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## IMPLICATIONS OF BRAIN RESEARCH FOR THE CHURCH: What It Means for Theology and Ministry By Allen Nauss

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**IMPLICATIONS OF BRAIN RESEARCH FOR THE CHURCH: What It Means for Theology and Ministry.** By Allen Nauss. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press/Kirk House Publishers, 2013. 241 pages. Paper. \$24.00.

How can we, communicators of the gospel of Jesus Christ, target our conversations, our preaching, our teaching, our walking-with people in a more focused and direct way? In J. H. C. Fritz's terms (see my article in this issue of the *Concordia Journal*), how do we learn more about the "book of the flock" so that we can, in Anton Boisen's (the founder of clinical pastoral education in the 1920s) terms, more accurately read the human document?

Allen Nauss takes up this task by attending to the spate of brain research over the last twenty years or so. Dr. Nauss is a longtime LCMS educator, teacher, and seminary professor. His interest in brain research, peaking in the last decade, propelled this book into publication. That it fits a real need in our church is an understatement. I currently use it as a textbook in an elective that I teach at Concordia Seminary where we focus on brain functions and their behavioral and spiritual implications. Every pastor and church worker who wants to keep abreast of research about human beings needs to have books like Nauss's available and, more than that, read and apply the information therein.

"We may be impelled to use the brain's functions to become more aware of our negative and positive biases, to balance our reason more adequately with our emotion, to use both (*cerebral cortex*) hemispheres appropriately according to the

needs of the situation, to help parishioners develop long-term memories with more deliberation and care, to read more accurately the mind and heart of others, and to develop Christian virtues within ourselves and our parishioners" (219). These are the areas Dr. Nauss takes up in his work; these are the areas about which teachers, pastors, directors of Christian education, and deaconesses need information.

Brain research has come into its own in the past several decades. It used to be that we could understand the functions of the brain only when we knew what specific portions of the brain had been damaged. Now, using imaging techniques, dyes, electrical monitoring, and a host of other research mechanisms we can "see" much better what parts of the brain are firing under what conditions. We all do well to keep our eyes, ears, and minds receptive to all this new research. There are likely some who will contend that this is not needed, for all there is to know about the human person is contained in the Bible. Nauss more classically, however, follows Fritz. We need to know as much as we can about the human person in general and about an individual person in particular to be the most faithful to our vocation as witnesses to the Triune God.

Especially interesting, and from this reviewer's view critically important, is Nauss's take on the relationship of emotion and cognition. Try this challenging position of Nauss's: "Much church preaching and teaching happens with such abstract words and remains head-knowledge. The emotion which accompanies all learning can then be boredom or dislike . . . Pastors learn their theology at the seminary largely in classes apart

from real life experience. It is presented deductively, via abstract words detached from individual real events . . . But as the pastors had to connect their abstract theological words to their own real life experiences, so do their hearers when they begin their ministry in a parish” (95).

Nauss is especially critical of those who, using his picture of what is happening, speak the abstraction from the pulpit and then assume no responsibility for its outcome, since it is the Holy Spirit that gives life to the spoken word. Rather, he maintains, we need emotional connections born of real-life experiences in order to develop a transfer of cognition into meaning and, further, into behavior. This way of deductively teaching and preaching is more in line with our understanding of how the brain functions and processes information. He also makes a very strong case for single-theme worship elements to better establish meaning and values in long-term memory.

Nauss also leads us to wonder if a great deal of our church conflict, theological disputation, and worship struggles might come from differences in preferred brain hemispheric strengths and under-appreciation of the role of emotion in our “thinking” processes. I believe he is quite on target here. He certainly makes a strong argument based on current brain research.

Nauss’s discussion of empathy is crucial, especially as he distinguishes cognitive empathy (understanding the view of the other) from emotional empathy (understanding the emotional state of the other). These two features are the building points of whole-person empathic connections. Listening skills, for instance, are often seen as simply saying back what the other person is saying, i.e., having

cognitive empathy. However, true listening always involves an emotional component, and that is sometimes lacking in our generally left-hemispheric way of doing theology and doing ministry.

I wished for more depth in Nauss’s book as he explored the practical implications of what he was communicating about the brain, but in our circles within the LCMS, this subject has just barely been tackled. Nauss helps us do so, and in so doing, I believe he stands in the rich tradition of classical LCMS pastoral care as represented by J. H. C. Fritz and many others.

It is certainly true that “seminaries and the church’s clergy in the field can certainly become more effective in their ministry as they combine emotion with cognition, work to balance the activity of both hemispheres, become aware of their biases and the virtues of Christ’s model, develop their empathy, translate their theology into meaning, and apply it in their worship and their lives” (224).

Readers will find some of Nauss’s book repetitive. Some might consider this a negative, but like a weaver, Nauss brings the reader back to central themes and, much like his argument that a brain can only pay attention to a limited number of things at one time, he brings the reader to his main points again and again.

Dr. Nauss is likely in his ninth decade of life. He continues to bring vital thinking, challenge, and helpful reflections to the church and, specifically, to the LCMS. May he continue to contribute to our understanding of the “book of the flock” and the “book of the self” (using Fritz’s terminology) because, frankly, we desperately need this at this time.

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