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Articles

Messengers of the Message: Preparing Tomorrow's Pastors

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Abstract: Perhaps your child or grandchild has stopped attending church. We all know people who have walked away from regular worship. For us it's a worrisome trait in contemporary American culture, and there are many reasons why it's happening. Among the reasons is one that concerns seminaries: the conduct of some pastors. Some messengers display pastoral demeanors and personal lives that do not reflect positively on the message of Jesus Christ.

More than ever before, seminaries need to form pastors who are continually growing in personal sanctification, men who take theological head knowledge down into their hearts, first and foremost because it is the message of their own salvation. Then, as a consequence, they go to congregations and communities as messengers of salvation, pastors who model the Christian life. Because these are changed times, Concordia Seminary is revising its curriculum. The message of the Gospel continues to be paramount, non-negotiable, but new curricular emphases will focus on the messenger of the message of Jesus Christ. One pastor who works with people who have disconnected from church says, "We are in a time when what you are saying is as important as how you are saying it. What you are saying needs to be genuine and authentic." As Paul said, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

This isn't the America many of us knew growing up. It's changed so much, in ways we wouldn't have imagined a few decades ago, changes that affect our lives in more ways than we know. As church people, these changes worry us when we see congregations struggling, and the statistics are bad. The majority of congregations in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are struggling. It's when we see our young people walking away from the church that these cultural changes pierce our hearts. No doubt you have a family member or friend who has become a "none," the word used by pollsters to identify someone who had identified with a congregation and denomination in the past but now lists "none" as his or her religious preference. To be sure, the increase in "nones" doesn't mean that your child, grandchild, or friend has left the saving faith. God knows their hearts, but their walk away from the institutional church is dangerous. In leaving the spiritual disciplines that have formed

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us in faith and in which we've tried to raise our young people, these precious souls are wandering into a spiritually dangerous far country, not unlike the prodigal son who went his own way, thinking that he knew best. So why do people leave participation in the life of a congregation? There are many reasons, but there is one that especially grieves us at Concordia Seminary; and I know it grieves all who love their congregations. This reason is the conduct of pastors.

Pastors should have loving hearts and welcoming arms; they shouldn't put people off. That's why our seminary is constantly talking about how to improve the quality of graduates. Ongoing efforts include evaluation of teaching effectiveness, workshops on curriculum and teaching techniques, focus groups and regular conversations with leaders in the church, especially the district presidents who have to deal with problem cases.

Overwhelmingly, our research has shown that our graduates do well when they are placed in their first congregations. Some do not do well because they were not a good fit for that first assignment, even though extensive work by the seminary and consultations with district presidents led us to believe it would be a good fit. Thankfully, these students often do much better when they are called to their second congregation. Sadly, however, there are a few graduates who fail badly, and the seminaries hear about it.

The following are some cases that I have heard about over my many years of ministry, inappropriate behaviors that have stuck in my memory. One pastor went ballistic when the trustees planted a tree without his approval. Apparently his view of the office of the ministry included landscape authority. Another pastor, asked by a member to visit a non-church member dying of AIDS, refused, saying the sick person was dying because of his sin. A third case was the pastor whose ways led people to leave his congregation. When the congregation could no longer afford to pay him, he insisted that someone had to pay him because he was a "called and ordained pastor."

But far more common are examples like my fourth case. A pastor whose two predecessors had failed morally, scandalous failures, arrived, visited members, listened patiently to their anger at the clergy. Thank God, through his patient pastoral leadership, the congregation today is healthy and growing.

Just as these cases have stuck in my memory, you may well have had your own hurtful experience with a pastor. "Are they learning this at the seminary?" Like heat-seeking missiles zooming in on a target, complaints zero in on the seminary, and please be assured that we take the complaints seriously. I recently asked a district president, "Let's take ten congregations that weren't getting along with their pastor. The conflict is great enough that you, the district president, were brought in. Out of those ten, how many congregations were in conflict because of the doctrine the pastor is preaching and teaching?" This district president answered, "Almost none."

Indeed, dysfunction in congregations is predominantly caused by interpersonal conflicts that in varying ways include the pastor. His doctrine is probably correct, the Law and Gospel rightly divided, but the messenger bringing the message is in some way flawed. It's common sense; we pastors are fallible sinners too!

“Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction” (Rom 15:4). At the start of this essay, we mentioned the changes in America these last decades, changes that have had an impact on the life of the church. Popular culture also caused problems in St. Paul's relationship with the Christians in Corinth. We can learn a way forward by seeing how Paul handled his strained relationship with that ancient congregation.

In our twenty-first century, the wonders of modern communication have made us conscious that we're living in a global world. Diversity accelerates, opinions and factions proliferate, Washington is gridlocked, but through all the dysfunction there is one dominant factor: political correctness. It dominates public conversation and tries to impose itself wherever it wants. This has come upon us in no small measure because of the dominance of major thought centers, like liberal universities, and many in the major media. This combination of liberal intellectual thought disseminated by willing media has successfully planted attitudes and conducts into the popular culture that couldn't have been imagined decades ago.

A sobering note: It's not going to change any time soon; the twentieth century is over. Back in the first century, the culture in Corinth had its own version of intellectuals and media influencing popular thought. Founded as a Roman colony in 44 BC, Corinth was in a location that made it a cosmopolitan city. Merchants, soldiers, philosophers, dramatic performers, tourists, religious pilgrims and evangelists all streamed through Corinth. It was truly a pluralistic society. The popular culture of Corinth found public expression through traveling orators called

the “sophists.” These intellectuals came to town and spoke in public, attracting followers with their wisdom and knowledge. They fostered a popular culture that was self-centered and self-serving. They promoted strength and belittled weakness, exalted knowledge and disparaged the unschooled. These sophists contributed significantly to a popular culture in which power, position,

prestige, and personality were more important than substance. In other words, the messenger was more important than the message. It was what we Lutherans call a “theology of glory,” and it was harming the Body of Christ in Corinth. Of course, those believers didn't understand this and so Paul had to teach them, pastorally.

You might expect Paul to have said, “My dear Corinthians, it's all about the message; pay no attention to me, the faulty messenger.” But no, he handled his

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relationship with the congregation in a different way. Paul wasn't a sophist, but he was perceived as one of the sophists. That's understandable. When he first arrived in Corinth, he had an agenda, spoke in public as a skilled rhetorician, and attracted a following. When he left Corinth, he got word that he was being compared somewhat unfavorably to other leaders, not just to sophists but especially to other Christian leaders, like the smooth Apollos. "I follow Paul" or "I follow Apollos" (1 Cor 1:12). Paul and other leaders were being compared and judged because the Corinthian Christians were more under the influence of popular culture than under the cross, reflecting the conventional wisdom that exalted the strong and knowing more than the wisdom of God in weakness.

Paul didn't dodge criticisms against him by saying the church members weren't getting the message right, and to be sure, the Corinthians weren't properly living out the message. Instead, *Paul presented himself as a model of how the message of the cross applies to life*. He said, "Be imitators of me" (1 Cor 4:16). While we can intellectually separate the messenger from the message, Paul recognized that the two are closely linked in the perception of the public within and outside the church.

If the saving message is carried by a flawed messenger who causes offense, many people will reject the Gospel, or at least have nothing to do with that congregation. The messenger must be a different kind of person, a leader willing to let his life be scrutinized for the sake of the more important message. "I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ" (4:16–17). "I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (10:33–11:1). Then and now, the pastoral demeanor and personal life of the messenger of the message is mission critical.

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Historically, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has kept the message and messenger somewhat separate. Seminary formation focused on intellect, on lectures, and on reading books of theology. The character of the messenger, while important, was not given a priority. That preponderant stress upon the message is seen in the questions asked a candidate for ordination or installation. Seven questions are asked; all but one are about content, about fidelity to the biblical and confessional message. Only one question turns to the character of the pastor. "Finally, will you honor and adorn the Office of the Holy Ministry with a holy life?" This emphasis upon faithfulness to the Word is as it

should be. Jesus says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31–32). “Scripture alone” is our Reformation heritage. The masthead of the German predecessor to *The Lutheran Witness* said, “God’s Word and Luther’s teaching shall to all time endure.” Most personally, it’s Jesus who saves you and me, and we know Jesus only through His Spirit working through the Word. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31).

Your future pastors will continue to receive this blessed Lutheran emphasis upon the message, God’s Word. Right now the faculty of Concordia St. Louis is revising the curriculum for our major pastoral formation program, the Master of Divinity program. “Curriculum” means not only what is taught in the classroom but the entire campus experience. The very first goal of the seminary experience is “Theological Foundations,” the acceptance and use of Scripture “as the inspired and normative Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions as their authoritative interpretation.” That’s not just a nod; the intent of the new curriculum is that our graduates conduct their ministries and guide their congregations from a biblical and confessional mindset. Worldly wisdom and knowledge can aid in ministry (for example, Paul used the devices of rhetoric), but such helps must always be subservient to ministry animated by the Word of Christ.

In that light, the new curriculum highlights “Pastoral Practice and Leadership” more intentionally than in the past. Students will have more experiences with healthy congregations. And through a new curricular emphasis, “Cultural Interpretation and Engagement,” students will learn first-hand about bringing the Word of God to people of different cultures and ethnicities. The focus will always be on God and faith. Tomorrow’s pastors must have the determination of Paul, “My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:4–5).

Because there has been a problem with the conduct of some pastors, much more attention will also be given by the seminary to the character of the candidate for ministry so that our future pastors “be above reproach” and “well thought of by outsiders” (1 Tim 3:1–7). Paul David Tripp has written,

Tomorrow’s pastors must have the determination of Paul, “My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:4–5).

Academized Christianity, which is not constantly connected to the heart and puts its hope in knowledge and skill, can actually make students dangerous. It arms them with powerful knowledge and skills that can make the students think that they are more mature and godly than they actually are. It arms students with weapons of spiritual warfare that if not used with humility and grace will harm the people they are meant to help.¹

Thus the new curriculum includes special attention to “Personal and Spiritual Formation,” emphasizing your future pastor’s devotional life, physical and emotional health, relationship skills, accountability, sensitivity to other cultures and ethnicities, and much more. Before the whole faculty votes to certify a student for the holy ministry, each student will have to demonstrate successful progress toward these desired outcomes. By the way, this isn’t only about seminarians. Manifest integrity of head and heart should be the character of every follower of Jesus. For pastors, ordination isn’t completion; it signals intensified zeal for sanctified living. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

This is a holistic approach that theological educators see as appropriate and necessary to ministry in our changed American culture. Nancy Ammerman, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Boston University, writes:

Simply teaching the basic skills of preaching and teaching will not help students assemble the disparate pilgrims moving through the city to hear what they have to say. Simply ensuring adequate scriptural and theological knowledge may or may not help a student hear the halting questions of a young adult who has never been to church. . . . All the things seminaries have learned to do are still essential, but they are no longer sufficient. Today’s religious leaders have to invite people into a spiritual community where worship introduces connections to God, fellowship introduces connections to one another, and service introduces connections to a large mission in the world.²

There is reason for hope. The Point, a mission church in Knoxville, Tennessee reaches people who have wandered from the church. “To date the average visitor to The Point is 10–20 years disconnected from the church if they have ever attended the church.” Pastor Matt Peeples writes, “People are tired of spin and gimmicks. . . . As a result of being bombarded with messages, they have become more savvy to what the message is really communicating. We are in a time where what you are saying is as important as how you are saying it. What you are saying needs to be genuine and authentic.” “In this culture, content becomes secondary to connection. If you do not connect, you will not be given the opportunity to share your content.”³

Paul’s strained relationship with the Corinthian congregation wasn’t as much about doctrine as about their failure to deal with one another as fellow members of the Body of Christ. “There is no evidence that the factions Paul describes in 1 Corinthians represented any differences in doctrine or practice.”⁴ L. L. Welborn carefully describes the setting that Paul portrays and makes a convincing case that

the problem is power struggle and not a theological controversy.⁵ The message gave them all they needed for vibrant congregational life (“you are not lacking in any spiritual gift,” 1:7), but their most vocal members didn’t get the difference between prevailing culture and life in the church. Society’s emphasis upon knowledge became their pride in theological knowledge. To that Paul said, “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up” (8:2). Society’s stress upon individual power and prestige became their justification for self-assertion to the spiritual harm of other church members. “All things are lawful (that is, can be justified theologically), but not all things are helpful” (10:23). In short, their theology of glory blocked the power and wisdom of God that comes from the message of the cross. To translate the message from their heads to the habits of their hearts, Paul presented his personal life as a model. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” That’s mission critical for tomorrow’s pastors, and today’s as well, for Jesus’ sake.

Endnotes

¹ Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Echristian, 2012), 54.

² Nancy Ammerman, “America’s Changing Religious and Cultural Landscape and its Implications for Theological education,” *Theological Education*, 49, no. 1 (2014), 33.

³ For easy access to Peebles’ work, see Matthew Peebles, Engage the Digital Age: Preaching the Unchanging Gospel in and Ever Changing Culture, connectingthedisconnected.com, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdE6S1oqvxs> (accessed August 19, 2015) and *The New Realities of Communication* at connectingthedisconnected.com.

⁴ Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000) 55.

⁵ L. L. Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric in the Corinthian Epistles* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 7.