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Concordia Theological Seminary: Reflections on Its One-Hundred-and-Fiftieth Anniversary at the Threshold of the Third Millennium

Dean O. Wenthe

Concordia Theological Seminary celebrates its one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of service to Christ with thanksgiving.

We are thankful to the Triune God. His presence and providence have blessed. His grace and goodness in Christ have sustained and nourished.

We are thankful to God's people, the church. Those baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have supported the seminary with their prayers and gifts. Most importantly of all, they have sent their sons to study and to prepare for the office of the holy ministry.

We are thankful for our alumni. The many faithful pastors who have gone forth to proclaim the crucified Christ from the pulpit, in homes, on the streets, at the bedsides, and before the graves of the blessed departed are God's gifts to the church.

From the divine perspective of the cross, the meaningful events of the last one-hundred-and-fifty years have not been the great achievements of science and technology nor the tragedies of a civil and two world wars.

No, from the vantage point of eternity, the events of lasting significance are the hundreds and thousands of baptisms which have occurred in parishes large and small, the hundreds and thousands of times that the living voice of Jesus (*viva vox Jesu*) has been heard as the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures were proclaimed, and the hundreds and thousands of times that contrite lips have received the very body and blood of Jesus in, with, and under the sacred elements of bread and wine.

To be "stewards of these mysteries" (οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ) is a high and holy calling (1 Corinthians 4:1). It is Christ's call to give His presence to His people. The verbal and sacramental presence of Christ is what the faithful pastor offers every man and woman. Every activity of the seminary flows from this central

conviction and confession.

As we look at God's world the truly cosmic events are not the movements of nations about this earth or into outer space. The most enduring and encompassing event of all is summarized in this: "There is joy in heaven (Χαρὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ) over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7).

The foundational character of this passage grounds the seminary as it reflects on a century and a half of history and prepares to enter the third millennium. The Blessed and Holy Trinity rejoices over the single sinner who repents! This fact makes each of us infinitely significant. It makes the holy ministry a calling which is crucial for human welfare now and forever.

Like Isaiah (Isaiah 6), God continues to call men with unclean lips to go forth for Him. Men who, in contrition, have their lips purified by the coals of fire from God's most Holy Place (Isaiah 6:6). The atonement of Christ, prefigured in the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), reveals the very heart of the heavenly Father. At such great price, He underscores our significance. It is why the seminary is so important. Whether our culture and world perceive it or not, the church and its seminaries are more crucial for the future than Wall Street or Washington.

This needs to be said! Not a few commentators have forecast the end of a Christian culture. As in previous epochs, such predictions do not surprise God's people. Pharaoh (Exodus 1 and 2) and Herod (Matthew 2:13-17) had long ago used all their power to shape a future devoid of God's people. The church's future and the seminary's, no less than Israel's and Joseph's and Mary's, is secure in Christ.

This does not mean, however, that the church and seminary will live triumphantly. Our calling is under the cross. It is also clear that for the foreseeable future that calling will be lived out in a context which is fluid and dynamic. The changes in the cultures of North America and the world will press all Christians to address fundamental questions: Who are we? What are we about? What is changeable and what must remain the same in our Christian calling?

These questions are legitimate. To ignore them is to risk a loss of identity. To avoid them is to jeopardize our ability to communicate Christ in a meaningful manner to our world.

A recent book by Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction*,¹ seeks to articulate the faith afresh for our context. While the Lutheran reader will differ with some of its assumptions and positions, Allen addresses our cultural context with insight, sensitivity, and knowledge.

Seminaries should be at the center of this effort to confess Christ in a faithful and fresh manner to our generation. It is here that the minds and the hearts of future pastors are formed. Their understanding of Sacred Scripture, the creeds, and confessions, as well as the *ethos* and practice of the church, is shaped here.

In fact, many Christian traditions have become increasingly aware of the strategic position which seminaries occupy. If they are to confess adequately who they are at the beginning of the third millennium, the compelling reasons for such a confession must be taught at the seminaries.

This search for a means to assess how well a seminary is doing has produced a significant literature. A good summary of this quest with working solutions and an extensive bibliography is in the Association of Theological Schools Journal entitled, "The Good Theological School."² This journal addresses these key questions:

- (1.) What Is the Character of Curriculum, Formation, and Cultivation of Ministerial Leadership in the Good Theological School?
- (2.) What Is the Character of Teaching, Learning, and the Scholarly Task in the Good Theological School?
- (3.) What Is the Character of the Institutional Resources Needed for the Good Theological School?
- (4.) What Is the Character of Administration and Governance in the Good Theological School?

Each of these questions is pertinent for Concordia Theological Seminary. At the same time, as these questions press us for a clear

response, we recognize that they are now new.

From Paul's contest with the pseudo-apostles (2 Corinthians 11) to his admonitions to Timothy and Titus, the question of the character of Christ's servants is inherent in our fallen condition and that of the world around us. God's people and particularly the called and ordained pastors must be *in*, but not *of* this world.

If the "pastoral" epistles already raise and address the question, the writings of the early church attest its ongoing pertinence. Ignatius of Antioch, writing to Polycarp around 110 A.D., urges:

I exhort you to press forward on your course, in the grace wherewith you are endued, and to exhort all to gain salvation. Vindicate your office with all diligence, both of the flesh and spirit. Care for unity, for there is nothing better. Help all, as the Lord also helped you; suffer all in love, as indeed you do. Be diligent with unceasing prayer. Entreat for wisdom greater than you have, be watchful and keep the spirit from slumbering. Speak to each individually after the manner of God.³

From this early engagement to such recent works as Eugene H. Petersen's *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*,⁴ the need for a pastor with integrity and authenticity continues. Because that need continues, the need for "good" theological schools continues.

Concordia Theological Seminary is a "good" theological school. Its goodness, however, does not rest in a treasury of meritorious achievements but in the treasure at the center of its identity.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again in a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away (εις κληρονομίαν αφθαρτον και άμικταντον και άμάραντον), reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. . . . Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy

inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3) grounds and informs every aspect of the seminary's life. This means that we will and should remain attentive to the things of God: His worship, His presence, His peace, His guidance.

Insightful thinkers in the academy recognize this need for a seminary to keep God at the center. One of the most stimulating and rigorously analytical reviews of contemporary theological education is David H. Kelsey's *To Understand God Truly: What Is Theological about a Theological School?*⁵ After surveying various visions for seminary education—scholarly profession, social activist, manager-leader, therapist—Kelsey stresses that the study of God must be central if a school is to remain theological. It sounds self-evident. It is often neglected. Kelsey writes:

More seriously, theological schooling defined and organized as preparation for filling a set of ministerial functions unavoidably simply omits to cultivate in future leaders the *conceptual capacities they need in order to understand and to engage in those functions as theological practices*, that is, as practices requiring critical self-reflection about the truth and Christian adequacy of what is actually said and done in the congregations' current engagement in the practices that constitute them *as* Christian congregations.

. . . My proposal has been that a theological school is a group of persons whose overarching end *is to understand God more truly*.⁶ [emphasis mine]

To understand God more truly is to know Christ. At the core and the very center of Concordia Theological Seminary is Christology. Jesus of Nazareth is the One into whom we have been baptized and with whom we are united (Romans 6:1-4).

He it is to whom we daily listen in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. It is His body and blood that we receive at the seminary's altar. Apart from Him there is no "good" theological school. There is no clear thinking. There is no future.

In Him there is life that is molded and shaped by the holy vocation to be a disciple. Such a pastor, so attentive to Christ and the holy things of God, is also attentive to Christ's people.

How will such men look to God's people? The following passage captures the concrete contours of a pastor who cares.

One's heart goes back from this eager, restless, ambitious age to the former days, and recalls with fond recollection the pastor of his youth, who had lived all his ministry in one place, and was buried where he was ordained—who had baptized a child, and admitted her to the sacrament, and married her and baptized her children—who knew all the ins and outs of his people's character, and carried family history for generations in his head—who was ever thinking of his people, watching over them, visiting their homes, till his familiar figure on the street linked together the past and the present, and heaven and earth, and opened a treasure house of sacred memories. . . .⁷

For the past one-hundred-and-fifty years and into the third millennium, this is the kind of pastor Concordia Theological Seminary, under the cross and by God's grace, will form for service. A servant of Christ who is spiritual, knowledgeable, caring, and compassionate will daily turn to Christ. He will also turn to His people.

In the coming issues of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* I will explore more completely four aspects of the pastoral office: integrity of spirit, clarity of mind, charity of heart, and centrality of mission.

The following piece is an introductory overview of these themes with a present description of how Concordia Theological Seminary understands its calling to serve Christ and His church.

Christ's Life: The Heart of the Seminary

Life versus death. The contest is ancient. The contest is modern. The contest involves each of us.

We live in a culture increasingly marked by the dominance of

death. The unborn innocents, the elderly frail, the youthful strong: death by violence ends their life.

In such a culture of death, the resurrection of Christ creates a community of life. Each Sunday's worship echoes Christ's victory over death, so the church rejoices in its hymnody: "Come you faithful raise the strain, Of triumphant gladness! God has brought His israel into joy from sadness" (*Lutheran Worship* 141, stanza 1a).

At Concordia Theological Seminary, Christ's victory over sin, Satan, and death is the center of our life together throughout the year. Christ's life means life for us. It is the basis of our worship. It is the reason for our study. It fills us with confidence as we seek to serve the church in faithful and fresh ways.

At the center of our calling is the formation of confessional and compassionate pastors. Men who confess Christ's life and compassionately carry it to a dying world in baptismal water, eucharistic bread and wine, and the life-giving word of Christ—the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures: they are the heart of the seminary.

How can that heart beat with the vitality of Christ's resurrection? In every passing age, the church is called to this central question: how can we receive and live the abundance life which Christ has bestowed in His resurrection?

Under God's grace and dependent on Christ's resurrection presence, Concordia Theological Seminary is called to send forth servants of Christ who have been shaped by Him, to be His shepherds, through worship, study, and life together.

What will such a graduate look like? They will be very different in background, hobbies, and so forth, as varied as the people whom they will serve. But under God's grace, they will also be recognized by four traits: (1.) integrity of the spirit, (2.) clarity of mind, (3.) charity of heart, and (4.) centrality of mission.

Integrity of Spirit

The future pastor must never view his calling as only a set of tasks or duties. As calendars become congested, a student, pastor, or professor can become so busy in our societal structure that his

spirit is not nourished. As one pastor has written: "So many conferences are concerned with image, with statistics, with schedules that there is no time for matters of God, for solace for the soul."

Worship of and devotion to the Holy Trinity nourish the penitent soul seeking mercy in the sacred blood of Christ's cross. The under-shepherds must daily receive forgiveness, strength, and guidance from the Good Shepherd. The chapel is where the life of Christ is received and confessed. Men defined by baptism, gospel, and eucharist have souls that can feed and comfort.

Clarity of Mind

Especially in our culture, a future pastor is called to rigorous and critical reflection. No platitudes or slogans will suffice.

The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are his delight. The creeds and confessions display the heart of Sacred Scripture. In a word, a pastor is called to know the mind of the church which, defined by the Scriptures, is the mind of Christ.

To bring Christ to this world also calls for a rigorous analysis of our culture's assumptions and commitments. To lead people through the decaying structures of this age to the life of Christ is a divine calling. To behold God clearly and to see this world *as it is* requires the best of our intellect.

Charity of Heart

But clarity of mind must be joined to charity of heart. Christ's compassion marks the caring pastor. His knowledge of God and people is not simply academic. It is in the service of Christ's mission. The sheep will sense that his interest and compassion are not manipulative or self-serving but solely in the service of bringing the person to Christ's gracious presence and word.

They will know that his critique of every idolatry—even comfortable religiosity—is to bring peace in Christ in an age that would keep them in frenzied moralism.

Centrality of Mission

These traits entail a fourth: the centrality of mission. Christ's life

is light in a dark and dying world. The pastor continually displays that light and life before the lost. With the best of soul and mind and heart, he longs to see every knee bow before the cross and join the saints in Christ's presence for eternity.

Conclusion

Integrity of spirit, clarity of mind, charity of heart, and centrality of mission: who can combine them? Only Christ. And Christ bestows them on His faithful servants. Always under the cross and in the frailty of our flesh, but His presence is there. In baptism we were united with Him. In Sacred Scripture we hear His voice. In bread and wine He gives His body and blood. All formation is finally God's gift and work.

The church has always prayed for pastors like this. John Gerhard, a great Lutheran father, in his *Daily Exercise of Piety* (1629), offers a prayer which petitions for just such men of God. Pray with me that God would use the seminary so to supply the church.

Grant, I ask, to Your ministers the necessary knowledge and pious diligence in all doing, that they first learn from You before presuming to teach others (James 3:1). Govern and enlighten their hearts by Your Spirit so that in the place of God they preach nothing other than God's word; they shepherd the flock committed unto them (1 Peter 5:2), purchased, and redeemed by Your precious blood (Acts 20:28), out of true and sincere love and not out of covetousness or ambition; they shepherd the flock in thought, word, and deed; they shepherd by the prayer of their soul, by the exhortation of the word, and by example; so that they follow in the footsteps of the one to whom the care of the Lord's flock was commended three times (John 21:15). Rouse them that they keep watch over the souls entrusted to them, since they shall give serious account for them in the severe examination of the last judgment (Hebrews 13:17). Whatever they advise in the preaching of the holy word, may they first be diligent in this matter in their own lives, lest being sluggish to work themselves, they labor in vain to arouse others. To whatever good works they inflame others, may

they themselves first be zealous in these works by the fervor of the Spirit. Before they resound with words of exhortation, may they first proclaim by their works whatever they are about to speak.

Send forth into your harvest faithful workers (Matthew 9:38), so that they may gather a great harvest of saints. Open the hearts of the hearers, so that they may receive the seeds of the word with the holy obedience of faith (Acts 16:14). Grant to them Your grace, so that they may guard the holy deposit of the word with a pure heart, and with patience bring forth abundant fruit (Luke 8:15).

The Endnotes

1. Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster-John Knox Press, 1989).
2. "The Good Theological School," *Theological Education*, Volume XXX, No. 2, Spring 1994.
3. Philip L. Culbertson and Arthur Bradford Shippee, editors, *The Pastor: Readings from the Patristic Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 20.
4. Eugene H. Petersen, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987).
5. David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What Is Theological about a Theological School?* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster-John Knox Press, 1992).
6. Kelsey, 163.
7. John Watson, quoted in John W. Doberstein, *Minister's Prayer Book* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 210-211.