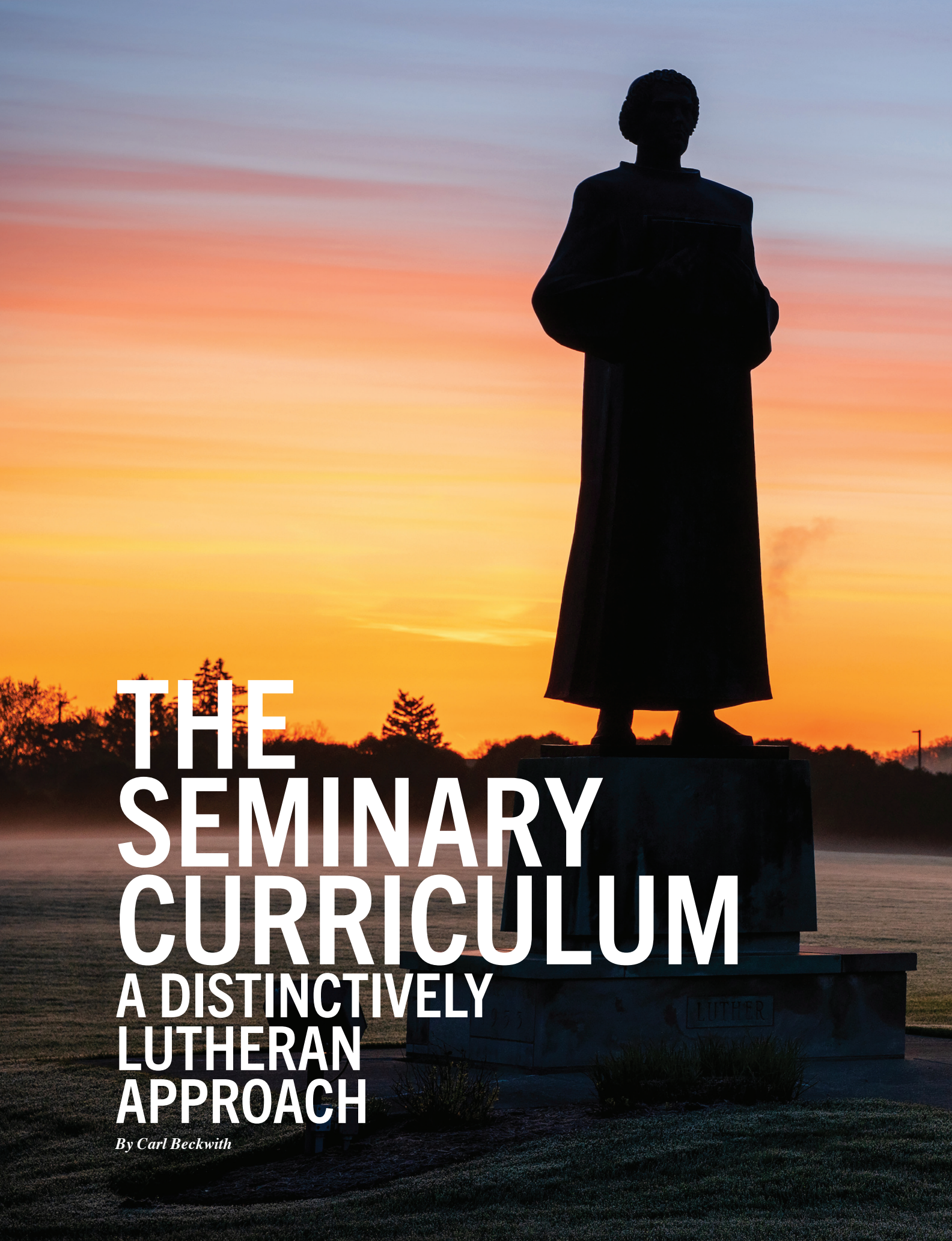


A full-page background image featuring a statue of Martin Luther in silhouette. The statue is standing on a stone pedestal, holding a book. The background is a vibrant sunset sky with orange and yellow hues. The title text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

THE SEMINARY CURRICULUM

A DISTINCTIVELY
LUTHERAN
APPROACH

By Carl Beckwith

When we tell the story of the Reformation, we often highlight Martin Luther's famous posting of the *Ninety-five Theses* on October 31, 1517, or his courageous words before the Holy Roman Emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1520, "Here I stand, may God help me, Amen" (AE 32:112–113). Before these history-changing events, there was another important task, less heralded but no less significant in its own right, that occupied Luther and his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg—revision of the curriculum.

Long before the dramatic events at Worms, Luther advocated for a reformation according to Holy Scripture (AE 31:250; 31:336; 32:122–123). Any reformation of the church, however, had to include the universities and their curriculum (AE 44:200). For this reason, Luther and his colleagues began discussing and slowly revising the curriculum as early as 1515. They not only embraced the humanist motto of *ad fontes*, "to the sources," but insisted on it. This meant for them a curriculum focused on the study of the Holy Scriptures in their original languages and on reading the writings of the church fathers, particularly Augustine, directly rather than as excerpts from secondary sources like the medieval manuals of theology.

The efforts of the Wittenberg faculty received a significant boost in 1518 with the arrival of a new faculty member, the gifted Philip Melancthon. Although young and only a few days on the job, Melancthon delivered a stirring lecture on revising the studies and curriculum for all youth. Luther could hardly restrain his delight in what he heard from his new colleague.

Curriculum review and revision is an ongoing process. Faculty and students come and go, and the needs of the church shift. As a seminary, we must be attentive to all of these things and more. There is no such thing as curriculum repristination. CTSFW cannot simply reproduce the curriculum taught at Wittenberg by Luther and Melancthon, nor even that taught by Walther and Pieper in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And, yet, there is a decidedly Lutheran approach to seminary teaching and curriculum design that unites the efforts of Luther and Melancthon to Walther and Pieper and to CTSFW today.

Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio

Before Luther declared, "Here I stand," at Worms, he confessed that he was bound by the Scriptures for all that he preached and taught. Toward the end of his life, Luther looked back on his long service as pastor and professor and summarized in three Latin words what he considered necessary to make a theologian: **oratio**, **meditatio**, **tentatio**.

C. F. W. Walther placed Luther's explanation of these terms at the beginning of his *Pastoral Theology*. Francis Pieper urged all theologians and all who aspired to be such to read Luther's advice and, by God's grace, to follow it at all times. So, too, I assign Luther's explanation during the first week of my Dogmatics I class. In this class of first-year seminarians, we carefully read Luther's advice, consider Walther's and Pieper's insistence on Luther's approach, and return throughout the class to these three terms. Here we find, I would suggest, the very thing that unites every Lutheran curriculum committed to the Holy Scriptures and the *Book of Concord*.

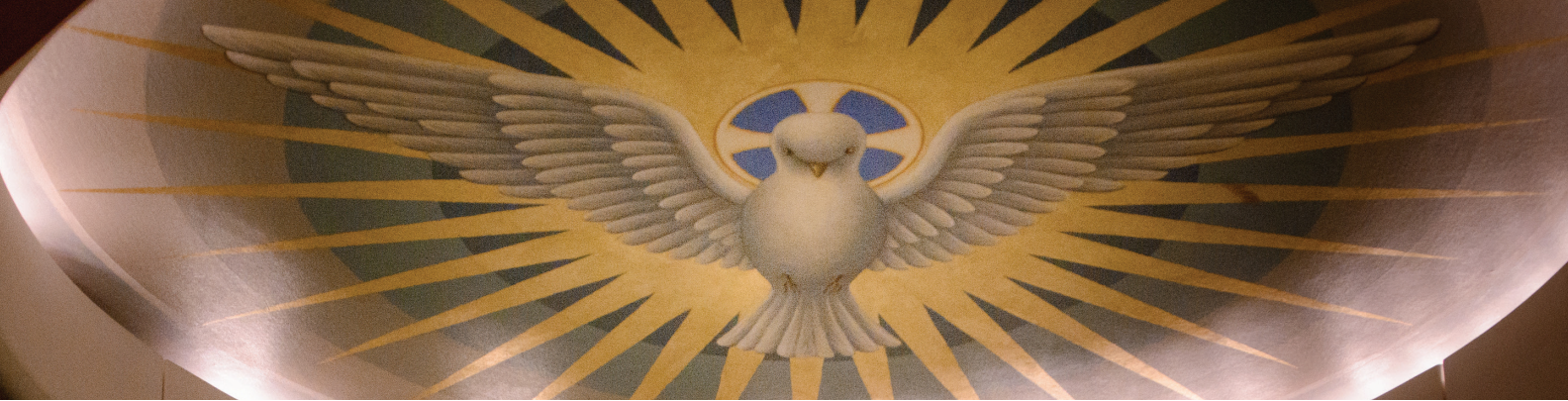
Oratio is prayer. It is the earnest appeal of all believers that the Father and Son would send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and Spirit of Truth, into their hearts to teach, instruct, enlighten, and give understanding of the "deep things" of God (1 Cor. 2:10–12 NIV). If not for the Holy Spirit, we could neither confess Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) to the glory of the Father (Phil. 2:11) nor access the Father through the Son (Eph. 3:18). It is the Holy Spirit who delivers, nourishes, and strengthens the gift of faith through Word and Sacrament, the divinely appointed Means of Grace (Rom. 10:9–17; LC II 37–39).

What does this mean for our curriculum? It means that neither the faculty of CTSFW nor any other person or program can make a man a theologian. That is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace. And for this reason chapel and the daily gathering together in prayer and praise to hear God's Word and receive his Sacrament must always be at the heart of everything we do at the seminary (Acts 6:4). This also means that to minimize the gathering together in daily worship hinders the formation of the man preparing for ministry.

Meditatio is the never-ending meditation and deep reflection on the inspired and inerrant words of Scripture. This requires diligent and careful reading and rereading of the Scriptures in both translation and their original languages. Here, warns Luther, danger lurks. Some will grow weary of this demanding task and think they have done enough and have complete understanding after having read the text of Scripture once or twice.

What does this mean for our curriculum? If chapel is the place of *oratio*, the place where the Holy Spirit

Neither the faculty of CTSFW nor any other person or program can make a man a theologian. That is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace.



imparts understanding to both student and faculty, then the curriculum is the place of *meditatio* on the deep things of God made known by the Holy Spirit. It is the whole curriculum—the exegetical, historical, dogmatic, and practical courses—that reads and rereads the Scriptures for the purpose of forming our students for faithful and successful service in the church (1 Tim. 4:13). The intentional sequencing and deliberate integration of our courses contribute to the intellectual, spiritual, and personal formation of men for ministry.

Here we must return to Luther's warning. A danger that always threatens the church is that some will grow weary with this task. Some will ask if Hebrew and Greek are necessary for the study of Holy Scripture; others will

Our task is not curriculum repristination, nor innovation for its own sake, but the faithful formation of servants of Christ for the church.

question if church history or dogmatics or pastoral theology need to be taught in a classroom at a residential seminary. Some will be bold enough to say that residential seminaries are unnecessary.

To think in such ways risks confusing pastoral formation with the mere imparting of information. Luther's response to such shortcuts remains as valid today as it did in the sixteenth century: "You will never be a particularly good theologian

if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe" (AE 34:286). Shepherds are not hastily produced but patiently formed under the Word of God by learned and pious faculty in a community that gathers daily around the Means of Grace.

Tentatio is the agonizing struggle of the Christian life. Here you not only know and understand what Scripture teaches, but experience the truth of God's promises for you in both adversity and prosperity. It is here, writes Luther, that you "experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom." When Luther says experience or suffering make a theologian, this is what he means. It is

life together, in the midst of both joys and disappointments, that makes a theologian. We might simply say that that is what makes a Christian and is certainly the thing most needed in the formation of our students for service in the church and for the sake of the church.

Where is the *tentatio* at the seminary? Some might say summer Greek with Dr. Nordling; others might point to their first exegetical paper or sermon. Of course it is none of these, as trying and as stressful as they might be. *Tentatio* at the seminary is simply living together, in community, as the faithful gathered around Word and Sacrament, preparing to serve our Lord's church. Life happens, as they say, everywhere, and that is true also of the seminary community. It is good for our students to be together, to pray for and encourage one another, when difficulties arise. The formation that begins in chapel and continues into the classroom finds its purpose here: brothers caring for brothers, some who are preparing to be pastors, others who have served as pastors and are now giving their time and effort to the next generation for the sake of the church.

All of this to say, the seminary has begun the process of reviewing and revising the MDiv curriculum. As we do so, our task is not curriculum repristination, nor innovation for its own sake, but the faithful formation of servants of Christ for the church. We have spent this academic year listening to graduates and current students, to fieldwork and vicarage supervisors, and to the broader church, considering carefully how our common life of prayer, worship, study, and service best forms pastors bound by the Scriptures.

Our task remains what it has always been for Lutherans: **oratio, meditatio, and tentatio**. Life together. No shortcuts. No place for untimely fruit. Pray for the seminary, for our faculty and students, and for all who labor in this shared work, that the Lord of the church would continue to raise up faithful shepherds for his people. 📖



Dr. Carl Beckwith is Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, and also serves as chair of the Seminary's Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee.