

PRIMARY TEXTS AND PASTORAL FORMATION

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb. 4:12)

By Carl Beckwith, Jon Bruss, Todd Peperkorn, and Roland Ziegler

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, is revising the curriculum as part of the Seminary's strategic plan. The details remain to be settled, but one thing is certain: the curriculum will prioritize deep engagement with primary texts, including the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, works of the early church fathers, and other original works. Dr. Carl Beckwith (CB), Dr. Jon Bruss (JB), Dr. Todd Peperkorn (TP), and Dr. Roland Ziegler (RZ) recently discussed why primary texts matter in pastoral formation. What follows are excerpts of that conversation.

The Lutheran reformers called for a return “to the sources” (*ad fontes*) rather than relying on scholastic manuals of theology and medieval commentaries on Scripture. Why?

RZ: *Ad fontes* was a reaction against the medieval commentaries, which were seen as mutilating the understanding of the Scriptures. The Reformers wanted to read the Scriptures, read the church fathers, and read Aristotle, not the commentaries.

JB: When Philip Melancthon was at the University of Wittenberg, there was a huge scholastic apparatus built just around Aristotle, but Aristotle's own work was completely inaccessible. How much more so the Scriptures themselves, these things that are spirit and truth and life? The medieval commentary tradition had obscured them. Luther talks about his tower experience, when he comes to understand the concept of justification by faith. He credits that breakthrough to the Holy Spirit,

but what the Holy Spirit made him do was read the primary text carefully.

When you grasp a text in that way, understanding it from the inside out, you're all the more powerful in conveying the thoughts of this important text and interacting with it and applying it to the lives of people. That's why this primary text thrust is so important, and so much a part of the spirit of Reformation.

TP: In going “back to the sources,” it seems there is always a drive toward simplicity, getting to the point of the thing. So when Luther talks about going back to the sure fount of Israel, going back to the Scriptures, he's really saying, “Keep it simple, and allow the depths of the Scriptures to inform us. Don't allow all the thoughts about the thing to overwhelm and crowd out the thing itself.”

I would call that depth, and not so much breadth. What is the essence of a thing? In our curriculum, we want to get to the essence of what we're trying to do and not allow all the secondary and tertiary stuff to get in the way of the Scriptures and the Confessions.



CB: In 1515, when Luther starts lecturing on Romans, one of the stories that's often told is that he said to the printer, "Give me a blank page, sixteen lines of text from the Vulgate, but no glosses, nothing in the margins, nothing between the lines," and that's what would then be in the classroom. That's a good example of wanting to wrestle directly with the Scriptures.

How is deep reading of the Scriptures and the *Book of Concord* forming our students? Why is it necessary that we do these things?

JB: The whole point of residential formation is being deeply steeped in the Scriptures and a healthy theology—the "sound words" of 1 Timothy 1:13—and to understand the Scriptures and this healthy theology simply requires a direct encounter with them. The more direct the encounter, the more the student understands the internal logic, the guts of our faith, and the more capable he is to live into the reality that they present and to press that out in his teaching and preaching.

RZ: I think it's a question of what you think a pastor is. The primary thing a pastor does is interpret the Scriptures and proclaim the will of God according to the Scriptures. You could say, "Well, could we just tell him what the Scriptures say, and then he does that?" But that doesn't

work. The Scriptures cannot be replaced by a summary or even exposition. The Scriptures have a unique place in the life of the church and life of the Christian, and since they cannot be replaced, they must be engaged. A summary can be correct, but it doesn't exhaust the Scriptures. It's one of the reasons why a summary or anything like that cannot replace the Scriptures. So that means immersion in the Scriptures.

CB: The curriculum revision of 2005–06 includes the statement that pastoral formation involves more than the mere imparting of information, and we still use that statement. It's not sufficient to simply talk about and summarize and offer mere commentary. When I teach Church History I and Church History II, for example, we're all reading our primary texts. There's no textbook. I'll recommend books for students, but I basically say, "I'm your textbook, and at the end of this quarter, I'll give you a list of other books so you can continue your reading. But for now, we're just going to read primary texts."

And I hear this many times: They're difficult. It's demanding. It requires a lot of work. It requires patience. It requires constant rereading. Sometimes students will be brave enough to say, "Can't you just tell us what we're supposed to know? Tell me what to do." So how do these two things necessarily go together, reading primary texts and pastoral formation?



Peperkorn



Bruss

TP: “Formation” is kind of a new term for us. You wouldn’t find that in the curriculum before 2005. You’d find “learning” or “training.” Why do we want to use it now? What is it about that term that has captured our attention?

CB: One of the things that I’ve talked about elsewhere is that you can’t have what we do here without chapel. If we’re talking about chapel—Word and Sacrament, Means of Grace—it really is the Holy Spirit that brings about the deep things of God. What we’re doing in the classroom is working through that with students. It’s not just passing out information. There’s something else happening here that, in my mind, involves character. There’s a theological and pastoral character formation, an aptitude that we’re trying to bring about with these men.

TP: I do think formation is absolutely the right word because with “form,” we’re getting change. I’m thinking of Romans 12, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,” that kind of language. Men, when they leave here, had better be different than when they came in. If they’re the same, then we haven’t done our job.

CB: Whatever we call it, we’re all after the same thing. Why are primary texts needed for this? Why can’t we just use a text like Pieper? We’ve got all these Concordia

Commentaries, right? They’re right here on the bookshelf. There are a lot of them. They’re all bigger than the Bible. So why can’t we just grab those? They’re all in English. Do we need to have Greek and Hebrew?

RZ: Let me just go with formation. What do texts do? They form your mind. The texts form you, and because they are demanding texts, they bring out something in you that would not be brought out if you’re not challenged. So I think this is part of it. Why not simply give you a textbook? Because a primary text challenges you, it makes you think, and it may create a habit of not just looking for something that is pre-digested.

TP: I like the idea of thinking of these primary texts or classic texts as building the foundation of what a Lutheran pastor is. What are the texts that he has lived and moved and breathed in, so that when he goes out as a pastor, whether he ends up with expertise in one area or another, we know that he’s got this foundation firmly in place?

RZ: Primary texts challenge us in another way, as they are not from our time. They challenge all kinds of preconceived notions and prejudices that we have but are not aware of, and it’s a different thing when students encounter it through active reading than when I tell them, because when I tell them, they just think, “Well, that’s



Ziegler



Students discuss the Confessions

just the professor, and he's a Boomer or Gen Xer, and he doesn't understand these things." But if I engage the texts themselves, then this kind of self-critical reflection starts, which is another benefit.

CB: I think so, too. When I present these texts, I tell the students at the beginning of the quarter what we're going to do and what we're reading. The texts and their authors are conversation partners that we get to have, but we can also learn from them and can debate with them.

Why is our commitment to primary sources—the Bible, the Confessions, Augustine, Luther, and so forth—important for the church today?

JB: A pastor is engaged in a very long-term conversation with his congregation. Interaction over primary texts is interaction over resistance to and openness to persuasion by the text, persuasion by others, reading of the text, persuading others about your reading of the text. In so many ways, this is really the job of the pastor. God has given us words by which we communicate what he wishes us to know and believe. Engaging repeatedly in the use of words about God's message to convey that message is something we practice here, and we practice it in depth over significant texts that shape the life of

individual Christians, shape us as pastors, shape entire congregations, and shape even church bodies.

CB: AI summaries are everywhere. Short form content is everywhere. That's what our students encounter. And then you bring them here, where the vision of formation is primary texts and deep reading, intellectual humility, patience, all that wonderful stuff. Well, students have a lot of temptations, and shortcuts are something that not just our students but a lot of people wish to embrace. That's why our commitment to primary sources—the Bible, the Confessions, Augustine, Luther, and so forth—is important. The church has asked us to do something, and we're doing it as best we can. This is at the heart of what we're doing.

TP: The life of the church is not lived on the surface, where you get a thirty-second answer to a question that the church has fought over for 1000 years. And yet, if that's your first entry into a discussion, then you have a profoundly messed up view of what the church is, how the church thinks about things, how pastors care for people as they struggle with things. Then it just becomes "surface question, surface answer."

We're trying to get the students into a deeper conversation and see this as a conversation with the texts themselves, because that's what being a pastor is: wrestling with the text of the Scriptures week after week and wrestling with the text of your people. 📖