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## Pedagogy for a Politicized Church

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## Pedagogy for a Politicized Church

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My friend and past president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Dean Wenthe likes to tell about a taxi ride he took to the airport after a meeting of seminary presidents sponsored by the Association of Theological Schools. Sharing the ride with the president of another denominational seminary, Dean asked about the hottest theological topic on his campus. Answer: whether or not Jesus Christ was/is divine. The moral Dr. Wenthe draws is that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has far-reaching doctrinal unity when compared with much of the American religious landscape. That said, the people of the LCMS live in the saint-sinner tension and sometimes we don't get along with each other when it comes to churchly business. The current administration's "Koinonia Project" grows out of a palpable sense of disharmony that many people feel and regret. A report to the 2010 national convention says,

Repeatedly, the task force heard that the problem of disharmony in the LCMS is primarily a clergy problem. Certainly lay people have participated in our Synod's disharmony as well, but pastors seem to be in the forefront of practices and attitudes unbefitting God's people. While some clergy may contend that "anything goes" when fighting for truth, such an approach ignores both our unity and concord as Christians and as confessional Lutherans."<sup>1</sup>

Why are we this way? Is ours a church that people find welcoming? And what are the implications for seminary faculties who work day-in and day-out to prepare the pastors and deaconesses who will minister the saving gospel to the generations of our children and grandchildren?

Let me begin with the broad American culture in which we live, worship, and seek to give answer for the hope that is in us (1 Pt 3:15). James Davison Hunter, professor at the University of Virginia and knowledgeable Christian, has written *To Change the World*.<sup>2</sup> He begins by addressing this conundrum: Despite Christians being by far the most populous religious grouping in the United States, American culture has grown increasingly secular and sometimes anti-Christian.<sup>3</sup> In the section "The Temper of Our Times," Hunter describes contemporary American culture.

We see great vitality in the functioning of different social institutions—the market, the polity, intellectual life, technology, and so on—and yet the culture that infuses them is in considerable disarray. American political culture continues to be fragmented and relatively polarized, its commercial and entertainment culture is gradually more tasteless and vulgar, its technological culture is ethically incapable of keeping up with the pace of innovation, and its moral and intellectual culture is evermore disjointed, incoherent, relativistic and superficial. It is not surprising that the attitudes and opinions of ordinary Americans reflect these kinds of contradictions:

average Americans are committed and hopeful yet they are also strongly distrustful of the major institutions and their leaders, dubious about the future of the nation, and often confused about their own nature and purpose in this life.<sup>4</sup>

Hunter concludes, “What remains of a traditional culture . . . is threatened with extinction, and Christian conservatives are right to worry about the effects of this on their descendants.”<sup>5</sup> Numerous attempts to stem the tide have been based on the assumption that a critical mass of changed hearts, one person at a time, can restore America to its historic “Christian” culture.<sup>6</sup> Those various Christian initiatives have largely not worked. “Do they change the world? The answer is both yes and no; but it is mostly no.”<sup>7</sup>

This loss of America’s traditional common culture has resulted in “the politicization of everything.”<sup>8</sup> “Everything” includes Christian responses to the changed culture and how Christians approach each other. “For all of the leading voices in Christianity up to now—and in their own way—politics has come to provide the language for thinking about the problems they see. Politics is always and everywhere the framework.”<sup>9</sup> When everything is politicized, ideology becomes paramount. “Politicization provides a framework of expectations and action and very little substantive content. In a diverse society, ideological polarization is a natural expression of the contest to provide that content.”<sup>10</sup> “Every area of civic life has been politicized to one degree or another and strained by ideological conflict.”<sup>11</sup> “The language of partisan politics has come to shape how we understand others.”<sup>12</sup> And in this current situation, “persuasion is ineffective at generating agreements.”<sup>13</sup> This is American culture today and we see it everywhere.

Do our LCMS beliefs make us counter-cultural while at the same time insulating us from the politicized world all around? Of American Christianity in general, Hunter writes, “The moral life and everyday social practices of the church are also far too entwined with the prevailing normative assumptions of American culture.”<sup>14</sup> Looking at ourselves, the definition of “synod” is critical. In the technical sense, according to the constitution of the LCMS, the “synod” is our congregations and rostered church workers and many, no doubt most do not go about the mission of the church in a politicized ideological way. In common speech “synod” also refers to the structures and leadership of the church at a national level, at district levels, and in conventions. There politicization does show up. Hallway conversations at many such gatherings, some publications, some blogs, some Facebook posts, and no doubt some emails and phone conversations, God only knows about that, do show the work of our church is politicized. Where America’s loss of traditional culture has created a void filled by ideologically-charged divisions, some LCMS partisanship promotes different views of proper doctrine and practice; although the contestants are unable to agree on how uniform our doctrine and practice need to be. I hasten to emphasize that correct doctrine and practice is hyper-important, and some advocates of certain expressions of doctrine and practice may well be correct in their analysis of the state of the church, but nonverbal behavior always trumps content.

To whatever extent and in whatever corners our church is politicized, the politicization shows the law at work among us. Now politics is a necessary art both in the kingdom of the left and to an extent among us who live in the kingdom of the right.<sup>15</sup> Any seasoned pastor knows to count his votes before laying a major proposal before the voters' assembly. The problem comes when diplomatic attempts at proper persuasion turn into *politicking*, activities like seeking office, campaigns for candidates, some funded, stacking boards and committees, arm-twisting votes, and slandering those who disagree. Politicking should not dominate the life of the kingdom of the right because politicking is law-based, using instrumentalities other than evangelical persuasion to achieve whatever a faction desires. Again, the goal might be good but the way to get there, how we deal with one another, is at issue. Any claim that we with our beliefs are counter-cultural rings hollow when we behave in ways congruent with politicized American culture. Dominant should be our Dominus, who says, "You know that the leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you" (Mt 20:25–26).

That said, "doing church" by the levers of the law is quite appealing, also to the baptized, because the law is second-nature, born into our hearts whereas the gospel is alien, coming from outside. Reverting to the law is a default position even for the regenerate, and when we can rationalize the default with proper sounding theological words and quotations, we are flirting with Pharisaism. But C. F. W. Walther urges us to remember that the law does not accomplish our goal. "The Law does not produce a change of heart, love of God, and love of one's fellow human being."<sup>16</sup> Working with the Koinonia Project, First Vice President Mueller has shared some prescient words from Francis Schaeffer. Writing about Missouri in an earlier time of strife, Schaeffer wrote:

Let me go back again to the Presbyterian struggles of the 30s when our men did not remember this balance [between truth and love]. On the one hand, they waited far too long to exert discipline, and they lost the denomination. On the other hand, they treated the liberals as less than human, and therefore they learned such bad habits that later, when those separated had minor differences among themselves, they continued to handle each other in bad fashion. Beware of the habits you learn in controversy. Both must appear together: the holiness of God and the love of God exhibited simultaneously by the grace of God. It will not come automatically, it takes prayer. You must write about this in your papers. You must talk about it to your congregations. You must preach sermons pointing out the necessity of standing for the holiness of God and the love of God simultaneously, and you, by your attitude, must exhibit it to your people and to your own children.<sup>17</sup>

So is the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod a politicized church? To be fair, I say "somewhat." Does that make a difference? Yes and no. No for the people in the pews who hear faithful Lutheran presentations of God's word of law and gospel from our pulpits and in our Sunday schools, Bible classes, and parochial schools. No for the sin-

care supporters of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League, Lutheran Hour Ministries, and LCMS registered service organizations. But yes, big time yes, for seminary graduates. Faculty members can tell you that our students are worried about being pulled into partisanship. They ask how they can resist getting labeled one way or another in our Winkels. They wonder where they will go when they find that the church is not always a safe place for honest, fraternal sharing, and study. True, our graduates will encounter this church politicization in varying degrees but none will be able to escape it, at the very least meeting it on the Internet and in the run-ups to some district and national conventions. The teaching of the seminary must address this reality both in theological substance and in churchly process. Students will come, study, and leave Concordia Seminary either to join in the politicization of the church and thereby acquiesce to American culture or they will leave the seminary with body, soul, and spirit formed into the meaning and mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ with the wholesome result that evangelical persuasion will predominate in their ministries and in respect for all in the body of Christ. The answer to that either-or depends in large measure upon the pedagogy of the faculty.

*Cultivating the Spirit* by Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A.

Lindholm summarizes a seven-year longitudinal study that examined the (1) spiritual and (2) religious development of college and university students.<sup>18</sup> There are about as many definitions of spirituality as there are people, and the authors cite many scholarly definitions but their own working definition says spirituality is about an inner quality . . .

rooted in a lifelong, internal process of seeking personal authenticity; developing a greater sense of connectedness to self and others through relationship and community; deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in life; being open to exploring a relationship with a higher power that transcends human existence and knowing; and valuing the sacred.<sup>19</sup>

"Religiousness generally involves devotion to, and practice of, some kind of faith tradition. It also typically involves membership in a community of fellow believers and participation in the rituals of faith."<sup>20</sup> The researchers surveyed 112,232 freshmen at 236 public and private religious institutions and then asked the same students to complete a survey during their junior year; 14,527 juniors from 136 schools returned the survey. The study found that "spiritual" goes up in college but "religious" declines.

We believe that the story told by our study data is not only fascinating but also of great importance for students, for institutions, and for the larger society. Essentially, we find that while students' degree of religious engagement declines somewhat during college, their spirituality shows substantial growth. Students become more caring, more tolerant, more connected with others, and more actively engaged in a spiritual quest. We have also found that *spiritual growth enhances other college outcomes*, such as academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership development, and satisfaction with college. These positive changes in students' spiritual qualities are not merely maturational . . .<sup>21</sup>

Obviously seminarians are older, but almost all come to seminary with a college degree and most come immediately from college or only a few years removed from that experience. The popular assumption is that they come to seminary to be “formed” for ministry, but in fact, they have in significant measure already been formed by college experiences, by their home congregation, by family, and by general life experiences. It is more realistic to say that the faculty’s task is “re-formation,” that is, to enhance and deepen the positive Lutheran spiritual and religious experiences they have already had and to try to re-form in them biblical and Lutheran doctrinal beliefs and practices that may be wanting. How can formation or re-formation be attempted?<sup>22</sup> From *Cultivating the Spirit*: “Our data provide strong evidence pointing to specific experiences during college that can contribute to students’ spiritual growth.”<sup>23</sup> What are some of those experiences identified by the study that the faculty can adapt in its pedagogy for the church? Greatly summarized they include the following.

“Interdisciplinarity . . . helps students appreciate the subtleties of intellectual problems and to see the value of using the knowledge and methods of multiple disciplines as a means of understanding complex issues and appreciating multiple perspectives.”<sup>24</sup> “When the fullness of time had come” reminds us that God’s saving revelation, the word made flesh, comes into specific earthly contexts (Gal 4:4; Jn 1:14). Interdisciplinarity in teaching honors the various contexts in which lay people and clergy can work together to bring their varying gifts to the mission of Christ. One example: teaching students to understand financial statements so that they will appreciate the expertise laity trained and experienced in finance bring to the work of the congregation.

“Community service . . . can have powerful effects on student development, regardless of whether the service is course-based.”<sup>25</sup> When residential seminarians experience mentored service in various cross-cultural settings, those real life situations outside the classroom lead to greater theological searching of God’s word. This happens now through resident field education, vicarage, our urban institute, and cross-cultural trips but needs to be integral to the whole seminary experience in and out of the classroom.<sup>26</sup> This too has a theological basis. Community service falls in the second table of the commandments, about which Philipp Melancthon wrote, “The works of the Second Table are truly the worship of God . . . The worship that is pleasing to God, internally and externally, both in our spiritual and outward life, is summed up in the Decalog.”<sup>27</sup> Our graduates will be expected to lead their congregations into the fullness of God’s work through us in this world and that means mentored learning experiences in community service.

“Another type of experience that positively influences students’ spiritual development is *interracial interaction*.”<sup>28</sup> The entire student population of Concordia Seminary is diverse because of programs like the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology and the Center for Hispanic Studies. The great challenge that must be met for the sake of God’s mission to today’s America is greater diversity in our residential programs, the largest source for providing pastors and deaconesses to the church. The eschatological vision, “A great multitude . . . from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rv 7:9), should begin to happen among us; demographic decline need not be our destiny. The seminary looks to congregations to help make this happen.

“Contemplative practices are among the most powerful tools at our disposal for enhancing students’ spiritual development.”<sup>29</sup> Here some suggestions from the study are outside the pale for a confessional Lutheran seminary but theologically proper contemplative practices will integrate doctrine into life, contributing to thoroughgoing pastoral formation.<sup>30</sup> This means more than a chapel program. The daily chapel program needs to reflect the best Lutheran practice, reflecting the different ways that LCMS congregations worship and in which our graduates will serve. The chapel program is not a substitute for Sunday worship with a congregation, but should serve, as James K. A. Smith says in another book relevant to our subject, as a “mediating institution” between academic life and the life of God’s people in the field.<sup>31</sup> Beyond the chapel program, the entire curricular and extracurricular experience of seminary life needs to be what Smith calls a “liturgy,” a body, soul, and spirit worship that receives God’s gifts and reflects his praise in conscious community.<sup>32</sup>

Again from *Cultivating the Spirit*: “When faculty directly encourage students to explore questions of meaning and purpose, students become more likely to show positive growth.”<sup>33</sup> Because a revised residential curriculum must address the challenge of giving busy students (in addition to studying they work and many have families), more time without sacrificing content, the effectiveness of the faculty’s teaching is of paramount importance. Exploring questions of meaning and purpose needs to happen in and out of the classroom. It’s about keeping the big picture in mind and having a willingness to hear students’ views and letting them feel safe to “think out loud.”

It has always been true but more today than ever that the seminary does not, indeed cannot graduate a finished product. *Cultivating the Spirit* does not address continuing education, that was not the study’s purpose, but given the multi-faceted task of formation and re-formation, providing continuing education resources is a necessary task of the faculty’s pedagogy in service to the church. Hence the faculty applauds President Matthew Harrison’s emphasis upon continuing education and takes seriously Resolution 5-08 passed by the 2013 national convention, “To Establish a Standard for Continuing Education of Pastors.” Working toward fulfillment of that resolution, Concordia Seminary has relevant theological resources available, such as the 4-1-1 continuing education program. The seminary’s faculty and board of regents also affirms Resolution 5-02A, “To Support and Encourage Participation in Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support Initiative,” the PALS program. Politicization in the church tempts pastors away from the concrete realities of the congregation to which God has called them.<sup>34</sup> Enhanced continuing education helps keep the focus congregational.

Moving toward a conclusion, you will notice that the suggestions from *Cultivating the Spirit* place a premium on personal interaction.<sup>35</sup> When the synod’s “system” was the dominant provider of seminarians, students entered Concordia Seminary with a great amount of homogeneity. We came from congregations throughout the country that had very similar church and community cultures. America was still a church society. We arrived at the seminary knowing one another; some of my classmates had already been together for eight years. Our formation for ministry had largely happened and so seminary professors in the main had to fill us with theological information needed for

ministry. But in today's post-church America, our seminarians come from various life backgrounds, from different congregational cultures, and no student knows all his classmates. This means that seminary pedagogy has to emphasize community, life together, as never before. Such an intentional effort toward community is intended to provide a safe context in which the strengths and deficiencies of an individual student's pre-seminary formation can be identified and addressed. Looked at another way, the days are gone when professors could assume proper formation and simply impart information. Smith writes, "Christian education has, for too long, been concerned with *information* rather than *formation*."<sup>36</sup>

Information, in our setting giving seminarians a correct understanding of biblical and confessional Lutheranism, must always be a hallmark of seminary pedagogy but it must be in context. One consequence of America's politicized, ideological milieu is that words carry less meaning today than in years gone by. "Any understanding of what is real, true, good, and right depends on a covenant between the words spoken and the reality to which they refer. But this covenant has been broken, and the result is an emptying of words of their inherited meaning."<sup>37</sup> The efficacy of God's word is a unique Lutheran emphasis, a "covenant" we hold that God's word brings to reality what it says. If surrounding society has weakened words of their meaning, we who teach the word must take into account how people learn. Robert Preus, surveying the efficacy of God's word in post-Reformation orthodoxy, affirms John Dannhauer's concern about "a caricature of the Lutheran doctrine that would make the Bible, considered as a book and apart from the working of the Holy Spirit, some sort of magical power that would coerce its victim into obedience."<sup>38</sup> If the word were "some sort of magical power," classroom information would be enough, doctrine could be separated from life, head severed from heart. But today's students learn differently than my generation did, and so the faculty's pedagogy is changing, not in accommodation to the culture but in a sincere attempt to respond to today's realities from the Bible and Lutheran Confessions. Smith: "It will not be sufficient (or effective) to deliver Christian content in pedagogies that are designed for thinking things."<sup>39</sup> After his survey of Christian attempts to counter America's cultural coming apart, James Hunter advocates a formation he calls "faithful presence."

When the Word of all flourishing—defined by the love of Christ—becomes flesh in us, in our relations with others, within the tasks we are given, and within our sphere of influence—absence gives way to presence, and the word we speak to each other and to the world becomes authentic and trustworthy. This is the heart of a theology of faithful presence."<sup>40</sup>

Isn't this what our Lord teaches us? To the establishment theologians of the day, he teaches that the greatest commandment is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Mt 22:37–40).



So the literature and countless personal experiences prescribe some basic pedagogical imperatives. They include, in very summary statement, fidelity to our biblical and confessional beliefs in their full christocentric breadth and depth, corporate worship, and devotional exercises wherein the Spirit through the means of grace grows disciples of the Lord Jesus, and more intentional face-time (1) between professors and seminarians, and (2) professors and seminarians, with the world in its brokenness outside the healing gospel of Christ. These pedagogical imperatives will be actualized in various ways, some innovative ways, and some ways will assuredly raise suspicions of theological liberalism from a few in the church. So be it. Ours will continue to be a pedagogy rooted in the word and the Lutheran confessions, substantive and not facile lip service. A fellow professor raised a question that makes gospel-based pedagogy something not to be taken for granted. What can happen, my colleague wondered, when a church is convinced that it has the correct understanding of the word and gospel, as we rightly do? In view of our real enemy, what can the devil, that “angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14) do when a church is convinced it has already answered all the questions and has all the perfect formulations? Can we be tempted to “advance” to an animating principle other than the gospel for our life together? If it’s not gospel, it’s law, the ministration of death (Rom 7:10-13). Can we fail to see the need to teach the faith in a way that can be understood by new generations? Pedagogy for a somewhat politicized church? The law is to be our *paidagogus* to lead us together to Jesus Christ and to no other Savior (Gal 3:24). “It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God (1 Pt 4:17).” Love God and love people. Keep the *telos*—the goal—in mind; the salvation of souls, yours and mine, and the salvation of souls our synod has so blessedly served for generations and we pray will serve with the only saving gospel for generations to come.<sup>41</sup>

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 2010 Convention Workbook, 75.
- <sup>2</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 167. Emphasis is Hunter’s.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, 46, 77. Hunter debunks the popular notion that there was a truly “Christian America.”
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 106, 107.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 103. Apropos is the observation by Harvard’s Henry Rosovsky, “Never underestimate the difficulty of changing false beliefs by facts.” *The Washington Post*, A17, November 4, 2013.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.
- <sup>15</sup> Aristotle: “Man is by nature a political animal.” (Politics I, 1, 1253a 3)
- <sup>16</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, ed. Charles P. Schaum, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010), 433; In W. H. T. Dau, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928), 384–385.
- <sup>17</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, “A Protestant Evangelical Speaks to His Lutheran Friends in a Day of Theological

Crisis,” *Evangelical Directions for the Lutheran Church*. Eds. Erick Kiehl and Waldo J. Werning, (Lutheran Congress, 1970), 146.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander W. Astin, et al., *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2011). The words college and university will be used synonymously.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. Emphasis by authors.

<sup>22</sup> Curriculum revision has been talked about for years and thoroughgoing revision is in its preliminary stages.

<sup>23</sup> Astin, 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>26</sup> Seminarians in distance-contextual programs are by definition in cross-cultural settings. It is a given in those programs but needs to be integrated into residential programs.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 395a.

<sup>28</sup> Astin, 147.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 148. Emphasis by authors.

<sup>30</sup> See *Ibid.*, 148ff.

<sup>31</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 225.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 39ff.

<sup>33</sup> Astin, 150.

<sup>34</sup> See *Inviting Community*, eds. Robert Kolb and Theodore Hopkins, (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 9–18.

<sup>35</sup> See also Smith, “The central role of practices in formation,” *Desiring the Kingdom*, 224.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, 219. His emphases.

<sup>37</sup> Hunter, 220–221.

<sup>38</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 370.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, 228.

<sup>40</sup> Hunter, 252.

<sup>41</sup> 1 Peter 1:9