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Herbert T. Mayer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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ALFRED O. FUERBRINGER

A Critique of Theological Education in the Light
of Changing American Culture
DAVID S. SCHULLER

Some Directives for the Education
of a More Excellent Ministry
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Book Review

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*Address all communications to the Editorial Committee in care of
Herbert T. Mayer, 801 De Mun Ave., St. Louis, Mo. 63105*

CONCORDIA
THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Editorial ✦

THE SEMINARY AND THE CHURCH

THIS ISSUE OBSERVES the 125th anniversary of Concordia Seminary. It gives us an opportunity as a faculty to acknowledge publicly our profound awareness that it has been the gracious God who has preserved for us the blessing of purity of doctrine. It also enables us to say a sincere and hearty Thank-you to the thousands of pastors—alumni of this school, Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield or another seminary—and non-alumni whose prayers and support have meant so much to us. Finally, it provides us with a point of departure for saying a few things about “the seminary and the church.”

“There is a gap between the seminary and the parish, the church at school and the church in the world.” Probably every alert Christian, regardless of his denominational affiliation, would agree that this statement is true at some times and to some extent. This statement is sometimes made in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, but it is relatively meaningless when made in this form. Three other questions must be asked to give substance and value to this observation. These questions are: What is the nature of the gap? What are its causes? What are its cures?

Where such a gap does exist, it may be present because a seminary faculty has locked itself behind ivy-covered walls. We flatly reject this as a description of the situation at Concordia Seminary. Our men maintain regular and frequent contact with parish pastors through correspondence and personal visitation. We would even go so far as to say that many of our professors are more alert to what is happening out in the world than a good many parish pastors are. We think that some of the articles in this issue will make that apparent.

Such a gap may exist in a denomination because a seminary faculty has espoused views that are described with terms like “modernistic” and as a consequence has alienated many of its alumni of a former generation. This has certainly happened on our campus. The views and expressions of many of our professors sound strange to pastor-brothers, and to their strangeness some seem to react in alarm. A number of men who have joined the faculty in recent years report that as they were considering their appointment they were urged by certain of their fellow pastors to accept in order to “save the seminary,” and yet these same men have discovered that their place on the faculty has exposed them to the same suspicions on the part of others, and that they themselves now need saving. In the face of today’s charge of “modernism” we can perhaps draw some comfort by citing the case of charges leveled against the faculty in 1913 by the Kansas District, the New South Wales District of the Australian Church, and also to a degree by the Minnesota District, that the entire faculty was teaching false doctrine about the nature of faith as a work. Drs. Bente and Pieper were criticized by name. The salutary nature of the climate in the seminary faculty in the midst of misunderstandings like these is

that men feel free to examine and test every formulation of teaching from the church's past to determine its adequacy as a vehicle for conveying God's message and its relevance to today's world.

The gap may exist in our denomination as well as in others because some charge their seminary with being 10 years ahead of the church. We felt this was a valid criticism while we were in the ministry. We have changed our mind on this point. We subscribe to it now as a healthy and necessary maxim. But we will have a little more to say on this point later. On the other hand, the gap may exist because some feel their seminary is 10 years behind the church. A sizable number of pastors in our church hold this view of our seminary and its faculty. Let us hasten to add that we are not looking for any sympathy as we write these words. We all accepted our position with open minds, in the full conviction that the Lord of the church wanted us here, and we anticipate that criticism offered by men in the field with a desire to be helpful will always be a prominent and important part of the work which professor and pastor together dedicate to Jesus Christ.

We would suggest therefore that four basic causes for a gap existing between seminary and parish may well be operating within our synodical relationships, even though we may not be quite sure of the nature of the gap. As a matter of fact, as we have suggested above, the description of the nature of the gap will probably vary at least slightly with each critic. But, in any case, a more detailed consideration of these causes with specific reference to the situation existing in our Synod between seminary and parish may be helpful.

1. In the first place, we have a feeling that the personality of our seminary during the past 125 years has changed basically every 15 to 20 years. There seems to have been a rhythmic rotation of viewpoints and emphasis held by faculty members which almost makes it possible to divide our clergy into two or three brackets classified according to age, with each bracket marked by certain noticeable characteristics. We cannot document this, and the statement itself may suggest criticism of our teachers. Nothing could be further from our purpose. Each "generation" of the faculty was facing different problems or was under the noticeable influence of one or two strong personalities. The result is that while we were all trained to accept the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions as the basis for our entire ministry, our attitude toward them and use of them may vary widely. It is frankly difficult for one "generation" of students to talk to another "generation" and for both "generations" to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of their training. Thus there was a generation which believed that systematics was the queen of theological disciplines. Even the Scriptures were approached systematically, and sometimes the student may have felt that the purpose of the search of Scripture was to uncover prooftexts — which were much more readily available in the catechism. Then there was a generation who insisted that the study of Scripture was basic. Today, for example, a student must take more courses in exegesis than in any other discipline. Perhaps today's student may feel that even courses in systematics are actually courses in Biblical theology. There are signs which indicate that the day of the practical department

may not be far off. The history department is still struggling to convince students of its importance in the theological task.

2. We suspect that another cause of the gap in our own situation comes from a failure to understand that there are at least two basic philosophies of education, each of which has certain values and certain limitations. We refer to the deductive and the inductive methods. A man trained in the deductive school is usually taught *what* to think rather than *how* to think. This is by no means all to the bad. But some negative possibilities are obvious. The student tends to lean on the opinions and answers which he learned from his professors; he sometimes feels that the diploma is the certification that he has acquired sufficient knowledge for a lifetime ministry; emphasis may be placed on a legalistic approach to problems in pastoral theology; the impression that an official exegesis of every verse exists may be created in the exegetical department; history men may make of history a tool to prove the absolute superiority of their own denomination. The reader will recognize at once that not all these patterns are integrally related to the deductive approach, but they often do have a way of flocking together. In the inductive approach the emphasis is placed on acquainting the student with the art of critical thinking and with the ability to find and use helpful materials to work out his own answers to most questions. In our complex and rapidly changing society, we believe that the emphasis must rest on the inductive method, on the "how to think" approach. If a student is not trained to think, he will find himself at the mercy of so many new ideas and "isms" that he may well turn out to be an active promulgator of liberal or reactionary ideas and tendencies, unaware that he has left his confessional and Biblical moorings. This method, however, also has certain obvious disadvantages. Some students who are trained this way may refuse to recognize even the boundary lines to independent reasoning drawn by Scripture and the Confessions. Others may become so infatuated with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake that they never become true servants of the Master. The use of the inductive method makes it more difficult to certify the theological position of a man at the precise moment of his graduation, since it is not always possible to predict where a student will finally end his theological search; but perhaps this is primarily the business of the Holy Spirit rather than of a neatly structured course syllabus. We feel certain that an alternation between these two approaches has marked seminary teaching, at least during the past 30 years.

3. A third cause of the gap in our seminary and synodical situation lies in a failure to understand and appreciate the nature of the theological task. We doubt that those of us who graduated almost 20 years ago had much of an understanding of it at that point of our ministry. The theological task consists in the unending and relentless exploration of a wide spectrum of intellectual and spiritual disciplines so that the unique lordship of Jesus Christ may constantly rise above every type of human limitation, tradition, or even ability. The task is not easy, and it is often unpleasant to all who are engaged in it; unpleasant because frequently old formulations must be placed under the microscope. (It always hurts to find mold in Grandma's prizewinning peach jelly.) Nor is it easy.

The traditionalist approach, which accepts what has been because it is what has always been, is easier and more comfortable.

4. A fourth cause of the gap which concerns us may be traced to a noticeable degree of irresponsibility, both on the side of the church at school and on the side of the church in the world. Let us hasten to add here that the larger proportion of letters which the faculty at Concordia Seminary receives is constructive in criticism and heartwarming in expressions of support. But some letters in the past have been characterized by a measure of irresponsibility which makes it almost impossible to communicate meaningfully with the writer or writers. We feel, for example, that it is a manifestation of irresponsibility when a man bases his criticism on hearsay or secondhand sources, or when it becomes evident that he has not given real study to the problem before writing. At the same time we would be very ready to admit that professors are capable of irresponsible conduct over against their brethren in the field. We sometimes speak when we should be listening; we sometimes fail to take counsel with brethren on the faculty before advancing a new idea at a pastoral conference; we can be curt in writing answers to men who are honestly disturbed. We feel that the Synod has rediscovered, at least since the 1962 Cleveland convention, the wonderful grace of forgiveness and mutual burden-bearing. We look forward to many more letters that will be grounded in those graces and will serve to build us up in our weaknesses. We promise answers which, in spite of all their human weaknesses, truly seek only to be of service to the God who was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself.

5. A final cause of the gap, we must recognize, is an occasional unfortunate breakdown in communication between Concordia Seminary and the parishes of the church.

If there is some validity in this analysis of the nature and the causes of the gap between the church at school and the church in the parish, we ask whether there are some cures which might prove effective.

1. Here the first obvious suggestion is more fervent prayer on the part of all concerned that we might be given grace to work together in the kingdom of the Lord. Nothing heartens us more than the assurance that you are remembering us in your prayers. We wish you could be with us in our daily worship as again and again we address our prayers to God for His church remembering also to pray in your behalf to the throne of grace.

2. The second suggestion is that a deliberate approach be made to improving the amount of contact and helpful interaction between seminary and parish. One practical necessity that must be faced if this is to be accomplished is that the work load of key professors be lightened. This suggestion ought to receive serious consideration and implementation for several reasons. In the first place, the lightening of classroom work would make it possible for professors to spend more time in the field and more time on the preparation and polishing of conference papers. In the second place, it would enable them to write in a systematic and coherent fashion, instead of grabbing an hour here and an hour there in attempting to produce a major theological work. In the third

place, it would make for greater vitality, freshness, and creativity in the classroom. Our men too soon become tired. The burdens placed on them by their seminary assignments, by synodical duties, and by other boards and committees can be recognized only by someone who has been "on the inside." In the fourth place, it might make possible the extension of the graduate school through setting up area workshops, possibly for five days at a time, staffed by two or three seminary professors. This has proved so successful in the Portland, Oreg., area, and in other places, that we consider this a service which should be explored and exploited as rapidly as possible.

We hope that what we have said above about the nature of the theological task may serve to create a broader basis for sympathetic understanding and thus alleviate at least some of the causes for misunderstanding.

We make the final suggestion with great diffidence. We know that the parish pastor is as tired as the seminary professor. But we feel that the importance of continuing theological study and growth on the part of the parish pastor must be emphasized at every opportunity. This is no longer a debatable luxury, if it ever was. This is now a *sine qua non* for a continuing effective ministry. And most pastors will find it a refreshing rather than a tiring addition to their program as opportunity is provided for such study.

And so, as we place this issue into your hands, we do so with a sincere thank-you for your many past favors and with our promise to do everything we can at this seminary to continue to train "a more excellent ministry."

H. T. M.