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The Task of the Theological Professor

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This paper is a revision of a statement on the nature and purpose of the theological seminary that Dr. Repp read to the Fact Finding Committee appointed by Dr. Jacob A. O. Preus, president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, to investigate the Biblical teaching of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The author is vice-president for academic affairs at the St. Louis seminary and served for many years as academic dean.

There is more to being a theological professor than to be able to teach and to be a specialist in a given area of theology. Whatever knowledge and skills a professor acquires must consciously be related to the total task of theology. Since he is preparing men and women for ministry he must do this in a manner that will enable them better to serve people in their world. To be sure, this is not basically different for him than it is for any lay Christian or for a parish pastor except that it is "more so." If the Christian layman is expected to be able to relate the Gospel to his calling, and if the clergyman must have this same skill because he is both a pastor as well as an enabler of others to ministry, then surely the professor who assists in the education of clergymen must himself seek to relate and apply his insights to the whole task of theology. Again, the difference is not in kind but only in degree.

Since we are primarily concerned with the task of a *Lutheran* theological professor, his role takes on a special confessional stance, different from others in the same profession. As a Lutheran the central focus of his theology must always be on the Gos-

pel. This dominates his theology. For him it is the one source of life and meaning for the church. As such the Gospel must receive the chief accent. And that is no mean task. For as Luther and others have often said, one of the most difficult tasks is to see everything in Scripture, and therefore in theology, either as Law or Gospel and then to be able to distinguish between the two. This is true whether it is Genesis 1—3 or Luke 1—3 (yes, even the genealogy). Furthermore, because he was led by the power of the Spirit to put his trust in the Gospel, the Lutheran theologian has accepted the Holy Scriptures as the written Word of God and as the only rule and norm of faith and practice. Because of that conviction, he has come to accept the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of the Word of God and has unconditionally subscribed to them in the best tradition of the Lutheran Church.

This confessional stand cannot be taken lightly by a theological professor. It is a serious responsibility for one whose ministry requires him continually to review what the Confessions say and teach and to compare this with what the Scriptures

clearly set forth. At the same time he must review what his own subscription to the Confessions means to him, to be certain that it means no more and yet no less than is required of one from whom Scripture is the only norm (*norma normans*) and the Confessions the norm ruled and controlled by Scripture (*norma normata*).

Since the theologian knows that the church has often been affected by the spirit of the times, this confessional responsibility is not as obvious as it may at first appear. Taking the long view of history, we know that at various times the Lutheran Church has taken on some of the coloration of its surroundings. It has variously become highly intellectualized in its theology, or highly individualized in its concern for others, emotional or rational, activist or removed from social concerns, mission minded or merely self-perpetuating. At times the Lutheran Church has permitted this article of faith or that one partially to eclipse the Gospel. Hence the theological professor must constantly reassess the church's confessional emphasis and help it to remain in or to regain, as the case may be, its true confessional witness.

To be faithful in his task the theological professor must continue to be a student of the Symbols, even though they may not be the area of his professional specialty. The Lutheran Confessions must serve to provide the feathers on the shaft of his theological arrows, so that they are true in their flight to the target. This does not mean that he blindly applies what the Confessions answer to 16th-century questions, as if the questions had not changed over the centuries. Instead, he must perform the hermeneutical task of understanding what the Confessions said to the antithesis of their

day, and distill the ageless doctrinal principles behind their answers. He permits these principles, then, to serve as a basis for today's questions. There is no quicker way of making the Confessions archaic than to pretend that "untranslated" they speak to us in every way for our times. This may be best illustrated when without "translation" we study the Athanasian Creed with a group of contemporary Christians or when we, for instance, take the article on Election in the *Formula of Concord* and address it to native New Guineans.

Even the focal Law-Gospel theme, the very center of Lutheranism, may have to have prolegomena before our theology becomes meaningful to the hearer. In most parts of New Guinea, for instance, where the idea of an overarching, or supreme, deity is unknown, one cannot begin by speaking the Law, much less the Gospel. They do not know of a creator God to whom they are responsible as creatures. Here first the creator God must be recognized and accepted before the Law may be applied and the Gospel can be witnessed to.

But this is true not only of the Confessions. It is true of every doctrinal formulation that has come down to us. Specific statements once drawn up to meet a given situation under peculiar circumstance at a given time may no longer best serve the church.

The simplest and yet the most profound creedal statement for the church at one time was, "Jesus is the Lord." It was meaningful, exciting, revolutionary for the first-century Jewish convert, combining the Old and the New Testament in a simple sentence and directing it all to Jesus Christ. Today this statement may go unnoticed,

may seem colorless, and may appear as a worn, smooth coin that has lost its imprint, because the hearers are no longer aware of the antithesis to which it addressed itself.

For this reason the theologian is not merely to teach Scripture, but he must re-examine the church's past and present pronouncements in the light of what Scripture teaches and professes. For this very reason he will often work at the edge of theological issues with all the dangers and rewards that come with the task. As he re-examines the Word, he must try to hear what the Scriptures say to the world now, especially to God's people, and then seek to set this forth in a form adapted to teaching and preaching.

As a Christian scholar the Lutheran theologian must be prepared and willing, under the guidance of the Spirit, to explore every aspect of Scripture. Since every word of Scripture is inspired and true, it is the responsibility of a seminary professor to take every word seriously and not gloss over it because it presents a problem that defies easy answers. Even the most honored and ancient exegetical and doctrinal pronouncements of the church will need to come under his scrutiny. This is a task that will often exact a great price. It will bring to him inner agony as he makes a leap of faith or as he faces the frustration of never really knowing the answers to many questions that the world asks. He must often be willing to make the humble admission, "I don't know." In all this, because of his own inner weaknesses, he will be subject to the error of judgment where he makes a wrong turn or uses the wrong term or expresses himself prematurely in the company of those who may betray his

confidence, or in a place and at a time when he should have remained silent.

In the same way the theologian cannot ignore, explain away, or "harmonize" the difficulties in the texts or what appear to be multiple sources in various books of the Bible. The questions that one hears at times from well-meaning pastors or laymen, "Why dwell on these difficulties? Why not stress only the central theme of Scripture, the Gospel?" may sound like pious words of advice. In reality they ignore the fact that this is the way the Bible was given to us. This is the way God delivered it to His church. To honor His Word is to honor also the difficulties that He has allowed to stand and to try to understand them better with the hope that they can bring new insights that will permit the Spirit to relate the Gospel more effectively to people.

A theologian must be a historian in the best sense of that term. When he treats the ancient texts of Scripture he must be sure that he removes the overlay that his culture and his times are prone to put on the words. He will utilize to the best of his ability the new insights that have come with man's greater familiarity with ancient forms of language that are contemporary with the Old and the New Testament and seek to interpret what the inspired writer, and God through him, meant to say to his day and to his age. From this understanding he can better witness to what God still has to say. Too often Christians fail to see the human matrix in which the divine has been revealed. As the human nature of Jesus was a stumbling block to many of His contemporaries, so the human element in the Bible which lies side by side with

the divine has been a stumbling block to many in the contemporary church.

With this same thought in mind the theological professor approaches his own age to discover the acculturation that may have crept into his theology and practice. There are many things that we do, teach and accept, sometimes even at the level of doctrine, that are really not of the essence of the Gospel but are the freight of the time, appropriate perhaps for one culture but wholly inappropriate in another. This, too, becomes evident when we take our European hymnody and our Western art and architecture and transplant these into an African or an Oriental setting, totally ignoring the culture that is there, as if these foreign elements were the true marks of Lutheran orthodoxy. This was brought home to the writer as he heard an 8-year-old New Guinea girl sing "Rock of Ages" for him as evidence of her kinship to his faith. As he heard this song and its familiar tune, he couldn't help but think how little these lines could really mean to her with their adult imagery and Victorian words of "cleft," "riven," and "respite." Did this meaningless array of words in a foreign melody really serve to express her faith? Certainly not! In fact, on second thought, what meaning does this hymn have for any 8-year-old in any part of the world?

Because the church in every age is surrounded by evil forces that would vitiate the Gospel, the theological professor in his office as prophet must warn God's people against the recurring tendencies that subtly or crassly seek to support or supplant the Word with human traditions, that resort to a refined rationalism or legalism typical of the Reformed, or that introduce Armin-

ian subjectivism and antisacramental individualism. The prophetic utterances of a faithful theological professor may readily invite the ire of the extremists on either side of the spectrum. It is in this sense that a theological professor has the function of being a critic, "to aid the church to understand what it is doing and by understanding to modify or redirect those actions." For this difficult and unpopular task he will need to be protected by the shield of faith.

Many in the church in this time of world unrest become especially concerned when the seminary professor attempts to carry out his prophetic task by relating the Gospel to the issues that face the church. We recall the problems the synodical fathers had in the past with issues that were vital in their day but which no longer excite us — usury, life insurance, slavery, marriage to the brother or sister of a deceased spouse, labor unions, and the like. Our fathers made strong pronouncements on these issues. They made many of them matters of conscience and church discipline and classified them as "doctrine," even to the point of declaring that some of these were "contained clearly and plainly in the Holy Scriptures." Where possible, the theologian must avoid similar pitfalls in his time.

Furthermore, the task of a theological professor is to assist others in mastering the skill to do this in their ministry and to do it in such a manner that they remain faithful and obedient to the Word. It is in this sense that the world sets the agenda. The professor must prepare future pastors who will be able to help people distinguish between the needs they feel and are aware of and their real needs, where these differ.

To do this, they must first be able to address themselves to the former before they can lead their people over to see the other, and help them find these needs met by the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All this is not to gainsay the fact that the theological professor will experience the normal discomfort when he is confronted with a new approach or a new formulation. There is somehow a tendency to feel that change reflects on one's personal ministry in the past or that one is being unduly influenced by the world. Age is a factor, too. The older persons get, the more comfortable they feel with traditional views. And then there is the normal ennui that besets all human beings.

The fears that accompany change should not be minimized. Progress and change both have their dark sides. Yet, in obedience to his Lord and Savior, the faculty member must, under God, take the risk. He does well to remember that the greatest change that may take place in a church body can actually occur when there is no change, when old formulas are used in connection with new situations and the Word becomes irrelevant for people in their need.

The need to meet change confronts theological professors with a hazard that is a part of their ministry. Any professor who has no problems cannot be operating in the heady atmosphere out there on the outer edges of theology, in new areas—at least for him—where the atmosphere is thinner and the breathing becomes harder. He cannot accept the bureaucrats' slogan "When in doubt, mumble." He may even have to venture to speak at the risk of error. Nor can he take the opposite view and say, "I'm a little slob, let me do my

job," and so excuse himself from criticism while he embraces the status quo.

Perhaps the church needs to be reminded that the reader or listener, too, has a responsibility. He must listen carefully to what is being said. He must ask himself whether he is sufficiently conversant with the subject to give a fair appraisal of what the professor is attempting to say. Those who report what has been said must not only report correctly and report in context, but they share with the professor the responsibility of reporting the material to an audience capable of understanding and evaluating it. Too often theological professors are accused of "disturbing the laity" when in fact the laity heard about it not through them but through unofficial sources, sources that sometimes pander to a certain mind-set. This lack of openness and trust has made many a theological professor a victim of press and gossip to the point that it has become for him almost a mark of distinction.

But being a committed child of God the theologian nevertheless is a sinner, daily in need of forgiveness and the life-strengthening power of the Spirit whom He freely gives through Word and Sacrament. As a sinner he is subject not only to errors of judgment but to all the sins to which human beings are heirs. He must assess his own motives whether he is impelled by ambition, a need for recognition, or a desire for leadership rather than of service. A constant barrage of attacks and criticism can easily foster impatience and bruise his Christian love. The seeds of discord are easily planted when the soil is thus prepared by Satan.

A theologian must admit that mistakes

will be made. He must continue to say with Walther: "We do not hereby mean to indicate that we are among those who believe that their understanding requires no development or correction. It is rather our constant, serious endeavor to make progress in the recognition of truth and, with the help of God, to free ourselves

more and more from the errors which still cling to us" (*Der Lutheraner*, XIII, 1). In saying that he pleads for openness and trust and a willingness to forgive, where necessary, on the part of his colleagues, his Synod, and of the church at large.

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