is not pessimistic. It does not glory in mediocrity or low expectations. It expects great things from God, but knows that it must wait in patience for the gospel to reveal, often only in eternity, exactly what those great things really were! It knows on the one hand that "[we] died, and [our] life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). But it also knows that "all things are [ours]" (1 Corinthians 3:21). It knows that we are blessed when people "persecute [us] and falsely say all kinds of evil against [us] because of [Christ]" (Matthew 5:11). But it also knows that this gospel that the Jews and Greeks of this world assail as weak foolishness is in reality "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24). That gospel will win to its side many former Jews and Greeks.

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<sup>4</sup> George Barna, "Nothing is More Important than Leadership," in *Leaders on Leadership* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1997) p. 29.



So where do we pray this leaves our students? It leaves them optimistically bearing the cross. It leaves them knowing, often through tears, that what many conclude is nothing but a death march is really the greatest victory procession this world will ever know. Our students won't need to be surprised by apparent defeat or when God gives open victory. In all things they can know that they remain more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Such an optimistic theology of the cross helps us – professors and future-pastors – to be unafraid to evaluate our ministries openly and honestly. We don't even need to be afraid to ask others to help us do that. Where we find sin and weakness, we can be honest about that. It's not about our perfection or power anyway. We can confess sin as sin, and rejoice in grace as grace. Finding weakness can simply remind us that God still puts his treasure in jars of clay to prove that the all surpassing glory is from him and not from us (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Our students can know that they don't have to hide behind our theology to defend no growth or decline. Growing or shrinking numbers do not in themselves tell us whether we, or another brother – or a church body – has been faithful or unfaithful. By such criteria alone, the Mormons would be crowned as the epitome of faithfulness and Jesus' own ministry would be evaluated as decidedly unfaithful.

We can agree. However, that there is such a thing as being faithful or unfaithful to the means of grace *and with* the means of grace. There is such a thing as being willfully or ignorantly blind to open doors God is displaying all around us. There is such a thing as praying for wisdom to see them, and to seize them as God gives them. There is such a thing as being so ignorant about the community in which we serve that we don't even speak the same language. There is such a thing as understanding the culture and setting around me so that those who hear me at least understand the point of what I am saying, even if only the Spirit can still turn on the light of spiritual understanding. I may claim it's only my orthodoxy that's keeping them away, but can that at times be a cover-up for my own lazy self-centeredness?

Those who live under the cross have nothing to fear from honest evaluation. Honest ministry evaluation has much in common with personal daily repentance. They both can hurt. They both can help. It is painful to recognize personal and ministry sins. But forgiveness is just as rich and free for my ministry sins as for my sins as a dad, a husband, and a friend.

Yes, it hurts to be bitten unfairly by the crocodiles, or to feel unjustly judged because we didn't do everything every synodical program suggested. But for the sake of souls bought at the price of God's own blood – both within the flock and without – regular and biblically honest ministry evaluation is critical. Here too the body of Christ is a blessing to us. Brothers and sisters in our own congregations can be valuable tools in such evaluation – so can others beyond the walls of our parish. They can help us to overcome the temptation to throw down the sword of the Spirit in discouragement in these latter days.

And what is perhaps the most important reminder to give ourselves or to hear from others in the midst of any ministry evaluation? It is this promise of our God: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). That is the gospel empowered optimism of those who live under the cross! That gives us the courage to confess any personal, congregational, or synodical lethargy or apathy that is impeding our ministries. That is the power to find new strength to step up to the walls of Zion with our forgiven and righteous feet and proclaim with new confidence this saving truth: "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

The second part of this article which will appear in the next issue of the Quarterly will suggest some steps which Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary could take to address these key issues. [The second part will appear in the online Essay File shortly. - WLS Library Staff]