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Gifts from the Lord of the Church

By LEONHARD C. WUERFFEL

After a little more than 16 years of service as the dean of students at a seminary, we have been asked to set forth some observations concerning the students served during this period of time. First of all, there is something frightening about such a request. To have been intimately associated with more than 2,000 young men, who today are ministers of the Gospel and are serving their Lord and His people somewhere in the world, is unquestionably a great privilege and a humbling experience. As in the case of a pastor, so here, too, there are some things about which you do not speak. Yet there are some things that might be said which could edify God's people and let God's glory shine forth. In the prayerful hope that this goal may be achieved, we venture a few observations on seminarians of the past 16 years and their preparation for the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel to the Lord's people.

Let it quickly be added that these observations will be only one man's opinion, based chiefly on experience rather than objective data. Expression under such circumstances suffers the limitations of all human judgment, and may especially be fraught with human frailty by virtue of the close contacts had with the very people described. Not infrequently the question has been asked: "What type of students are you receiving at the seminary these days?" This is not an easy question to answer with precision. However, some impressions may aid in arriving at a picture of the present generation of seminarians. Experience in the actual work of the ministry conveys

a much better answer, and this may be judged more accurately by those who are being served or by those supervising them and working with them as ministers of the Gospel.

This writer is convinced that the men whom we receive at the seminary are gifts from the Lord of the church. As they enter their parishes upon receiving their calls, they are, in a very real sense, gifts of the Lord Christ (Eph. 4:11). Generally speaking, they reflect a genuine spirit of dedication to their Lord and a desire to serve Christ and His people as ministers of the Gospel. In a survey of the entering class of 1962 the question was asked: "How definite is your decision to become a minister at the present time?" Of 137 students, 99 answered "definite"; 27, "fairly definite"; 11, "indefinite." This spread is typical in the experience of this writer. It can readily be understood that some may have reservations when confronted with this question as they first enter the seminary. Most frequently they have concerns about their personal fitness for the work. They need help to learn to know themselves and their talents more fully. They need assistance in understanding the work of the ministry more accurately before arriving at a final and fixed commitment. The manner in which they deal with these questions is wholesome, and their desire to do the will of the Lord is evident. By far the majority reflect a sensitive approach to this question. If they indicate to others an uncertainty about becoming ministers, some might immediately label this as a failure to have a proper commitment. However, it is more

often traceable to their overwhelming realization of what will be required of them as ministers and to an awareness of the times in which we are living. They have read what is being said about the image of the ministry today. They have heard from many reliable sources that the Christian church is under fire and that its influence where it is established is progressively less noticeable in the lives of people, especially those who are only nominally affiliated with the church. Nonetheless, they show an eagerness to know their task better and to understand how, under God's blessing, they may use the tools of their task—Word and sacraments—with telling results.

There is an attitude and atmosphere of sobriety and, as one senior put it, an awesome feeling as the members of each graduating class face the day of ordination. Much of this approach is due to their 12-month involvement in the actual work of the ministry during their vicarage. Here they have been able to put theory into practice, and they have gained a real taste of the work and the world by personal observation and effort. The value of the vicarage is unquestionable and is a most vital part of their training. The congregations of Synod and their pastors are to be commended for their readiness to give the students the benefit of this year of pastoral experience. Not a little effort and financial investment has been made by these congregations and their pastors year after year. The value of this should be set down as a major contribution to the full and proper preparation of the men for their ministry in the future.

The vicarage experience and the field-work program while the student is in residence are of special significance to our

present generation of students. First of all, the number of students coming from parsonages or from the homes of teachers is on the decrease from year to year. In addition, the number of students who are affected by the pressures of the times and who come from broken homes, or who are recent converts to the Lutheran Church, is on the increase. To be with the Lord's people as they carry on their Kingdom work, and to serve shoulder to shoulder with a pastor or teacher is essential to the student's growth and understanding of the Synod and the ministry of God's Word and sacraments.

In many ways these young men are like any group of red-blooded American males. They come with all manner of solutions to the problems of the world and its people, and they surely know just what Synod should do in many instances. They soon learn, however, when they enter the active work, that answers are not so easily found, and that the work of the Lord as a minister of the Gospel is truly an act of faith. The Lord's work needs His blessing as we seek to do His will in the light of Bible directives. Much could be written about how dedicated pastors and teachers, as well as lay members, have made lasting influences upon the personal faith of these men. They were aided to arrive at a realistic outlook toward the ministry of the Gospel as a life of service to God and His people. The church has truly ministered to them during this formative time as they prepared themselves to become undershepherds of the Lord Christ, the Chief Shepherd.

We have indicated that some students reflected uncertainty in their vocational outlook, and that their uncertainty may be based on a feeling of personal inadequacy for the task or on a fear as to what

might be expected of them by the people whom they will serve. There is yet another aspect to which reference should be made and which may deserve greater delineation. I speak of the spiritual struggle which many students go through as to their personal faith in Christ and the salvation which He prepared for them and for all people. Luther spoke of this as *tentatio*, and for theological students this becomes a real factor with which to deal. There is comfort for a theological faculty in the fact that the Reformer defines this experience as one of the elements that make a theologian. Yet there is little comfort for the student in this statement as he is in the midst of the often painful process of theological growth. Ideally a seminary should be a community in which doubts are both acknowledged and overcome.

If we know anything surely about the spiritual climate in which a person can prepare to be an adequate Christian pastor, it is to be found in a community where faith is a living reality, and where people are unafraid of honest confession of doubt in any of its dimensions.¹

In a certain sense this struggle is to be anticipated. The devil will work overtime to destroy the faith of anyone who wishes to serve the Lord in the ministry. Where the study of theology is pursued in earnest, the old evil foe has not declared an amnesty; quite to the contrary, he will use his devilish skills with the highest possible degree of effectiveness. On the other hand, many of the men, who are only weak and normal human beings, may have viewed the office of the ministry and its powers

as a protective device against facing themselves. They may have seen the work as an opportunity to acquire special status or to achieve power over people. Perhaps for the first time they are thrust into the setting where they see themselves clearly for what they are in the light of God's Word—sinners and saints. They recognize that a lifetime of dealing with the frailties of human flesh in themselves and others is involved. They find that total dependence on the grace of God in Christ is needed, and they learn to despair of self and all that man may achieve intellectually or by his behavior. This is a time of "blood, sweat, and tears" for the theological student who is so close to the Word, and yet seems to be removed so far from the power of the Gospel.

In the same volume Williams observes: We see here one reason why theological faculties are often rightly more disturbed by the student who seems to have no religious problems than one who does. Certainly we do not try to manufacture difficulties for the Christian life. We do not have to. There are enough questions in life and theology. But there are those who seem to manage to move serenely through a theological course without any profound searching either of the Gospel or of themselves. It is a fair guess that they rarely make good pastors.²

Every teacher of the Holy Scriptures at a seminary will know exactly to what Williams is referring. The teacher is supremely aware that his assignment is not only to stimulate the student by leading him into new and broader avenues of knowledge. The student also needs to be aided to bring his newly acquired concepts into focus for

¹ Daniel D. Williams, *The Minister and the Care of Souls* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1962), p. 113.

² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

his own personal faith and for his future pastoral leadership. Wagoner puts it this way in his recent book:

Seminary is a time when honest faith and honest doubt are inseparable. It is also a time when acute self-consciousness about such matters reaches its heights. How much easier it would be if the student could *simply* study the German Reformation or the Oxford Movement or Baillie's Christology without any concern for personal involvement in the problems raised. It cannot be.³

In connection with the spiritual struggles through which these theological students go one is reminded of Luther's famous statement: "I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to search deeper for it, when my temptations took me."⁴

Ours is the privilege and obligation of helping these young men to keep close to Christ in His Word and Sacrament as they pass through these dark waters of doubt and temptation. To lead these young men deeper into the treasures of God's Word is the daily activity of professors of theology. For this cause it is indeed a comfort to know that we as teachers of the Word have the prayers of the Lord's people.

The training of our pastors may extend for as long as a span of 12 years if a student enters the program at the freshman high school level. This has been called "the System," affectionately, and sometimes not so affectionately. We do not wish to enter into the debate on the merits or demerits of beginning study for the ministry as a freshman in high school. No matter what position is taken concerning this early

beginning, few will argue the merits of the fellowship benefits which future pastors have as they study and live together as men of God, preparing for the work of the ministry. There is admittedly the danger of spoon-feeding and prolonging the period of dependence. There is the danger of conformity; many other things could be listed. However, there is a value that few will question in having men living together who are dedicated to and studying toward the same goal which, in the nature of the case, contributes to their growth by mutual service. They learn to minister to each other's needs, and this should have a carry-over value in their later ministry as they work together in the field as fellow pastors. Educationally, the values gained by associations and discussions outside of the classroom can enhance the instructional task. In addition, as these young men grow into manhood, the help they render to each other is difficult to acquire in any other way.

It may be an oversimplification to put it this way, but I believe that it can be said that few men can go far "in the system" who are marked by serious and debilitating idiosyncrasies before the brothers will put forth efforts to help bring about changes. It is true that some are hurt and apparently suffer negative results. As long as the world stands, the best of God's people will need to battle the old Adam. However, for the vast majority, life together makes them stronger men in Christ and equips them with witness skills that will result in a lasting contribution for their future service to people. It is also all to the good if in confidence they can discuss the problems which they confront, if they can admit the failures which they have made, and if they can listen with good grace to the critical

³ Walter D. Wagoner, *Bachelor of Divinity* (New York: Association Press, 1963), p. 73.

⁴ WA, *Tischreden*, I, p. 352.

appraisal of their brother seminarians. In our success-minded age with its keen competition, it is essential that by such sharing these potential pastors learn the value of this resource for insight and mutual support. The severest deterrent to this type of mutual help is the defensive and anxious spirit that is concerned about exposure of incompetence. Nonetheless, we need the grace to submit our ministry to colleagues who can speak critically in love. All too frequently ministers, whether young or old, escape the discipline involved in having their work examined by those who can observe critically and judge constructively. It is our contention that much of this art can be learned at the seminary. At least a good beginning can be made, and later the grace of being a pastor to a fellow pastor can be acquired with more telling effect as confession is made and forgiveness in the name of Christ is applied. It is a cheering experience to sit with pastors who pursue their vocations as ministers of the Gospel in this spirit of mutual care and spiritual helpfulness toward each other.

Concordia Seminary has had to work with the fact of marriage on the part of the seminarians. Two factors in the development of our schools and their programs must be kept in mind. The Synod has added one year to the total program with the establishment of Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne, Ind. At present the average age of our graduates is 26 years. It is to be noted also that all the preparatory schools except the Senior College and the Milwaukee Concordia have become coeducational institutions, allowing for earlier association with girls, who in many cases become pastors' wives. This early association calls for early commitment

and long engagements in many cases. We may wish that it were otherwise, and I know that my colleagues at our various preparatory schools are putting forth yeoman's efforts to stay the trend. The fact remains that many arrive at the point where they feel that it is the Lord's will for them to marry. On its marriage policy the seminary has endeavored to call students' attention to what is involved. The pertinent portion reads:

It is the general policy of the faculty and the board of control of Concordia Seminary to counsel students not to assume the responsibilities and obligations of marriage prior to graduation.

While it is true that marriage is one of God's great gifts to be desired and held in honor by all, and for many students marriage has not interfered with their academic development, yet the seminary, as a professional school, must exact more effort and demand more time of the student than is expected of the average undergraduate. Accordingly the single student will generally do better in his total program of preparing for the ministry. Wisdom and experience dictate that the problems and responsibilities which married students face be considered very carefully. They involve social (family) and economic (financial) obligations which may make impossible the successful completion of a student's theological training.⁵

Year after year this policy has been reviewed by both faculty and the students involved. The policy has been maintained. The students who have been guided by it have encouraged the continuation of the financial prerequisites set by the seminary and the clearance in advance with the dean

⁵ *Concordia Seminary Catalog, 1964—65, p. 33.*

of the student's intention to marry. It is evident that this policy has been a stabilizing feature, though some may feel that a personal matter of this kind should not be "regulated."

Positively it can be stated that the married students have done good work at the seminary. The requirements of the classroom have been met, and as a general rule the students' academic standings have not suffered. I hasten to add that there are intangibles involved that are most difficult to assess. For example, the seniors will surely desire to do some studying in depth even beyond the demands of the classroom to round out their preparation. Time may not permit this privilege for a married student. It is my honest conviction that some men, on the other hand, are the better for their marriage, and their wives have gained some invaluable lessons for their future service as pastors' wives. Special attention can be given to these girls during the months in which their husbands are studying at the seminary or learning in their vicarage. This is not to say that we are ready to encourage this approach as a general policy, but it does mean that we must realistically and honestly take cognizance of what has happened.

Negatively it should be added that some men need to work at a part-time outside job too many hours each week, or their wives need to assume the position of breadwinner and homemaker at the same time. This could prove to be quite strenuous and interfere with the most favorable beginning of a home for the future. The spirit of sacrifice which most of these young wives show in assuring themselves that their husbands get their job done as seminarians, and done well, is commendable

and evident. There are difficulties. If, however, there are those that feel that ultimately this trend will lead to a "domesticated ministry," permit me to predict that this will not take place. The desire to know their place in the future work of their husbands, and to fill this place in a God-pleasing manner, is very apparent among these girls. The possibility is undeniable, but this generation of students' wives is facing it honestly and openly. They have formed their own organization on the campus for socialization and education. Special lectures are held by various members of the instructional staff to prepare them for their work and to give them a better understanding of theology.

It cannot be denied that the loss of leadership influence of many of the off-campus married seniors is keenly felt. The type of sharing described above is limited by the fact that these married men live off campus and have only occasional contact with the underclassmen. When Synod builds dormitories for married students, this loss will be greatly minimized. Until then student leaders are encouraging new patterns of student fellowship and activity to preserve as much as possible this vital association.

The number of seminarians engaged in part-time jobs to support themselves is on the increase and poses a problem to which much thought and prayer must be given. A number of factors must be kept in mind. Today's student spends about twice as much on books as students of 10 years ago. A recent study of the financial needs of our students indicated that in the course of five years their overall educational costs have gone up 50 percent. Support of students has been increased considerably. More financial help is being given by the Dis-

tracts of Synod, by congregations and individuals, and by parents or other members of the family. Scholarships have also been on the increase. However, all of these sources of help have not increased in accordance with the cost of living, or more accurately, in proportion to the expressed needs of the students. Undoubtedly, the standard of living of our modern culture has made its impact felt on the sense of value of our students. The latest model car, a closet full of clothes, an active social life may be items that could be debated as essential to a modern ministry. Students need to be helped to realize that a pastor ought to live a little lower for a little less rather than to live too high and obstruct the view of the Suffering Servant who had not where to lay His head, and whose image every good pastor ought to be.

A limited amount of outside work can fit well into the primary function of a seminary. No one should question the thesis that the primary calling of a theological student is to prepare himself for service in the ministry of the Word. Everything that he does should in some way assist to that end. His primary task is to master the living Word and living with people with all the implications involved (Eph. 4:1-16). It might be stated that a limited amount of work can be recreative in nature. It can also aid the future pastor to a better understanding of modern man. On the one hand, simply to supply the student with all that he needs financially could result in making him an excellent scholar but one who has lost touch with reality. On the other hand, to press the ideal of "the working student" can result in irreparable harm to his effectiveness as a theologically sound minister of the Gospel. The opportunity

to gain the full benefit of formal study may never again return for many.

Last year the assistant dean of students, who supervises the seminarians in this phase of their experience, made certain observations that give pause for serious reflection and point out one of the seminary's ongoing unfinished tasks. He said:

There is no easy answer to the dilemma in which the modern theological student finds himself. To say that a student should not work will not do, for this is neither practical nor necessary. What is more, if this were suggested, then in order to set a good example, members of the staff would also have to dispense with such outside activities as preaching, lectures, writing, assistantships, etc., and needless to say, this would impose a real hardship for some. A loan fund for students can only be of temporary assistance. So I believe that the working student will always be with us. Approximately 55 percent of the St. Louis seminary students have permanent part-time jobs, not to mention those who get occasional odd jobs. Nearly half of these students are employed in areas relating to some phase of theological education. Almost all of these work under 15 hours each week. There are some 60 who work more, and half of these are in the Barnes-Renard Hospital seminary-sponsored program. The student who wishes to work only some 6 hours each week has a problem because most permanent part-time jobs require 10 or more, and most students who do serious budget planning prefer some kind of modest but regular income. I think it is no secret that some students are working because they are laying up hidden treasures for the day of their graduation or marriage or both.

A few words should be said in regard to graduate study after the seminarian has

acquired his bachelor of divinity degree. In increasing numbers students have expressed the desire to continue with additional study before family obligations become too severe and congregational responsibilities make this desire almost impossible of fulfillment. First of all, Synod does make provision for this consideration (*synodical Handbook*, 6.163 f). Secondly, the need of the Synod for teachers in its system of schools makes it mandatory that this matter be carefully considered. Proof for this can be found in a survey of the present staffs of teachers at our synodical institutions and the current pressure on the Board for Higher Education to find adequately prepared men to fill these staffs. Further, each terminal school should exercise careful judgment in assuring itself that the students best suited for graduate study pursue this course. In addition, each terminal school, to my knowledge, has set up a way in which these graduates can be guided in their studies and followed year by year in their additional development.

Some people have expressed the concern that continued graduate study will result in the loss of many of our graduates for the ministry. This is not the case. The majority of these students continue at our School for Graduate Studies and are led deeper into the Word of God by our own teachers. In a study of the classes from 1947 to 1962 (16 years), involving 1,902 students, only 8 who continued in graduate study did not enter the ministry of God's Word. Even this small number is to be regretted, but it surely reflects no greater loss than the number of men who for various and sundry other reasons may no longer be serving today.

We should include the observation that this writer has found the seniors who desire to continue their studies upon graduation serious and intent on doing the God-pleasing thing as they face this decision. It is true that some may desire further study as an escape from assuming the responsibilities of the ministry at this time or for other reasons. However, only God can look into a man's heart, and no one cares to play God in so serious a matter. Students are encouraged to go into graduate study only if they see in this added study an opportunity to serve the Lord and His people the better. This is not to speak disparagingly of the preparation of our regular graduates for the work of the ministry. Experience seems to indicate that they are able to serve well. On the other hand, a certain carefully selected number of students need to be directed toward advanced graduate study, not for the purpose of status or any similar selfish reason but that the work of our Lord may never be wanting for properly prepared pastors also for the several specialized ministries.

Finally, many heartening experiences have been had with the elected student leaders. They have shown a quality of leadership and concern for the brethren that augurs well for the future of our seminary and our Synod. Today many of the students with whom we have worked hold key positions in Synod — District Presidents, Circuit Counselors, and top positions in our synodical boards and schools. Working with these men was a distinct privilege as we had occasion to direct them in a manner and to minister to them, and in turn to have been helped to grow in Christ by and through them in so many ways.

St. Louis, Mo.