

CONTENTS

Volume Twenty-Five, Number Three

FEATURES

4 The Future of Bioethics

By Dr. Gifford A. Grobien

Christians believe and confess that our bodies will not be free of infirmity in this natural life, this side of the resurrection. If bioethics is viewed only as a discipline for making good decisions about health, we will eventually find ourselves in despair at our inability to overcome sickness, debilitation, and death. Along the way, we will find ourselves tempted to take actions regarding human health and life far beyond the faithful and good stewardship delegated to us by God.

7 The Future of Higher Education

By Dr. Russel P. Dawn

By recognizing Truth, recovering it in our institutions, and maintaining it by intergenerational resolve, higher education can be harnessed for cultural renewal. Through all the changes in higher education that occupy our daily concerns—demographic shifts, online modality, demand for new programs—it’s the transcendent Truth that must define our future.

10 The Future of Parish Ministry

By Rev. Sean R. Kilgo

Many pastors in the last two years have found themselves doing things they never thought they’d have to do. But is this possibly all a distraction from what the future of parish ministry actually has in store for us? Perhaps, in order to get a picture of what the future of parish ministry will look like, we need to first turn our gaze backward to the Scriptures, and see what our Lord has instituted for the work of the ministry.

Also in this Issue:

What Does This Mean?	13
176th Academic Year Begins at CTSFW	14
CTSFW Events	16
Called to Serve	18
Faculty and Staff Updates	20
Alumni Focus: Rev. Gino Marchetti	21
The Future of Philanthropy	22
Profiles in Giving	24
Military Project	26
Beginning the Conversation	28
In the Word Bible Study	30



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The Future of Higher Education

Russell P. Dawn



Photo: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Education is a tool of cultural transmission. It has ever been such. Proverbs tells us that if we raise our children in the way that they should go, when they are grown, they won't depart from it. That's cultural transmission—passing on the culture, including the faith, from one generation to the next. Education is also a tool of cultural change and has ever been such. Moses taught the Israelites how to live as free children of God rather than slaves of Pharaoh. That's cultural change—bringing the next generation into a culture that differs from that of previous generations.

Cultural transmission and change are perhaps the most important functions of education, for they imbue the learner with the things we believe and value, those we do not, and why. Neither is inherently good or bad, for the quality depends on the existing culture. A good culture ought to be transmitted, and a degraded culture ought to be changed.

The reverse, however, has often been the case. To illustrate, let's look at some educational tradeoffs we've seen over the last century or so. Have we taught that nature is random because there is no cause, or nature is orderly because it was ordered by God? Have we taught that moral truth is in the eye of the beholder, or moral truth transcends personal preferences? Have we taught that gender is a social construct, or sex is an immutable biological reality? Have we taught that offense is to be avoided at any cost, or the cost of freedom includes having to overcome offense? None of these choices is culturally neutral. Through these and innumerable other choices, secular progressivism has gradually become the cultural norm in education. That has been a massive project in cultural change over many decades, and the outcome is a society that is increasingly godless, immoral, chaotic, and unfree. Cultural change has meant cultural degradation.

American society, with its system of nearly universal schooling, has been particularly ripe for the process of cultural change through education. A relative few have been able to shift

the culture substantially, and higher education has been the key to making it happen. Thousands of like-minded professors have influenced hundreds of thousands of young minds, who have then gone on to influence millions and tens of millions of others. Critical theory is a good case in point. This is the source of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) that's making waves today, but it's older and broader, influencing higher education since the middle of the last century. Like CRT, critical theory seeks to destroy—"deconstruct" is the sanitized term—any possibility that a text or idea carries transcendent Truth within it. The only truth is that which arises in the subjective (i.e., personal or individual) perception of the reader. Even a flawed perception is legitimate if it *feels* true to the individual. This subjectivism has been taught more and more in college, and thereby has increasingly influenced the way school teachers (as well as journalists, artists, writers, and others) have thought about the world around them. They, in turn, increasingly have brought that influence to wider society, especially through schools. Cultural change has been brought about incrementally but inexorably across the generations.

This is where much of higher education stands today. Indeed, the views of the secularists that were radical a generation ago are widespread today. Go back two generations, and what was radical then is now not only accepted but unassailable. And so, the future of higher education seems bleak.

Have we taught that nature is random because there is no cause, or nature is orderly because it was ordered by God? Have we taught that moral truth is in the eye of the beholder, or moral truth transcends personal preferences? Have we taught that gender is a social construct, or sex is an immutable biological reality? Have we taught that offense is to be avoided at any cost, or the cost of freedom includes having to overcome offense? None of these choices is culturally neutral.



It is not. Or at least, it needn't be.

Just as higher education has been an engine of cultural degradation over the last century, it can be an engine of cultural renewal in the future. Indeed, this is already happening, and in some institutions has been happening all along. The effect, however, is not yet great. Hundreds or perhaps thousands of faculty members at institutions dotting the landscape are teaching tens or even hundreds of thousands of students according to Truth. Where their effects are being felt, the fruits are faithfulness, virtue, order, and liberty. That is what renewal looks like—the contrary of godlessness, immorality, chaos, and bondage.

Renewal doesn't look the same as the past—we can't go back, and we shouldn't even want to. God is inviting us into loving service for our real neighbors according to their real needs in the very real, present, and soon-to-become-real future. But neither does renewal ignore the past. In the past we find lessons in wisdom (and foolishness) that can help illuminate the path forward. The future of higher education—if this journey of cultural renewal is to succeed—must be marked by *recognition*, *recovery*, and *resolve*.

By *recognition* I mean a clear understanding of what a proper education, a proper pursuit of Truth, entails. For instance, what axioms—foundational truths that cannot be proven or disproven—do we accept? Do we accept that there is a God to whom we are

responsible? That there is a moral law that transcends our preferences and immediate circumstances? That we naturally tend to violate the moral law? These and other related truths are part of the natural law tradition that can be explored according to reason but cannot ultimately be proven. There are also specifically biblical insights that cannot be proven, for instance, that God is triune, that human beings are made in His image, that we naturally rebel against Him, and that He has redeemed us in Christ.

All of these truths—natural and revealed Truth—are crucial to a proper education. They are the insights that have helped to make societies faithful, virtuous, orderly, and free. They are also widely rejected in modern higher education. The first step in harnessing higher education for cultural renewal is keen *recognition* of what the foundational Truth is and where it has been undermined.

The next step for higher education is *recovery* of Truth, once Truth has been recognized. This may well be the most difficult step of all. Some institutions have already accomplished it, of course, and others may only be a few years away. But still others may need decades to reach the goal. *Recovery* entails remaking the university in the mold of Truth. Faculty members may need to be trained, new faculty brought in, curricula rewritten, and programs of study redesigned. Barriers may include regulatory requirements, expected approaches to scholarly

research, the stigma of being an outlier, and, in general, the immense power of the entrenched culture of academia. *Recovery* of Truth is a slow, costly, uncertain process. It is also of almost incalculable importance.

The final step in harnessing the future of higher education for cultural renewal is *resolve*. Once Truth is *recognized* and *recovered*, it must remain so. *Resolve* is the determination to hold onto the gains, rather than letting them go in the comfort of success or the face of challenges. Cultural renewal will be inevitably slow, and probably intergenerational, so *resolve* must also be intergenerational. The lack of intergenerational *resolve* is why so many institutions that started out Christian have lost most or all of their connection to Truth.

By the grace of God working through those whom He calls to such service, the future of higher education can be bright. By recognizing Truth, recovering it in our institutions, and maintaining it with intergenerational resolve, higher education can be harnessed for cultural renewal. Through all the changes in higher education that occupy our daily concerns—demographic shifts, online modality, demand for new programs—it's the transcendent Truth that must define our future. Otherwise, higher education will be neither higher nor an education. 📖

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