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Some Directives for the Education of a More Excellent Ministry

By ARTHUR C. REPP

The continuing reevaluation which theological seminaries have been making of themselves, coupled with a growing criticism of the seminaries' products on the part of many in the church, has produced a lively ferment in the current discussion of ministerial education. Some outstanding theological books and articles of late have addressed themselves to this subject, all of them showing a real concern for finding a solution. Unfortunately, many of the critics disagree among themselves, leaving the seminaries with the problem of putting the pieces together. Lutheran seminaries have not escaped the barrage of strictures against theological education. Their own ongoing self-evaluations have been speeded up as they have become increasingly aware of the importance of adjusting themselves to the changing scenes and needs of the society in which the church is found.

As the minister par excellence for every age, the apostle Paul has left the church with some directives which may well serve as a focal point around which seminaries should organize their efforts to provide a ministerial education which is relevant for present-day circumstances. In summing up his own ideals as an apostle, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5 RSV). Here Paul has stripped the essentials of the ministry down to two major accents, its message and

its task, to proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ and to serve Him in self-effacing obedience. These two accents must come through constantly in the preparation of men for the holy ministry.

The first and foremost task of a theological seminary is to prepare ministers of the Word who by word and life proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ.

It was the lordship of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ which Satan threatened when he rebelled and pulled the human race into that same rebellion. But God rallied His forces and sent His Son to obtain the victory. By His death and resurrection the defeat of Satan was effected, and in that defeat the power of sin, death, and the Law were broken. The victory of Jesus Christ made it possible for men once again to acknowledge God as Lord and "to live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." But this lordship is still challenged where sin rules and where man interposes himself in seeking to direct homage to himself.

The first prerequisite for preparing men to proclaim the lordship of Christ is that the seminary open up the Holy Scriptures for the student so that he himself may clearly hear God's claim to be his Lord and, having heard it and acknowledged it, to become able to proclaim it to others. Such a study of the Holy Scriptures requires a personal faith on the part of the seminarian, for he must have the convic-

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tion that here the Spirit is speaking to him, teaching, energizing, keeping, and sustaining him in faith as he humbly listens to his God. The seminary is no place for the seeker after God, for one who must still find his faith, for the dilettante who turns from one oracle to another so that he can make his own judgment of truth, or for the student who studies Christianity in a disinterested way without himself having become deeply involved. This is not to say that the seminarian will not, at times, have painful struggles with himself. His faith will often come under severe strain as he searches the Scriptures and experiences the struggle of flesh and mind against the Spirit. When he is under this cross (Luther's *tentatio*), he will nevertheless struggle to listen prayerfully as a man of faith to the voice of the Spirit because it is the voice of his God. It goes without saying that he will not always be successful in this battle.

In teaching the Holy Scriptures, the seminary will require of every student that he apply the best skills and will help him to acquire new ones so that he can constantly and even relentlessly search the pages of Holy Writ to hear God speak to him there. For this the seminary will require a working knowledge of the original languages of the Scriptures and assist the student to improve in them at every turn. With these skills in hand, the seminarian will search the Scriptures with the ever-recurring question, "What is God saying?"

When the lordship of Jesus Christ is of primary concern, the seminary will impress on its students that every statement in the Scriptures is precious and has been recorded in that manner that men might hear God in that way. Every textual diffi-

culty will be taken seriously because the student must recognize that even in the paradoxes God has both revealed and hidden Himself. The student will try to hear the voice of God in order to find out what God is saying. He will ask the double question: "What was He communicating to this community then and there? What is He saying to us now?"

Because God spoke under varying circumstances and to people of diverse cultures, it is necessary for the student of the Holy Scriptures to know the contemporary thought, culture, and language patterns through which God revealed Himself. He must be sure that a 16th-century or a 19th-century expression does justice to the message which God has revealed. A proper understanding of this "human side" of the Holy Scriptures will help the student keep a sober balance, removed both from a fundamentalism which literalizes the Bible where this was not intended and from a liberalism which fails to take the Holy Scriptures seriously where they have revealed truth too sublime for the human mind fully to grasp. While it is necessary to explore the human element of the Scriptures if God is to "come through" to us, it must be recognized for what it is, the swaddling clothes, the wrappings, in which the Christ Child comes to man.

With the aid of the Spirit the seminary's task is to help the student acquire a reverent and humble attitude toward the Holy Scriptures, and the skill which will enable him throughout his ministry to search the Holy Scriptures to hear the Spirit. Hence the emphasis will be placed on knowing the principles of interpretation and on the ability of applying them to the study of the Scriptures. No one can escape the task

of discerning for himself the answer to the question, "What is God really saying here?" *Sola Scriptura* is in truth a principle that brings some agonizing moments for the devout student who wants to hold fast to the lordship of Christ.

Obviously, in many cases the student's study will lead him to a full understanding and appreciation of the same interpretation which the fathers had reached through their own study. It is the seminary's responsibility to see to it that the seminarian is driven to the Scriptures to hear God speak rather than that he simply accept an explanation which has been developed by his professor or by some other accepted authority. Whatever the interpretation may finally be, it must be defensible on sound hermeneutical principles and accepted in reverent obedience to the Holy Scriptures.

The study of the Holy Scriptures will naturally lead to some important secondary avenues of interest in order to give the interpreter additional light for his task. Here various isagogical, historical, and textual questions must be raised to help the student become a better interpreter of the Holy Scriptures so that he may more clearly proclaim the lordship of Christ. Unfortunately, however, problems raised in these areas have sometimes tended to capture the major interest of some exegetes, and as a consequence they have allowed their energies to become dissipated in the pursuit of scholarship for its own sake rather than for getting at the ultimate concern, that of hearing God speak in His Word so that His lordship may be proclaimed. Intriguing and sometimes dazzling theories may tempt the scholar to stand in the spotlight that is reserved for God. Too much time, for instance, is often

spent on questions of authorship. Did Moses write all of the Pentateuch? Did Isaiah write all of the book ascribed to him? Did Matthew write the first book of the New Testament, or did someone else? All these are important questions and should not be ignored, but still more important is the fact that inspired writers wrote and/or compiled the material under God's guidance as they were moved by the Spirit. This we believe because the Spirit has brought us to this conviction through His word.

As the seminarian studies and works with the Holy Scriptures under the guidance of the seminary faculty, he must be taught to formulate the teachings of Scripture so that he can set forth God's message in articles of faith which apply to the questions men are asking in his day. This will enable him faithfully to present God's holy doctrine clearly and forthrightly. To assist him in this task, he must learn how the church in the past has formulated Scriptural doctrine, to what questions it was addressing itself as it prepared a specific confession, and what expressions the church has found it necessary to add to the basic Biblical statements in order to meet its changing needs. Systematic theology is to provide the student with the necessary perspective by setting forth the church's doctrine in an orderly manner. The Lutheran seminarian furthermore must become thoroughly acquainted with the Lutheran Confessions and gain the conviction that they are a true declaration of the Scriptures and the *norma normata* to which he subscribes. But the study of theology must become more than a concern for the past as a corrective. He must learn to synthesize the whole of truth theo-

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logically. The seminary must help students actualize their theology so that they can apply the Word to the current situation in a way that has both meaning and purpose. In this way the student will avoid the pitfall of permitting the study of systematic theology to become an attempt merely to master the contents of a catalog of theological antiquities which have little or no relevance to the questions being asked today.

Closely allied with the seminary's effort to teach the student how to synthesize the whole of God's revealed truth theologically and to help him to actualize it, is the seminary's responsibility to direct the future minister to the past that he may learn to appreciate God's guidance "in the ongoing life of the church and its continuing interaction with the social order." Here again, since this is the continuous responsibility of every pastor, the student must acquire "the skill to investigate the church's past and to interpret it to all sorts and conditions of men."¹ A serious study of God's mighty acts in the history of the church and the latter's reaction to these acts and to His Word will be both an encouraging and a humbling experience as God's guidance is made vivid.²

If the thesis is accepted that the seminary's first task is to prepare "servants of the Word" who by their own word and life proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ, then it must be acknowledged that the seminary's center is the worship of the

Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a worship that is both corporate and private. If the church holds with Paul that its ministry is not to preach itself or the works of men, but "Jesus Christ as Lord," then it has the right to expect that the graduates sent out by its theological schools are men of God who were nurtured by the Holy Scriptures both academically and spiritually, "men who by daily discipline have learned to live in the presence of Christ, men who by corporate worship and private devotion have come to know what it means to present themselves as a living sacrifice, men who have combined *ora* and *labora* to the glory of their Creator and Redeemer."³

In such worship the seminary family praises God as a Christian community which is welded together by the Gospel for a common task. Because the study of the Holy Scriptures may be an agonizing experience as well as a source of power, the common worship under the Gospel and the sacraments will serve to fortify against doubts which drag their questions across the soul, will restore the Christian's vision to see more vividly God's enfolding grace, and will restore power to mind, soul, and body. And because the faculty and students are still much in the flesh, the Gospel, conveyed and offered in holy absolution, will give much needed forgiveness and peace to the penitent.

That a seminary must provide a community marked by growth in the academic and spiritual life is not an option but a necessity. Concordia Seminary in its long history has not always lived up to this

¹ Objectives of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

² As an illustration of what is implied, see the author's article "Concordia Historical Institute and Its Educational Role in the Church," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, XXXVII (July, 1964), 33—48.

³ Inaugural address of President Donald R. Heiges, "Prospectus for a School of Theology," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin*, 1962, p. 28.

provision. There have been intermittent periods, sometimes as long as 10 years, when serious study was something of an option, almost an extracurricular activity, and the spiritual life of many of its students was tenuous. No seminary loyal to its purpose dare fail in this respect, for such failure is fraught with serious harm to the church body which it is obligated to serve under Christ. "A theological school is not a foundling home for social rejects, nor a browsing corner for dilettantes, nor a trade school for ecclesiastical specialists, nor a citadel of pietism for frightened Christians. A school of theology is an institution of higher learning; it is an institution dedicated to intellectual pursuits whose prototype is any top-ranking professional school on a graduate level. This enterprise is educational in the broadest and deepest sense. This enterprise is theological because it attempts nothing less audacious than the description and interpretation of the mighty acts of God in history for the salvation of man."⁴

The acknowledgment that Jesus Christ is Lord is never simply a personal response between the Christian and his Lord. For if Christ is Lord, then we are His servants, His ministers, and we serve Him best when by the Gospel we help and strengthen others in their acknowledgment of this lordship. This is what Paul referred to when he said, "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." This is the holy ministry, the holy service to the Lord. Therefore the theological student must pursue his studies with a view to making the lordship of Christ an actuality within the Christian community.

The Christian community into which the Lutheran clergyman will normally be called is rightly described as the church at a given place. Since the congregation has also voluntarily bound itself to a synodical body by a common confession, the theological school will prepare the seminarian to minister not merely within the confines of a single parish, but to minister cooperatively with sister congregations toward the common objectives for which their synod has been organized. But this loyalty and devotion to a synod must not blind the seminarian to his responsibility toward all Lutherans, whose heritage he shares. Nor must he lose sight of the obligation he has to show an ecumenical concern for all Christians by working with them within the framework of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

In every ministry he enters, the Lutheran clergyman will serve both individuals and groups. This will require of the seminary that it strive to instill in the seminarian a true concern for people, all kinds of people, "for of such is the kingdom of God." Some of the recent criticism of seminaries has been that theological education has placed too much importance on the pastoral concern for the individual.⁵ Perhaps this phase of the ministry has been overemphasized to the point where conscientious pastors have spent themselves with individuals because they have not trained the members of their congregations to meet their responsibilities in this respect as members of the "people of God." But the pastoral concern for the individual dare not be neglected, particularly in crisis situations. A church faithful to its Lord

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵ See David Schuller's article in this issue.

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can ill afford to contribute to the facelessness which more and more people are experiencing in an urban society. Already too many find themselves squeezed into the mold of anonymity where they regard themselves as little more than a statistic, readily expended in a crowded world of automation. While the individual Christian may find himself hopelessly trapped today in a collective society in which he is not free to initiate action consistent with a life in Christ, the church must not therefore fail in its concern for him as an individual. Historians and anthropologists will remind us that such conditions of anonymity and top-level control of society have existed in the past and in some cultures have never lost their hold. The ties of feudalism, such as the principle of *cius regio eius religio*, and the principle of clan authority, which is still widely accepted today, are a few examples that come to mind.

While ministers will continue to give much energy and time to individuals and groups, their service must not end there. The overarching task of the called servant of the Word is, according to Biblical principles, "to equip God's people for work in His service" (Eph. 4:12 NEB). The New Testament clearly sets forth here and elsewhere that all believers are engaged in this service and that the ordained minister's responsibility is to minister to this serving community by discovering, guiding, and directing the gifts which God has given to the church. Thus God's people will become able more effectively to infiltrate the world with the divine self-disclosure, to serve their fellow Christians, and to buckle on their arms as they fight the good fight of faith. Full-time service for the Lord is not only for the clergy, for

the man in the clerical collar, but also for those who are accustomed to shovels, typewriters, drills, scalpels, books, diapers, and dishes.

Where the implication of this concept of the ordained ministry has been grasped, the seminary in preparing its students takes on a role different from the customary one. The ordained minister becomes a minister to the serving community, and for this task he must know not only theology; he must know people and the world in which they live. Furthermore, he must be able to communicate to them and to help them communicate to others.

If the laity is to live up to its New Testament responsibility, it needs to become an informed church. The Biblical illiteracy among Christians, also among Lutherans, is appalling. While the Lutheran sometimes appears to make a better showing than others, many deficiencies come to the surface when he is taken away from catechism language and is expected to apply his theology in a less formalized way to some life situation. It becomes the task of the seminary, therefore, to bring theology to bear in the life of the seminarian in such a way that he can teach people in clear, relevant language suitable to their needs and circumstances. Equipping the members for the church service they are to render brings an added dimension to preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, counseling, and public worship. These programs of study and other activities will be both a proclamation of the Gospel and at the same time a stimulus to the ministerial student to clarify his thinking about his own life of serving, praying, and witnessing whereby he demonstrates his membership in the serving community.

If theological education is to succeed in this respect, it cannot be a cloistered education. To be sure, the seminary must be a place where scholarship is accepted as a major responsibility. Nothing less will do. "Unless it insists upon creditable intellectual competence on the part of its faculty members in their respective disciplines, the school forfeits a respected place in the realm of higher education."⁶ But coupled with such study the seminary must offer the student to the best of its ability the actual experience in which he becomes equipped for an effective service in the life of the church. Some of this may be learned from books, but the actual skill, with the attendant attitudes and understandings, can really be learned only when developed in the crucible of life. Hence, from the beginning of their theological education, students must not be drawn away from people. They need the opportunity to put their understanding of the Gospel to immediate use. For this they need on-the-spot correction by competent critics. They will be given this in their fieldwork experience, designed to help them acquire skills through classroom teaching, altar services, institutional bedside ministries, preaching, youth work, and calling of various types.

After two years of seminary training, a 12-month "vicarage"⁷ will provide additional opportunity to convert the learning of the seminary into the language of the pulpit and pew. To be a valid experience, the vicarage must not become a year of trial ministry in which the seminarian is

permitted to be a "junior pastor" without supervision, for the essential part of an adequate vicarage is the close supervision by a competent pastor. It is to be a year of apprenticeship. It is true that in a certain sense this supervision is a handicap, for real learning does not take place until a man is in the parish ministry, with final responsibility for his answers, decisions, and actions resting on his own shoulders. But the seminarian is not ready for this. A secondary learning must take place first before he sets out on his own in the ordained ministry.

Such experiences as fieldwork and vicarage do not violate the principle that the chief business of the theological student for the time being is to be a student. The field experiences, particularly the skill of communication, must also be learned; and while the seminarian is in the field, he is primarily a student of the seminary under the care of a resident pastor. There his chief function is to acquire a *habitus* while essentially a layman, a layman who is serving.

The task of the church is not limited to serving itself. It is to penetrate the world, to infiltrate it with the divine self-disclosure. The seminary must therefore help its students know that world, learn what kind of evil haunts and possesses it, what questions the world is asking, what conclusions, if any, it has drawn. The students must learn to know its despair and the nihilism that torments it. They must know what the world's culture is and the words and images which it has adopted. The students must seek to discover what the world's images are of God, sin, salvation, and church. They perhaps may even find that it has no image for these. Unless

⁶ Heiges, p. 30.

⁷ The term "vicarage" is used in a nondictionary meaning to describe a period of "externship" which the student experiences on a full-time basis, ordinarily after his second year of theological education.

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there is at least a partial understanding of the world, the future minister will not even be able to ask the right questions, to say nothing of giving the correct answers.

All this is not to say that the seminary must provide students with a new brand of Gospel, or that new techniques need to be discovered to undergird the Gospel to make it relevant. Some critics of theological education have left the impression that the minister must first clear away the debris of past understanding and practice before he can proclaim the Gospel. In the inner city this may be interpreted to mean that the social and economic levels must first be raised before the Gospel can take effect. For a rural community it might mean that crop control and market co-operation must first be analyzed and structured. It may mean that in foreign fields we must first Westernize the nationals. In the minds of some the need to clear away the debris seems to imply that people must first be restored to our image of what they ought to be, become "our kind of people," before we can preach the Gospel. Such an attitude is a denial of the efficacy of the Gospel for all sorts and conditions of men. Contrariwise, we need to emphasize that the church's task is to proclaim the Gospel. This does not imply that the Gospel is not meant for the whole man, as though it had nothing to do with the body, with society (race struggle, exploitation of men, etc.) and the total creation. Nor must we be trapped into believing that the modern media of mass communications, high-powered publicity and the like, will in themselves bring success and attract to the Gospel. We will always have to contend with the rebellion of the individual and the obstinacy of the human will

when faced with the Gospel. Our reliance must be placed on the power of the Spirit to overcome, transform, regenerate, and rebuild. Hence it is continually important for the seminary to help its students correctly divide Law and Gospel, while using every means to proclaim the Holy Scriptures. In doing this, the theological student will become less self-conscious and more Spirit-conscious.

True mission work, i. e., bringing the grace of God to bear upon men and women who are outside of the pale of Christianity, must be differentiated from the reshuffling of Christians from one denomination to another. Mission work implies that the church must continue to use every avenue of communication to maintain a dialog with the world and by that dialog release the power of the Gospel for salvation.

The laity needs to recognize its responsibility also in witnessing by life and word to the world about it, and the seminary must help its students so that they can guide the church under the Spirit to accept this responsibility. To become effective in this task the church must become more fully aware of how radically life has changed in the past two generations. For Lutherans in this country this presents a particular problem since they have a long history of ruralism behind them and are still often trying to attack their problems with a rural mind, even when working in metropolitan areas. To this we must add the difficulty of holding the somewhat naive thought that the country, villages, and towns are God's places, while the cities are the haunts of the devil. This overlooks the fact that the sins of the cities are nothing more than the sins of the small towns on a larger scale. By the same token, the villages are small-scale reproductions

of the grace of God made manifest in the cities.

When the seminaries begin to look upon the tremendous sociological changes which have taken place in America, to say nothing of the world, they must not lament because their timeworn methods no longer apply. Rather, they must adjust their procedures and approach each new obstacle as a challenging opportunity for ministering. Perhaps a few illustrations will sharpen this. The skylines of most large cities are becoming punctuated by high-rise apartments where hundreds, and in some cases thousands, are housed under one roof. Many of these self-contained units are sealed off from the community and the church. Only under the most extraordinary circumstances can a pastor gain entrance to canvass these apartments or make mission and pastoral visits. Unless some way is found, the Word of God will not be able to penetrate these steel-ribbed canyons except through the media of mass communications. One attempt toward the solution has been to establish pastors as residents in high-rise apartments and so give them a base of operation from within. But this has its limitations both in terms of manpower and in sheer economics. It would seem to be a much more effective way if the people of the church were utilized to meet this problem. Christian families in these apartments, or placed there, if necessary, would establish Christian cells and beachheads by living a life of witness to Christ. Such infiltration would enable the church to be the church there too.

This same kind of infiltration and frontier witnessing presents itself in other ways. When one considers the thousands of Christians serving in the military who are

transferred around the country and in foreign lands, one sees a reenactment of one of the great opportunities seized by the early Christians. Serving as witnesses, they made contacts with the military and its camp followers. As these were shifted about in the Roman Empire, they were instrumental in sowing the seed of the Word, with the result that Christian communities sprang up in the most far-flung and isolated parts of the empire. Is this not the opportunity that God is giving the church today? The record shows that while many fail in this respect, there are Christians who are alive to their ministry and are giving Christian witness in boot camps, training stations, and military establishments throughout the nation. Abroad, too, many of the laity are fulfilling their ministry. Seminarians need to catch the New Testament vision of the Christian ministry so that they may more vigorously guide and direct the church within the full scope of its Christian responsibility to witness—if the church is to be effective in the decades that may still lie ahead.

Where theological students recognize that they are "to help guide people in serving one another effectively in the body of Christ and become faithful witnesses of the Word,"⁸ their Christianity will not be reduced to a series of syllogisms and propositions to be debated, outlined on a chart, or subscribed to; it will be something to be lived in lifeblood. Their proclamation will not lose its force and become a secular message to men. Instead, their theological education will lead them to witness to the lordship of God in Christ Jesus, and their life will become a song of praise to God and a way of life for Him.

⁸ Objectives of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.