

10-1-1968

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### Recommended Citation

Goltermann, Samuel I. (1968) "The Future of Theological Education," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 39, Article 59.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol39/iss1/59>

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# The Future of Theological Education

SAMUEL I. GOLTERMANN

*(This paper was prepared for a meeting of District contact men of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, held June 18, 1968. The author is assistant executive secretary of the Board for Higher Education of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.)*

Theological education has become one of the more controversial issues in today's ecclesiastical world. Almost everyone associated with the establishment has some opinions on how to improve it.

The factors which must be taken into consideration are of substantial number and variety. The best I can do is to pick up, ever so gently and so briefly, some of the many threads and attempt to weave them together to show a possible new design in the fabric of theological education in the United States. As you can expect, it will be difficult to distinguish what other people think is going to happen, what I think is going to happen, and what is really going to happen.

Recently the American Association of Theological Schools met in St. Louis. This is the large association which includes almost all institutions of theological education in the United States and Canada. For many years it represented only Protestant schools, but in the last several years a considerable number of Catholic institutions have also sought membership. On the membership list will be found small denominational seminaries, as well as large independent and university-centered seminaries.

Several years ago this association appointed a Resources Planning Commission to advise the members of the association

and the churches they serve how the resources for theological education in North America may be redeployed to insure more effective education for priesthood and ministry. This commission was to look into the future and to give advice as to what changes must be effected if theological education is to survive (and survive seems to be the correct word) the great changes and upheavals in American culture. According to the report of the commission, "the creation of the commission reflects widespread concern and agreement among seminary educators, clergy, seminarians, church officials and laymen in the churches: it is that the training of men for the priesthood and ministry must undergo profound changes if the churches are to be supplied with adequate leadership during the coming decade." Indeed, the commission concluded from its study that "profound changes in the existing pattern of seminary education in North America must quickly be effected; [that] these changes are likely to be even more profound and more continuing than many seminaries and churches currently perceive; and [that] the pace of change at all levels of theological education must be accelerated if seminaries are to retain their historic position in Roman Catholicism and in major Protestant denominations as the primary source from which the churches secure new clergy."

Although the AATS report does not use the expression, it has been indicated that two overwhelming considerations have dictated this conclusion: ecumenics and eco-

nomics. For many the ecumenical theme has become a basic assumption and the ecumenical process has become an essential part of "adequate" seminary education. The report of the Resources Planning Commission says:

Fully adequate seminary education will not be possible unless students planning to enter the priesthood of the Roman Catholic and orthodox churches and men entering the ministry and priesthood of the major divisions of Protestantism

1. can sit together in the same classes and seminars studying that increasing body of Christian knowledge and tradition within which historic confessional differences either are already non-existent or are undergoing radical redefinition;

2. have the opportunity in the central or basic portion of the educational program to engage in valid inter-confessional dialogue about issues which remain the subject of meaningful differences between and within the major traditions;

3. have the opportunity to work together in a variety of practical settings of the type which will characterize the ministries which they are preparing to enter; and

4. have the opportunity to develop a common life in conjunction with formal instructional settings and processes which will facilitate the fullest personal realization of the ecumenical educational experience.

In other words, the members of the commission believe "that adequate training for ministry and priesthood must be ecumenical and that, to be ecumenical, men of different confessions and traditions must be educated in a common setting."

The economics theme behind the call for radical change in seminary education in the United States is predicated on the be-

lief that unless there are substantial structural changes, a considerable number of American seminaries will be forced to the wall during the next decade. According to the report, these are the facts:

The cost of merely staying alive, of conducting business as usual, without making any changes in the existing programs, will at least double again in the next decade. Making any profound changes in programs and methods, if undertaken by an individual seminary, seems likely to require operating expenditures which will be four or five times greater than those today. . . . The cost of educating a minister in a Protestant seminary today has become one of the highest per student costs in professional education. The average annual cost of educating a Protestant seminarian is \$2,650, while the comparable cost per student in law schools is \$1,100.

Certain facts must be remembered to understand some of these apparently radical statements. Most American seminaries are relatively small institutions. A seminary numbering 100 students is not unusual. These institutions largely account for the seemingly high per student cost of theological education. The very comfortable size of the two Missouri Synod seminaries accounts, in part, for their somewhat lower per student cost of operation. Most American denominations have many seminaries rather than just one or two; they are often very loosely attached to their denominations; they frequently have very inadequate support and very inadequate physical facilities.

Further, it should be remembered that many of these seminaries are in culturally isolated places; they are perforce inadequately staffed. In most seminaries, large and small, staff members are compensated

at a rate significantly lower than that offered in most nontheological educational institutions today. Considerations of basic equity alone will require substantial increases in faculty salaries at theological seminaries generally. Moreover, a new competition has entered the scene for the services of top-quality theological instructors. The fantastic growth of departments of religion and theology at private and public universities has suddenly created a greater demand for competent instructors, a fact which of necessity will drive the "price" up. All of these considerations have resulted in the now-famous proposal of the AATS commission for "theological clusters." The suggestion is that seminaries gather, perhaps by physically moving themselves into clusters of schools which, *while retaining their confessional identity*, will participate rather intimately in a sharing of educational facilities and functions, both to provide an ecumenical context for seminary education and to effect the greatest possible economies of physical facilities and of instructional staff.

Integral to this proposal is the proposition that these clusters of theological seminaries should also be intimately related to a major university, not only to permit maximum utilization of university facilities and offerings, but also to facilitate an ideological dialog and to halt the increasing separation of theological study and conversation from American education generally.

It is difficult to estimate at this point what effect this massive proposal will have on theological education. It seems safe to say, however, that it is not completely unreal. Many American seminaries will either be favorably disposed toward its theoretical

assumptions and will *want* to move toward an accommodation with them, or will be *forced* to seek such new alignments out of concern for sheer survival. I suspect that it is obvious to say that the two seminaries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will not in the immediate future be heavily involved, at least physically or structurally, in this movement. Both the traditional theological position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as well as the geographic location and the size of the seminaries will prevent a literal accommodation to the cluster theory.

The study commission of the AATS has designated the St. Louis-Kansas City area as a possible cluster area but, frankly, sees little possibility of effecting new accommodations and alignments in this area. No one, either inside or outside the Missouri Synod, has seriously proposed the physical removal of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. And, for that matter, persons outside the Missouri Synod have actually been less inclined than the people inside it to recommend seriously the physical removal of Concordia Seminary, Springfield. Actually, the size of both of these seminaries makes them much less susceptible to criticism for so-called isolated existence than other seminaries of much smaller size operating elsewhere in the nation.

All of this, of course, does not prevent the two Concordia Seminaries from moving toward greater involvement and cooperation with other theological schools than has heretofore been considered possible or appropriate. The St. Louis metropolitan area does provide substantial opportunity for interseminary relationships because of the presence of Eden Theological Seminary, the St. Louis University School

of Divinity, and Kenrick Seminary. We already have the possibility of cross-registration with the St. Louis University School of Divinity in certain elective courses. It should be pointed out, of course, that such arrangements fall far short of the intimacy and comprehensiveness of cooperation which the AATS proposal recommends. However, for our purposes and in view of our traditions, these arrangements are undoubtedly vastly more appropriate for the time being than the more drastic proposals. It should also be pointed out that continued cooperation with both Washington University and Saint Louis University permits the realization of at least some of the benefits which are presumed to inhere in the seminary-university dialog. It is also good news to hear that a major state college will soon be built in Springfield, Ill. This will give our seminary there, for the first time, the advantages of such an institution in the immediate metropolitan area. Incidentally, it will be a *senior* college, for juniors, seniors, and graduate students.

I have spent a considerable amount of time in providing a description of this one major proposal because of its immediate newsworthiness and because of the way it now dominates the American theological education scene. Actually, much more needs to be said about the future of American theological education which does not involve the location and form of seminaries, but which may in the long run be more important. Let me try to gather up a few of these threads.

First, something about curriculum and instruction. There are many people who insist that the so-called "classic" or "standard" seminary curriculum is in need of drastic revision, that it is, in fact, outright

obsolete. They say that it simply does not prepare men for ministry anywhere in today's world, and certainly not in areas like the inner city, the ghetto, or the university. Although these condemnations seem unnecessarily severe, it does not seem unduly negative to agree that theological education has probably been unnecessarily bound by such forms as the four-discipline structure (exegetical, systematic, historical, and practical divisions), the lecture system, traditional course and subject sequences, and an unusual rigidity in terms of course requirements.

I say that we can agree to certain of these accusations, but with hesitation and reluctance. We also need to admit that there are many, many people within the theological education establishment who have not only been aware of these problems for many years but have worked valiantly to bring new life and vigor into theological education. To imply or to infer that theological education has been static over the past decades is simply unwarranted; there has been change, movement, progress. Visits to classrooms, examination of textbooks and syllabi, and careful analysis of the daily life and activity and work of the seminarian would, I think, convince everybody that many good things have been happening.

Much more can be expected to happen in the years to come. There seems little doubt that practically every course and every program will not only be challenged but will also be changed, both by reorganizing the content and revising the method. Theological problems will be studied by a cross-disciplinary method which involves invoking the Scriptural witness, of course, but also studying the historical context and

human situation in which the theological fact or truth is to be taught and communicated. This will mean less "learning" of theology (especially as propositions and theses) and more "doing" of theology in the sense of forming theological statements and understandings as a product of applying the Word of God to present situations and structures. All of this may require substantial changes in method, from traditional lecture, recitation, and propositional modes to problem-centered and case-history approaches which enable the student to operate in the classroom in a manner very similar to the way in which he will have to *do* theology in the ministry to which he will soon be called. In fact, certain of these methods will find appropriate use in the exegetical and systematic fields as well as in the practical or pastoral areas, to which their application now seems particularly obvious.

New attention will certainly need to be given to a basic canon of education, namely, that instruction should start from where the student is. This implies a recognition of his present needs, concerns, interests, doubts, and anxieties, and assisting him to grow, to find answers, to gain assurance and commitment, and to develop dispositions and skills for ministry. The profound implications of this curricular principle can scarcely be overemphasized, and the obligations within it must be impressed upon teachers not only at the seminary level but indeed at all levels of education. It needs to come as a serious critique of all those course outlines which have, without serious examination, proceeded simply from "A" to "Z," from the early to the late, from the simple to the complex. If I may illustrate from a field outside theology, let

me ask this: If you had the opportunity to teach literature to a group of college freshmen, and if you really felt an honest obligation to your students to open to them the quality of literature as representation of life and human thought—if you wanted to awaken and arouse and enliven their minds and hearts—would you really start your literature course with *Beowulf* or the *Faerie Queen*? Or would you perhaps grab a bunch of paperbacks from the rack at the airport and from this point of contact lead back into styles and modes of expression and thought-worlds and idea-constructs to explain whence our world and culture and the shape of our very thoughts have derived? There is so much in the teaching of religion and theology that must allow for these same *human* considerations.

It would seem that a further obligation of instruction and curriculum construction in theological seminaries would be to allow for some sort of intimate impingement of the major nontheological disciplines upon the theological—much as they do in the realities of life and of ministry. I am thinking particularly of the disciplines of the behavioral sciences and the humanities. Let me hasten to say that I am *not* talking about the teaching of psychology, for example, as a kind of skill in understanding or adjusting human relationships or even in human engineering. What I mean is a serious confrontation of the interpretation which the behavioral sciences explicitly, and literature and drama and other interpretive arts implicitly, make of the nature of man and his world and his destiny. It has always seemed strange to me that we have given so much consideration to the relationship of the physical sciences to historic Christian faith and have said so

very little about the more telling effect of the social or behavioral sciences and of literature and art. This critique is not taken seriously if we do no more than provide liberal arts courses in the preseminary curriculum; the relationship must be much more intimately established to the point where it is necessary to have the witness of psychologists and sociologists and philosophers and dramatists in the major theology courses, especially systematics, ethics, and pastoral theology.

A final curricular issue is as important as any. In the future we shall undoubtedly see a far greater emphasis on field education. Field education is more than observation; it is more than occasional participation in parish work or Christian education or institutional ministry, with little criticism or guidance from a supervising professional. Good field education (and I would call it *clinical* education if the term had not been preempted by the institutional people) includes intimate involvement in action- and person-centered experiences with continuous interpretation of purpose and method by a professional who has the disposition to invest time and effort in making them valid teaching experiences.

As you can imagine, this is an extremely difficult objective to accomplish, not only because such a program is hard to organize and because enough teaching situations are hard to find, but also because many practicing professionals have permitted themselves to grow sufficiently careless in many of their activities that they cannot be depended upon to provide an exemplary teaching situation. Both the field education which is received in the seminary city as well as the 12-month internship have done much to provide the seminarian of the past

and of the present with valuable experience; to provide needed improvement in this program will require a new dedication to internship and field education as being essentially an educational experience for the student and not a source of inexpensive professional help for pastors and congregations. It is essential that this purpose of field education be understood by the pastors and people of a church constituency in order to allow the educational institutions to continue to adjust field education programs to the educational task. There seems little doubt that it will be necessary to follow the lead of the medical profession in teaching more and more of ministry through clinical procedures rather than through textbook procedures.

Leaving the area of curriculum in the narrow sense, we need to turn some attention also to recruitment, specialization, and career contours. Much has been said about the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit competent young men for the pastoral ministry. Related phenomena, which ought not to be oversimplified but carefully studied, are a tendency toward later commitment, a less than universal willingness to prepare for ministry by proceeding through the entire synodical education structure, and a growing resistance to a predetermined universal program for every student.

There seems little doubt that recruitment is going to become more difficult, and the difficulty is going to be felt equally along quantitative and qualitative lines. While I do not want to minimize the continuing difficulty of the quantitative, I want to emphasize that as a church we shall have to concern ourselves more and more with the qualitative. By *qualitative* I certainly do

not mean sheer academic or intellectual prowess, but that whole set of qualities of person and character which involve skills of communication and of relationship and the disposition to place creativity and imagination as well as discipline into an effective ministry directed to real people.

Frankly, there are not going to be too many people available to the church for professional ministry in the years to come, and the more concerned we are about getting the right kind of people, the less attachment we can have to the purely *traditional* modes of identifying, attracting, supporting, and educating them. The kind of people we want and need have high expectations of quality education; they want to have a substantial personal voice in determining the nature and character of their education, and they are most unhappy about many of the traditional forms, the red tape, and the regulations which often-times circumscribe even professional education as if the participants were children, delinquents, or idiots.

It is frequently said that theological education has erred seriously in that it has attempted to force all would-be clergymen into exactly the same mold, both in terms of life-style as well as of professional preparation. More about life-style in a moment; but the problem of program differentiation or specialization remains one of the most difficult for educational administrators. It seems obvious that the two extremes must be assiduously resisted: either making everyone take exactly the same program or, on the other extreme, permitting total and immediate specialization.

In their good judgment, theological educators will always have to distinguish between a basic curriculum, a semi-elective

layer wherein a student may exercise choice which reflects his interest but where an adequate distribution is still required (so many courses in New Testament, so many courses in Old Testament, etc.), and finally an area of true elective choice which will permit the student to prepare himself particularly well for a form of ministry which he has in mind. There seems little doubt that this last category will grow in theological education. It is precisely this fact which seems to call for substantial consultation soon of representatives of various activities in the church to assure that this may be done profitably and without untoward consequences for the future of either the individual or the church. It simply does not seem possible in the present state of affairs to allow the kind of specialization in ministry which is commonplace in medicine. Just recall how large a proportion of ministers shift from one form of ministry to another, perhaps several times in their careers.

On the other hand, something will have to be done, and apparently quite soon, in order to prepare seminarians or graduating candidates for the specific needs and problems of the ministries which they will enter immediately upon graduation. A thought which comes to mind is the possibility that a candidate might receive his call sufficiently early in his last year to permit at least the last quarter of his last year to be devoted almost exclusively to specific preparation for the kind of ministry he will be assuming. It may become more and more common for a candidate to spend the summer between graduation and the assumption of his ministry in specialized preparation. The concept of a specialized internship, although much more difficult



and controversial, is also being widely discussed.

Behind all of these possibilities, there looms, of course, an even greater question as to the wisdom of permitting some kind of even more basic choice by the seminarian with respect to the nature and quality of his entire seminary career and subsequently of his ministry. What I am alluding to is the possibility of a two-track system through the entire course of theological education, one oriented toward theology in the more scholarly and historical sense and the other track emphasizing ministry, with the emphasis upon parish activity, education, counseling, and the like. What restrains us, of course, is the long-term Lutheran tradition of a "scholarly ministry" which assumes an intimate union of theology and ministry in the lives of all those who accept ordination. We have always felt that the parish minister must be a theologian and a scholar in the preparation of sermons (even in the preparation of sermons for "simple" people, which is probably the hardest kind of preaching and the one which requires the most professional know-how), in educational endeavors (such as Bible class and confirmation class), as well as in his analysis of personal and community needs. The theological professor, in turn, needs to be not only a theologian but a minister, both because he is bound by the nature of his office to be a true minister to his students, to see them as people and to share with them the nature of Christian theology as Gospel, and also because he is teaching theology for use in *ministry*.

There are two additional massive concerns of theological education which we can only mention here, but which will

certainly be important elements in theological education in the future.

One of these is continuing education for the clergy. It is now widely recognized that no professional person can today afford to work through an entire career without continuously refreshing and updating his professional education. Moreover, there is broad recognition of the fact that this process must be given its due—that it cannot be accomplished only by reading a few magazines and an occasional book or by going to a conference now and then to hear a couple of short papers.

Hence, practically all of the American denominations are undertaking substantial programs of continuing education, some of these in and through seminaries and other existing educational structures, others establishing separate programs, structures, and centers for this purpose.

The big tasks which remain are to convince a larger portion of the clergy to see their obligation to the church and to themselves in this area and to persuade congregations to grant their pastors annual educational leaves with pay and stipends for what is an integral function of their professional life.

Another contemporary challenge which theological education must face is the preparation of men for ministry in the ethnic minorities, chiefly in the black ghettos. As we have read in many places recently, this is not simply a matter of inserting a few units or courses in urban sociology and Afro-American history into the curriculum. The contention is that no man can serve as a pastor in the black community unless he has experienced "the black condition" and learned to "think black." This he can never learn at a white

seminary or even at a "whitened Negro seminary." Hence, the call is to create new organizations and structures which will meet the requirements and which will be mainly administered and staffed by members of the black community. The most serious complication is, of course, the staggering difficulty of finding qualified black instructors who have not already accepted "better" offers and of finding qualified black students who can resist the temptations of generous scholarships from other schools, most of whom are now in intense competition for these students.

The issues to which I have thus far alluded may be considered some of the threads which will help to form the pattern of the fabric of theological education in the future. But, if I can get the analogy correct, these issues have been the great warp threads, running lengthwise through the loom. In our context, they are structural, organizational, curricular issues.

But a fabric also has woof threads—those running crosswise in the loom, without which we would only have string and no fabric or design. For us, these are the human and personal considerations, the considerations which revolve about the development and formation of the individual person as a humble, committed man of God, disposed to put himself into the service of his Lord and the church.

I feel that there must be a new concern for this part of education. I feel that seminaries will again come to see formation as a process compatible with professional graduate education. Theological schools will express a new concern for maximizing a sense of community, a worshiping, studying, communicating, interacting, ministering kind of campus community—in-

volving administrators and teachers as well as students.

We have recently been talking a great deal about life-style—and the life-style of seminary students should not be excluded. Our students are becoming increasingly heterogeneous on almost every scale, and they are also intimately involved in all the forces of change, of protest, of self-expression, of diversity and personalism which are making their impact throughout our society. Increasingly, they will not be fitting the stereotype and image which many of us continue to hold of the Lutheran pastor—in dress, social and recreational activity, modes of expression, and political and social philosophy. There is much good in this, and there will be many problems and difficulties. At any rate, life-style should and will become a more real and legitimate area of concern in theological education.

More than most other forms of education, theological education ignores the student at its own risk and peril. If you think that it is simply out of the question that any school should ignore its student, I would respectfully suggest that you are somewhat naive.

The Report of the Committee on the Student in Higher Education, commissioned by the Hazen Foundation and chaired by the dean of student affairs at the University of Wisconsin, recently appeared. This strongly worded criticism of contemporary general higher education contains sentences like these:

The Committee proposes to criticize American higher education for not being more concerned about the total personality development of its students.

We are . . . asking that the college do more than it ever did before in facilitating

the development of the young adult personality.

The young person becomes what he becomes not *only* because of what he hears in the classroom and not even *mainly* because of what he hears in the classroom. His interaction with teachers, his encounters with the social structure of the college administration, the friendship groups in which he becomes integrated, the values he acquires from student culture, the atmosphere of flexibility or rigidity which permeates the school environment, the playfulness or the seriousness, the "practicality" or the "spontaneity" of operative goals of his college—all these have an immense, if not yet precisely measured, impact on the evolution of the young person's self-view and world-view, on his confidence and altruism, on his mastering of the needs for identity and intimacy. The college cannot escape the fact that it does have such an impact, that the quality of life on the campus (and even in the halls of the commuter college) does shape the personality of its youthful charges.

It is no longer possible to take a narrow view of intelligence as "academic knowledge," isolating cognitive growth from moral growth and the general maturation of the person.

We have become sophisticated enough to realize that rigid rules, minute supervision, and compulsory attendance at church services contribute nothing to the growth of the human personality. Yet the fantastic challenges of the rapid expansion of the last two decades have prevented us from seriously considering whether there are alternative ways in which the college can create a situation which will facilitate the maturation of the young adult without violating his freedom. This report con-

tends that there are indeed such alternatives and that given the size and complexity of American higher education and the inarticulate restlessness of its students, the alternatives have ceased to be optional.

Professional education, even more than general education, consists of more than programs and course sequences; it demands a total context or climate. It is a matrix in which persons are being formed, an interactive and dynamic situation in which dispositions, attitudes, loyalties, and commitments are developed and altered. To be insensitive to these nuances is to court ultimate and total failure.

Professional education has the responsibility of fostering a professional consciousness, professional standards of performance (and the internalizing of those standards), as well as a deep sense of professional ethics. It can enhance or diminish the possibility of an effective *esprit de corps* among its graduates.

These facts ought not only to haunt the dreams of those constantly seeking the "shorter, easier, and cheaper" way; they ought also to discomfit those who seem to regret that educational institutions are overrun with students who refuse to act like trouble-free learning machines.

It is a pleasure to note that almost all seminaries—including specifically the two seminaries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod—are intensively engaged in continuous self-study, examining all the issues which I have enumerated.

So it is without embarrassment that I earnestly solicit for them your increasing prayers and unabated support.

St. Louis, Mo.