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The Pastor as Scholar

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That some pastors are scholars is true enough. But it is also true that most of them don't continue as pastors very long; presently they become members of a college or seminary faculty. Those who do stay in parish work are not likely to achieve great success, at least statistically, for the parochial ministry today is an activist function; there is not much time for contemplation or for intensive study. The most famous contemporary pastors are apt to be organizers, executives, and "personality boys." They are usually good preachers too, but that is not the same thing as being a scholar. Some scholars are good preachers, but they keep their scholarship out of the pulpit and speak quite simply, as one child of God to another. Pastors for the most part have no trouble in this area; it is not necessary for them, by a deliberate exercise of the will, to exclude their learning from their sermons. This is not meant sarcastically but as a simple statement of fact. Pastors—at least in the activist church life of America—are generally not men of great learning. They haven't time to be.

Why then pursue the subject any fur-

The accompanying essay was originally delivered as a banquet address at the Institute on the Church and Society held in June 1966 at Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne, Ind. The Reverend Mr. Herbert Lindemann is the pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne. He is a member of the Commission on Worship, Liturgics, and Hymnology of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and chairman of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship.

ther? Because many of us have a disquieting feeling that this current state of affairs is not exactly how things ought to be. There are certain dangers in it, dangers to the pastor, professionally, and dangers to the whole life of the church. One of these dangers is that of superficiality. Once we have persuaded ourselves that we haven't the time to do much reading or studying or even thinking in depth, then much of what we say is frothy stuff, delivered with great clerical unction perhaps, but often sadly lacking in meatiness. Some sermons are this kind of off-the-cuff treatment of a text, and other utterances may likewise give evidence of a lack of preparation. To say that we haven't had time to do more is to admit that we haven't been sufficiently interested or perhaps—horrible thought!—that we have been lazy. We usually find time to do the things we consider important. Perhaps some of the other things we do are not as vital as we think. In any event, the communication of the Gospel is the essence of our assignment as apostles of the Lord. If the pressure of other duties is forcing us to be superficial about this, then our sense of values is in need of overhauling.

Another peril to the church and the ministry is the false image that is developed in the minds both of the pastor and of the general public. What is a pastor's function? What role does he play? And what sort of person should he be to fulfill this function and to play this role? Is he to be an ecclesiastical glamor boy? Does it belong to the essence of his office that he

move with ease in any kind of company, that he be jovial, a wellspring of good stories, an exuder of vitality, optimism, and aggressiveness? Should he always speak with great conviction, regardless of whether he has anything to say? A clergyman may be an externally impressive character and yet be lacking in that breadth of mind and depth of soul which somehow he should be communicating to his people. For beyond every other personal characteristic a pastor must have this essential qualification: that he be a man of God. And the second commandment is like unto this: he should be a lover of men. On these two requirements hangs all true success in the Christian ministry. If these are missing, the pastor is only a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

You will notice that this does not include any mention of scholarship or even education. Yet the long experience of the church abundantly demonstrates the sad consequences of an uneducated clergy. The medieval church illustrates the point; so does the frontier church in America. Happily there is not much argument about this any more. The day is past when it was thought sufficient that a pastor be sincere. There is now general agreement that it helps a lot if he knows a few things. In our own synod the pretheological program of studies has been increased by two years during the last two decades, and the requirements at our seminaries—especially at Springfield—have been markedly raised. The result is that our “priest factories” are now turning out candidates for ordination who are much better equipped than formerly. The updating of our system of higher education has effected certain shifts in theological thinking that are not always

agreeable to those of us who were graduated before the changes were introduced, but we who are past the half-century mark in age must surely rejoice that the average student at senior college and seminary today is intellectually and spiritually head and shoulders above the student of the twenties and thirties.

It is good that this is so, for in this same period of time the complexion of the laity has changed too. People nowadays are more highly educated. Someone remarked recently that what changed the faces of our congregation more than anything else was the “G.I. Bill of Rights.” Certainly it made a difference; from that time to the present, people have been unwilling to settle for anything less than that degree of schooling which is available to the average G.I. This has resulted, it seems to me, in a marked change of attitude toward the teaching of the church. Thirty years ago there was still a general acceptance of the church’s authority; there wasn’t much open resistance to what was taught. When I had an inquirers’ class at that time, I could pretty well count on 100 percent of the class coming into the church at the conclusion of the course. Nowadays people frequently will say that they want to think it over and to do some further reading and then, perhaps after a year or two, they may finally say Yes. In such a situation the worst thing a pastor could do would be to be impatient or authoritarian. He must be understanding with the candidate’s intellectual objections; he must be well enough acquainted with Christian literature to suggest appropriate reading; and he must be emotionally stable so that he can work with the candidate in a calm, rational, and

objective atmosphere. Perhaps we are speaking here more of spiritual maturity than academic knowledgeable, but both things may be regarded as marks that distinguish an educated man from one who has merely had a lot of schooling.

In any event, it won't do, in a modern, sophisticated congregation in which there are not a few college graduates, to have a pastor who is an ignoramus. I don't know whether it is possible for him to be a scholar in the narrow sense in which that word is used in the world of scholars, but there are a few requirements under this heading which are *sine qua non*. In the first place, he should have some acquaintance with and sympathy for the attitudes, objectives, and methods generally accepted among scholars. We could spend a great deal of time talking about what is involved here, but let me simply pick out one quality of scholarship that stands at the heart of the whole enterprise. I mean honesty: a passionate love for the truth, a rigorous elimination of all prejudice, illusion, and old wives' tales, a willingness to investigate and then to accept the factual results of the investigation, however unpalatable these may be. This spirit one would expect to find among the disciples of Him who said that He was the truth and who Himself, with a divine fury, cut through the hypocrisies He found in the society of His day. Unfortunately this impatience with concealment of reality has not sufficiently rubbed off on all of Christ's ministers. Instead, there is often a lamentable tendency to imitate the behavior of the ostrich: to refuse to look and listen and learn, to cling to things no longer tenable, and to reject things just because they are new and strange. Perhaps a psy-

chologist would say that basically this is a fear of accepting certain unpleasant truths about one's own nature: an unwillingness to accept oneself. Be that as it may, the attitude is clearly a failure to go along with the Spirit of truth as He attempts to lead us into more accurate perceptions of the truth. If we have been mistaken in some of our ideas, we must be honest enough to admit it. If new truth has been brought to light, we must be nimble enough to accept it. If a brother challenges some of our pet superstitions, we must be charitable enough not to condemn him as a heretic. To be honest can sometimes be painful.

Second, a pastor should make some effort to keep up with what is going on in the theological world. This is essential to staying alive intellectually, and even spiritually. The opposite of life is death, and it is a truism that it is possible to be quite dead while remaining orthodox. A man who is alive is curious. He is interested in finding out. He asks questions; he likes to go to the source for information. I once knew a professor at Concordia College at St. Paul—he subsequently became editor of *The Lutheran Witness*—who had a most refreshing curiosity. I met him once at a Socialist meeting at which Norman Thomas was speaking and on another day in the Roman Catholic cathedral where Cardinal Pacelli was saying mass—and we felt quite different about both Socialists and Roman Catholics in those days.

Now there are people in the theological world who are saying some very "far out" things today. You and I, who are supposed to be leaders in the Christian thought of our congregations, ought not only to have some knowledge of what is being

said, but also some understanding of why it is being said. In other words, we need to have understanding of the age in which we live, how it got to be what it is, and what we as Christians can do about it. This is the third essential qualification of a modern pastor: he ought to know what is going on in the world about him.

I hope I shall not be an alarmist about this, but it seems to me that the moral and spiritual state of mankind today is truly terrifying. Here is Paul Scherer giving us a partial picture of the situation:

The trouble is not only that we are addressing the child and heir of the last four centuries. That makes the task difficult enough. The trouble is that we are addressing "fallen man." And he lives in a strange world of his own. For him God no longer occupies the center of the picture; he does: which is what the Fall means. He regards himself as the victim of forces beyond his control; but he has to do the best he can on the assumption that he can master them singlehanded and shape his own destiny: which is what the Fall means. So he thinks of himself as standing over against nature to conquer and exploit it; and for the most part over against his fellowman as well: which is what the Fall means. He has to handle things, deal with facts, and come out as near the top as may be. He has his own ideals and standards, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, cultural, and you will please allow him to operate under his own articles of self-government. This is where he lives, this is his frame of reference, this is what the Fall means. He is not alone in the mind of the twentieth century; he is the mind of Adam. If you can give him something he can use right now, where he is, to his own advantage, well and good; but please, no more of this double talk about the foolishness of God which is wiser than

men, and the weakness of God which is stronger than men — things which are not, and yet bring to nought things that are — an eternal Word revealed in a historical event — a faith which is within history, yet transcends history. What has any of that to do with him? He has been driven out of the Eden for which he was made, to cast about for it now, in his lonely search, every day he lives, without ever finding it. Its imagery is quite alien to him, its language is scarcely any more to be called language! If *agape* does not mean "having one's mouth open," then you have to set it down as gibberish.

Here, then, is modern man wandering around in a wasteland. If there is one word that characterizes him, it is the word "lost"; and if there is a story that epitomizes his need, it is the story of the prodigal son. Modern man has traveled far from home, and so far the expeditions sent out from the father's house have not been very successful in inducing him to return. He has not yet spent everything, and he is still having a good time doing it. In the meantime the father waits, and his people with him. (Incidentally, we must take care not to become insufferable prigs, like the boy in the story who never left home!) So the age in which we live is in many ways thoroughly depressing. If you don't think so, look at an impressionist painting, listen to some 12-tone-scale music, watch one of those homosexual plays, or read one of the innumerable novels about moral decay. Even more significant than the reflection of modern life in the arts is modern life itself. If I had known what a furious, unremitting warfare we have on our hands against the malicious powers of evil, I doubt that I should have had the courage to go into the ministry. The

struggle has become more severe every passing year, the opposition more subtle and more deadly, the casualties on the Christian side more numerous, not perhaps in terms of widespread defection from the church, but definitely in respect to the poisons of secularism infecting the souls of us all. Once more, I do not wish to sound like a typical preacher shouting at the top of his voice that the world is going to hell, but at the same time I mean to say that there is not the slightest justification for complacency among us. We need not be scholars to be students of our age; but we can ill afford to neglect being students of its literature (which sometimes preaches sermons better than any we are able to devise) and students of the life of man in our time, with everything that affects it.

That's a large order, which no one of us can adequately fulfill. Life today is far too complicated for even the best of us to come to more than a very partial understanding of it. But we cannot afford to give up for that reason, and we must not allow ourselves to be defeated by the complexities of our age. If we do have a fight on our hands, at least we know that we are on the right side, and, because of Easter and Pentecost, on the winning side. This brings me to say something about the spirit in which a pastor today needs to carry on his work in the church.

Let me get at it this way: A true scholar, besides being honest, will also be humble. One of the finest men I have ever met was Martin B. Ruud, professor of English at the University of Minnesota, a recognized authority in early and middle English. But with all his scholarly stature he was a man who would devoutly bend his knees

before almighty God and frequently receive the blessed Sacrament. Not all scholars, unfortunately, have the same spirit. Sometimes pride of mind sticks out and arrogance of temperament, and occasionally, one suspects, there is a desire to say something sensational and so to draw the spotlight to oneself. In this connection those of us who move on less ethereal levels of the intellect find it frustrating and often downright irritating when a scholar's language and manner of expression tend to obscure rather than to convey his meaning. We preachers are especially sensitive to this, for our business is communication, and we find it hard to be sympathetic with a man who appears in the role of a communicator but fails to communicate. Professional jargon may be a kind of shorthand among professionals, but it can be a formidable obstacle when readers or hearers do not "dig" the "lingo." The reaction to involved verbiage is not that we sit in astonishment at the erudition of the scholar but rather that we become impatient with him for his failure to say plainly what he means. A humble scholar is one who gets down to the level of his audience or readership.

It is part of arrogance to be destructive, for there is no love in such an attitude. Everyone knows, of course, that if the truth is to be made known, some demolition work must be undertaken in the process. All the untruths, half-truths, and perversions of the truth need to be destroyed if reality is to stand forth in its naked beauty. But the trouble with so many critics of our society and of the church is that they never get past this work of demolition; indeed they often seem to be caught in a kind of sadistic fascination with it. We

have no lack of prophets of doom who write devastating critiques of the modern church and prophesy the early demise of parochial life. One of them, William Hamilton, goes so far as to say, "I do not see how preaching, worship, prayer, ordination, the sacraments can be taken seriously by radical theologians." This is wielding the axe with a vengeance. When all of that has been cut down, and in the process God Himself has been demolished, what is left? Nothing! Nihilism! Zero! It is difficult to see how men who have arrived at this point can in any sense be called theologians. They do indeed keep talking about Christ, but what they mean by this seems very fuzzy to the orthodox Christian.

However, it is not germane to our subject to enter into the complexities of this school of thought. What is significant and downright amazing is the tremendous discussions that have been evoked by Robinson's *Honest to God*, Pierre Berton's *The Comfortable Pew*, and Altizer and Hamilton's *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. Sometimes one suspects that these men have actually done the church a favor in jarring a lot of complacent Christians loose from their inertia to react to this new radicalism. But the enormous sale of these books, when one has discounted their sensational appeal, causes one to suspect that they are popular because they dare to put into words what thousands of people have thought but have been unable or unwilling to express. This means that there is far more disbelief in the modern world than faith, for these writings are primarily writings of negation rather than of affirmation. Robinson writes in order to reject the notion of a three-dimensional universe and related ideas; Berton rejects

the Anglican Church in Canada and most other organized churches as well; Altizer and Hamilton reject God Himself. What do these gentlemen offer in place of what they repudiate? Not much. Harvey Cox offers the world outside the church, and that is small comfort indeed. "No honest contemporary seeker can ever lose sight of the very real possibility that the willing of the death of God is the way to madness, dehumanization, and even to the most totalitarian forms of society yet realized in history." So writes Kenneth L. Wilson, and one could not picture anything more bleak. What the radicals say they undoubtedly say, as Bishop Robinson indicated in the title of his book, in the name of absolute honesty, and in this they are being utterly modern. For one of the *leitmotifs* of modern literature is a thoroughgoing scorn of phoniness in all its ways and manifestations. Everything must submit to the test of genuineness, and that is good and healthy. Yet only too often this is accompanied by an iconoclasm so suspicious and cynical about everything that it will not accept anything at all as genuine. This is honesty gone to seed; honesty that has resulted in negativism. Some of us are getting pretty weary of it.

It is like a refreshing breeze to read an affirmation like that of Charles Malik in a recent issue of *Christianity Today*. He seems to qualify as a scholar. He has a Ph.D. from Harvard and is presently on the faculty of the American University of Beirut. His article is simply an expansion of the Nicene Creed and in the course of it has over a column of the amazing assertions of our Lord concerning Himself. Mr. Malik says:

Theology is exactly that discipline which

tries, in all humility and in all seriousness, and without any spirit of cleverness, to make sense of all these astounding claims, to make sense of them, not by explaining them away, nor by reducing them to nonsense — as so many so-called theologies do — but first by believing them, and then by trying to relate them among themselves and to the other propositions of Holy Writ, as well as to the deliveries of sound reason and healthy human experience. Genuine theology cannot subordinate God and how he chose to reveal himself to what it calls reason and human experience. Genuine theology must take equally seriously all three — God, reason, and experience; keeping always in mind, however, that, if God exists, he must in the nature of the case always come first. And it is a very strange discipline indeed that entertains even the slightest doubt about the existence of its object.

In the end it all comes down to the question of one's personal faith, which in the very nature of it cannot be as objective as the scholar's quest for the truth but must be an intensely subjective thing. Mr. Malik several times in his article says that he will probably be considered "corny" for saying the things he does and that sophisticated intellectuals will ridicule his simplicity. That, no doubt, is a risk all of us must take; it is part of the cross. But the point is that sound learning and humble faith are by no means incompatible. And here I am speaking of precisely the faith which asserts that some truths are not tentative or relative but absolute. "I know whom I have believed," said an ancient scholar, "and am persuaded. . . ." In our time a most disturbing shaking up of our beliefs is occurring, but perhaps God's purpose in this is that "those things that cannot be shaken may remain." It is our

function as Christians to assert our faith in these things, and it is a function of strength, nobility, and freedom. A man never comes into his own so fully as when he stands up and says, "Credo."

Dr. Sizoo has a published sermon on the text, "Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief." He points out that in most of us, as in the man who said these words to Christ, belief and unbelief exist side by side. The question therefore is, which of these will dominate our life? The man in the Gospel perceived that "the things he could accept were of infinitely greater consequence and importance than the things he could not accept." He admitted his doubt, but "he did not cultivate it; he did not try to pamper and pet his unbelief. He expressed regret for it. . . . He did not hire a hall and charge one dollar admission to tell people that he could not believe. He did not tramp across a college campus with his head swathed in a halo of degrees staggering the minds of his students by the brilliancy of his negations. He lived in the area of belief rather than in an area of unbelief."

This is what all of us must do, the more so as our knowledge of the truth increases and as our private superstitions are stripped away. In the process we may sometimes become very weary and occasionally wonder, if we are "honest to God," if there will ultimately be anything left to cling to. Certainly there must be, if life in this world makes any sense whatever, if there are any values that abide, if, in short, there is a God. This is the fundamental issue, is it not, beside which the querulous quibblings of small minds often fill us with a holy impatience. Christian scholars and pastors alike must, in this age of spiritual

erosion, keep addressing themselves to the central question of the meaning that only the real God can give to our earthly existence. Everything else is peripheral; we have no time for much else if we are to stem the tide of the practical atheism of our age. And if we think that because we are professional churchmen we are not affected by this tide, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Dr. Sizoo is talking to us too when he concludes his sermon with this pastoral advice: "Treasure your faith, however frail; guard the flame of faith, however feeble; cling hopefully to the things you can accept in the universe; take this broken and battered trust of yours and build on it. 'Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief.'"

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