

Διδακτικός [Didaktikós]—ABLE TO TEACH

Therefore, an overseer must be ... able to teach. 1 Tim. 3:2–3

By Jon S. Bruss

Have you ever experienced a class being “over before it started”? I can think of numerous occasions when class, it seemed, was always over before it started. What the teachers of these classes had in common was an amazing ability to engage students as both learners and colleagues. The students knew they were there to learn, and so did the teachers. But the teachers grabbed the students where they were, put themselves in their seat, and discovered with them what was to be learned. What that required of the *teachers* was to think long and hard about their own experience of learning what they were teaching and then creating the conditions under which the same could happen for their own students.

That’s a difficult thing. When you know something, it’s easy to adopt a different posture, a posture that just “delivers the goods” (i.e., being a “sage on the stage”).

It’s even more difficult for those who are preachers by training, like me, since my primary mode of instructing my congregation isn’t so much by teaching but by telling. And there’s a place for that. It belongs in the pulpit, because much more is going on there than just “instruction,” though that’s also a big part of it. There’s convicting by the Law and comforting with the Gospel—and those are “telling” things, primarily, even if there’s “teaching” content that goes along with them.

Things are different in a classroom, whether that classroom is on the seminary campus or in your church’s undercroft or education wing. While there might still be conviction by the Law and comfort from the Gospel, the focus in a class is squarely on “growing in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

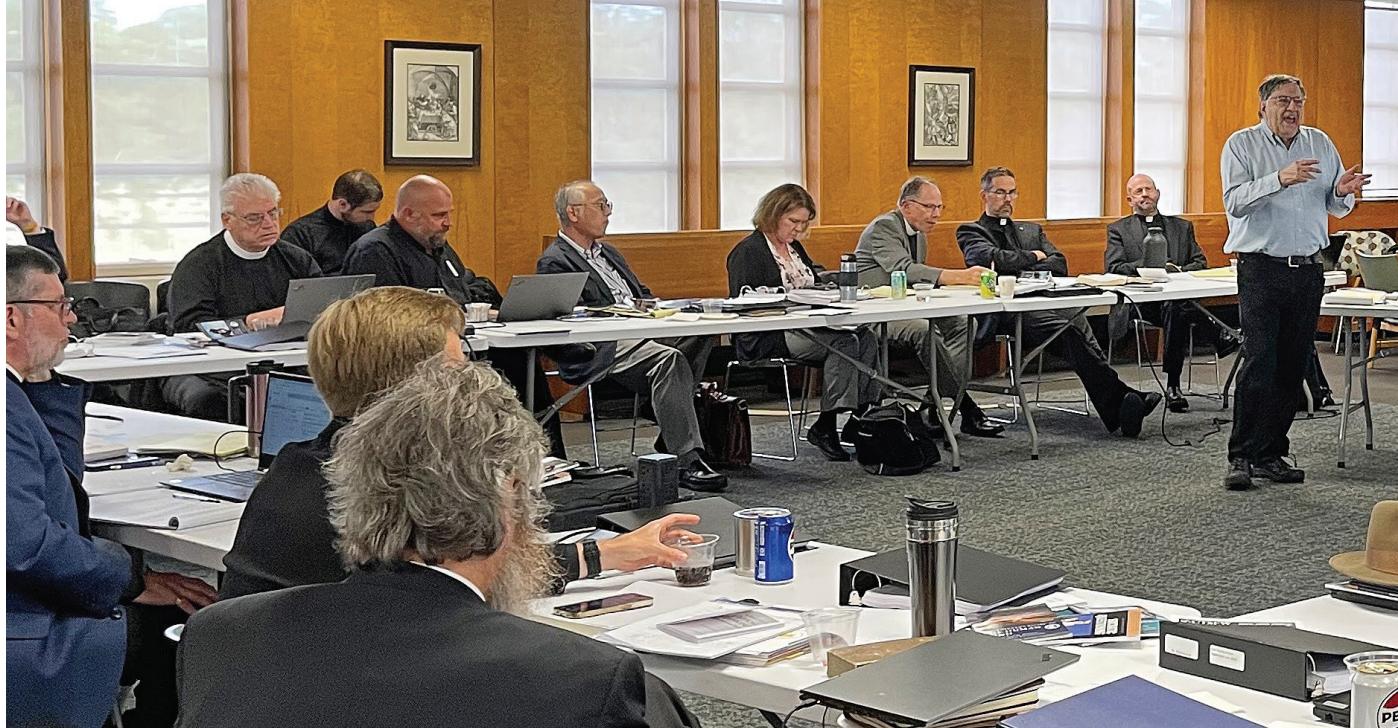
Recognizing that, Concordia Theological Seminary and our faculty, as a key part of our strategic plan, have embarked on an intentional effort to strengthen teaching. This isn’t to say that we don’t already take pains to do

better tomorrow what we did well yesterday. Rather, it’s to say that this effort is now being orchestrated, funded, resourced, and rewarded in a significant way. And it’s not just for the newcomers on the faculty, but for seasoned veterans.

This fall, with significant gifts from a handful of CTSFW supporters, Assistant Provost Dr. Gifford Grobien arranged for a day of sessions led by Dr. Gerald Nosich, senior fellow at the Foundation for Critical Thinking. Dr. Nosich introduced the faculty to strategies for teaching students how to read, think, speak, and write clearly, perceptively, and profoundly about primary texts, which play a central role in CTSFW’s MDiv curriculum. In fact, our pastoral ministry students take as a matter of course 72 credits in the primary texts, over half their coursework.

To grasp what Scripture really wants to say, it’s incumbent on students to trace out its arguments in detail, pay attention to and chase down “the context of the words,” understand the rhetorical shape of what they’re looking at within its immediate context, within the context of the book in which it’s found, and within the context of the entire Bible; weigh the validity of its claims; inquire about apparent gaps in the argument, its assumptions, and possible counterclaims. In other words, what is demanded of them is *close, critical* reading. To equip students for this task demands that faculty be skilled in teaching not just the texts but how to approach the texts.

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Dr. Gerald Nosich, senior fellow at the Foundation for Critical Thinking, presents strategies for teaching critical thinking to the CTSFW faculty and instructors September 3 at the annual Fall Faculty Forum.

If something precious is to be learned, it deserves to be taught in the best way possible. Here's an analogy: I once had a chance to take several laps around the Kansas Speedway. The way to enjoy the track is to drive in a car that's up to the task (certainly not the 2009 Honda CR-V I drove up in). I got to take a few spins in a NASCAR race car, and it was thrilling. Now, it was nerve-wracking, too. I had never gone 149 mph. I had never had to have a full-body harness and helmet while driving my shaky old Honda, nor drive a car with such high gearing that you could take first all the way up to 70 mph and beyond. I had never sweated quite as much when trying to hold top speed through a turn after being warned that if I hit the apron, I'd flip the car over. But none of those "hardships" detracted from the thrill—they contributed to it.

The same thing ought always to be said of our learning of God's Word and our Confessions: it won't be easy. It won't come without an appropriate struggle. Done right, it will at times be frustrating. But it should also always be a thrill—deeply engaging, deeply interesting, deeply mysterious, deeply generative. So, we as a faculty are setting about teaching students how to have and sustain that sort of bracing, thrilling encounter with the Word of God and our Confessions.

Why? First, because it's in that way that students will really grasp the Bible and our Confessions and all they teach in a way that can put all the pieces together and generate ever deeper insights. It will make them theologians. And the pastor is always *theologus loci*—the theologian in whatever place he is. He has to be.

Second, teaching, just like preaching, is best learned by imitating models. As a faculty, we want to model the

best teaching there is. Each of us will do things differently. That's how teaching works, and that's a good thing. It presents our students with as many models for teaching as they have teachers, and sometimes more: I don't teach the New Testament like I teach New Testament Greek, nor do I teach dogmatics in the same fashion I teach Luther's *Galatians Commentary*—so already there, in one faculty member, a student has at least four models. Multiply that by the 20+ faculty members our students will encounter, and if all those professors are at the top of their game in whatever approach they take, our students walk away with nearly 100 excellent approaches to teaching the Word of God in their congregations.

And that's, finally, why this is important: because *you* will get the "best stuff there is that can be learned," taught in the best way possible. Through the teaching in your congregation you will be brought into a bracing, enlivening—even thrilling—encounter with the Word of God and our Confessions. It might not be easy. It might not come without a struggle. It might sometimes be frustrating. But it will always be rewarding as you grow—and learn to grow!—in your understanding of the Holy Scriptures and our Confessions and in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Think: better preaching, better catechesis, better Bible classes, reinvigorated mission, better "teaching the faithful" and "reaching the lost." *That* is why "he who desires the office of overseer must be ... able to teach." 



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