

1-1-1974

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Recommended Citation

Tietjen, John H. (1974) "Theological Education in Ecumenical Perspective," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 45, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol45/iss1/3>

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Theological Education in Ecumenical Perspective

On Sept. 9, 1973, Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., presented the degree of doctor of divinity to Dr. Tietjen. The following speech was his response to the honor conferred upon him.

I am deeply moved by the honor bestowed on me. When Dr. Fauth and several of his faculty colleagues informed me about their intention to confer an honorary degree, I was embarrassed and didn't know how to respond. Yet I am pleased to receive the degree you have conferred. I understand your action as an expression of appreciation for Concordia Seminary and especially for its faculty, many of whom are present tonight. As their president I function as their representative and spokesman. It is proper for me to include them as recipients of the honor. It would be appropriate if I could find a way of sharing the wearing of this hood with each of them.

The ceremony tonight is a reminder of the increasingly cooperative and cordial relations between Eden and Concordia seminaries. Our present relations stand in marked contrast to the opposition and hostility of a former age. In one sense it is strange that there should have been difficulties between us. As a Missouri Synod colleague who has done much research in Eden Seminary's tradition wrote me in a letter of congratulation received yesterday, ". . . history has its ironies. The Missouri Synod and the old Evangelicals have a common heritage at many points. But we seem to have passed each other by like two ships in the night during most of our histories. And to me, our Missouri Synod has suffered in part because of it." Passing in the night is no longer true of our two seminaries. That is one evidence of a growing ecumenical consciousness in the church.

THE GOSPEL AND THE CHURCH

Some critics of ecumenism assume that to be ecumenical you have to be unfaithful to the truth of the Scripture. Perhaps some who engage in ecumenical activity settle for a least common denominator approach to Christian teaching. For many, however, ecumenical activity is necessary precisely because of their desire to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture. Ecumenism in our time has been nurtured by a renewed understanding of the Scripture's teaching on the relation between Gospel and church. There is only one Gospel, as there is only "one Lord, one faith, one baptism . . . one God and Father of all men, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all" (Eph. 4:5-6). The heart of the Gospel, as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians and as I reminded our seminary community at our opening service this year, is "that Christ died for our sins . . . that He was buried and raised to life on the third day . . . that He appeared" to His followers (1 Cor. 15:3-8). The Gospel is "God's power to save all who believe," St. Paul wrote to the Romans. Through the proclamation of the Gospel the Spirit of God comes to men. "No one can confess 'Jesus is Lord,'" St. Paul wrote, "unless he is guided by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). When I hear someone confess, "Jesus is Lord," I have to acknowledge that this Spirit-led person belongs with me to Christ's body. That is what the church is, an intimate communion between Christ and those who have been baptized into Him. I have to affirm as brothers and sisters those whom God

has acknowledged as His sons and daughters. Such a renewed understanding of the Scripture's teaching on the relation between Gospel and church has been taking place throughout the church. It helps to account for ecumenism in our time.

For example, it has affected our understanding of mission. I intend to limit my illustration to my own church. In The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod the consequences of a renewed appreciation for the Scripture's teaching on the relation between Gospel and church is clearly evident in a remarkable set of affirmations on mission adopted in 1965. In addition to affirming the church as Christ's mission to the whole world, the whole society, and the whole man, the Mission Affirmations talk about mission in an ecumenical perspective. One affirmation affirms, "The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Church." In that section the following premise is laid down: "Every Christian by virtue of the saving faith which the Holy Spirit creates in his heart is bound to his Lord and enters into a real and living unity with every other member of Christ's holy body, the church." That premise leads to the following assertion: "We affirm that by virtue of our unity with other Christians in the body of Christ, we should work together when it will edify Christ's body and advance His mission. . . ." Still another affirmation asserts, "The Whole Church Is Christ's Mission" and recognizes that one community of Christians has to take account in its mission outreach of the existence and work of others engaged in the church's mission.

Renewed appreciation for the Scripture's teaching on the relation between Gospel and church has other consequences. It has affected our understanding of ecclesial identity. That has been true for many churches, especially those with a strong confessional consciousness. I intend to illustrate

again by reference to my own church body and its Mission Affirmations. One set of affirmations includes the following:

We affirm as Lutheran Christians that the Evangelical Lutheran Church is chiefly a confessional movement within the total body of Christ rather than a denomination emphasizing institutional barriers of separation. The Lutheran Christian uses the Lutheran Confessions for the primary purpose for which they were framed: to confess Christ and His Gospel boldly and lovingly to all Christians. While the Confessions seek to repel all attacks against the Gospel, they are not intended to be a kind of Berlin wall to stop communication with other Christians.

The Scripture's teaching on Gospel and church will not allow one community of Christians the luxury of separation and isolation from other Christians. It requires that we come to terms with who we are and why we are set apart from others and what we intend to do about our separation in the light of the Scripture's injunctions concerning our unity in Christ.

ECUMENICAL EDUCATION

All of this—both our renewed understanding of the relation between Gospel and church and the effects of that development on our understanding of mission and ecclesial identity—has deep implications for theological education. It must, because theological education is central in the church's life. New insights into the Scriptures often have their source at the church's seminaries, not only with Biblical scholars but also by those scholars' influence on those who will serve as future clergy and theological leaders. As a seminary does its work of providing the church with leadership that equips the people of the church for their mission, the seminary cannot escape the implications for mission and ecclesial identity present in the Scripture's teaching on the relation between Gospel and church. Nor can it escape the implications for theological

education itself, for the nuts and bolts of the seminary program.

One implication is concern for confessional identity rather than conformity. According to the report of the Theological Education Research Committee, produced under the auspices of the Missouri Synod's Board for Higher Education:

It is becoming increasingly evident that changes in the style of confessionalism and the growth of ecumenical engagement both call into question the traditional pattern of seminary education. On the larger scene the whole educational apparatus of seminaries segregated from all other Christians in total sectarian isolation and instructed wholly by a faculty of a particular persuasion is coming to look more and more like an anachronism rather than an instrument designed to serve the needs of the contemporary church.

The report contends for the kind of educational environment that leads to confessional identity rather than conformity. My own seminary education was strong in fostering confessional conformity. It was the ecumenical environment of New York's Union Seminary that helped produce in me a strong confessional identity. In my contact with Christians of other denominations I was required to face up to other ecclesiastical traditions as they actually were and not as painted in caricature. Theological education in an ecumenical environment had twin results for me: appreciation for the strengths of other ecclesiastical traditions and renewed appreciation for what it means to be a Lutheran.

Another implication for theological education in our new understandings of mission and ecclesial identity is the need to prepare students for mission in a setting that corresponds to the ecumenical context in which they will be working. With a few exceptions Christian communities do not

live in isolation from one another. My seminary education with its emphasis on separation from other Christians did not prepare me for the actual situation in which I found myself in my parish ministry. As students prepare for ministry they need to be in contact with people from other churches just as they in fact will be as they exercise their ministries. Already as students prepare for their future mission and ministry they should be taking account of the mission and ministry of other Christians and of the possibilities for cooperating with them.

All of this argues that seminaries in a particular geographical area should be cooperating with one another. Cooperation means more than the opportunity for cross registration, valuable as that program is for students. It means providing opportunities for students of different traditions to rub shoulders and share ideas and work together. At Concordia Seminary we have been saying to one another that certain common courses should be designed and offered jointly by cooperating seminaries. We are also saying that some of a seminarian's course requirements could and conceivably should be taken under the auspices of another theological institution. All this is not for the purpose of changing Lutherans into Roman Catholics or Roman Catholics and Lutherans into liberals (isn't that what Eden Seminary is supposed to be?) or Eden students into advocates of the Lutheran Confessions. Rather each student shares his tradition with others so that he can return to his own tradition more aware of who he is and what he is for. In the process the Holy Spirit does His work of drawing us closer together and leading us to the unity of the church as described in the Sacred Scriptures.

John H. Tietjen