

# An Open Letter to Lutheran Brothers and Sisters on Theological Education

Christopher M. Thomforde

## Salutation

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

What follows is an open letter on the subject of theological education. It is addressed to you, the men and women of the Church who have direct responsibility for theological education and to all those of us who wonder about its current effectiveness and future vitality.

Theological education is a matter of concern among many throughout the Church and, currently, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the tradition which I call home, is focusing its institutional attention and imagination upon the way forward for its programs of theological education.

Many questions come to mind, when considering the future direction of theological education. Where are the winds of the Spirit blowing in our time; where is the Church heading? What are the obvious and subtle cries of the poor to whom the Gospel is addressed? Are we paying attention? How shall the Church respond? How does the Church prepare men and women to respond wholeheartedly and thoughtfully to the call to serve? Who is eligible to serve? What's at the heart of theological education: intellectual inquiry, skill training, or spiritual formation? How does the Church sustain those called to serve in their vocation? What might a viable financial model look like which can support the Church's program of theological education? And, of course, what's wrong with theological education now; what needs to be shored up, fixed, or brought to a close?

As an ordained pastor of the ELCA who has been the beneficiary of theological education in a variety of settings, who has served in a parish, in colleges and universities of the Church, and as president of The Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, I am most interested in the process of imagining the future of theological education. Given this interest and this experience, I write this letter to you, offering up a variety of thoughts for your consideration in hopes that the

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conversation about theological education among us might be focused, constructive, and faithful. What follows is not an argument in favor of a particular approach to theological education. Nor is what follows a prescription for a particular plan for this or that program of theological education. I write to you as one who cares deeply and professionally about the mission of the Church and as one who desires to make a contribution, however modest, to the conversation about the future of this mission and the programs of theological education which will be developed in support of it. What follows is something like the observations and insights from a friend, garnered for more than forty years of participation in the life of the Church, who simply asks, “As you think and pray and imagine and struggle and plan, have you thought about this . . . ?”

What follows is informed by my particular experience as an adolescent in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and as an adult in the Lutheran Church in America and subsequently the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I give thanks for these several traditions which have shaped my understanding of the Gospel and ministry. I am not as familiar, currently, with the dynamics of theological education within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod or in the many other expressions of the Evangelical Lutheran tradition in North America as I perhaps should be in writing this open letter. What follows has something of an ELCA focus. But it is an open letter, for all to read. I hope that it might be helpful, informative, and suggestive to anyone, from any of the various Lutheran traditions in North America who takes seriously the work of theological education and who wonders about its future, in spite of its ELCA focus.

As I write, I am reminded of a passage from Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. Buber writes:

Spirit become word, Spirit become form—whoever has been touched by the spirit and did not close himself off knows to some extent of the fundamental fact: neither germinates and grows in the human world without having been sown; both issue from encounters with the other. . . . Again I am reminded of the strange confession of Nietzsche who circumscribed the process of inspiration by saying that one accepts without asking who gives. That may be so—one does not ask, but one gives thanks.<sup>1</sup>

Theological education, it seems to me, has to do with spirit, with word, with form, with sowing and germinating, with encounter, and with giving thanks.

### **Some Initial Thoughts**

1. When Jesus sent out His disciples, according to Matthew 10, He charged them, “I send you out like sheep among wolves; be wise as serpents and gentle as doves.” In so doing, I believe He set forth crucial principles for us to remember and to weigh as we consider the future of theological education.

2. “I send you”—The work of ministry has its origins, its authority, its foundation in Jesus and the Gospel He proclaimed and lived. The ministry of the Gospel is not about the good intentions or zeal of individuals or of committed groups of believers, as important as good intentions, zeal, and communities of believers may be. Nor is its vitality to be found in the strategic plans of the Church as an institution, as necessary as plans and institutions may be. In ministry, we are invited, called to, commissioned for, and empowered with the Holy Spirit to live in accordance with God’s work of reconciling the world unto Himself through Christ. The mission is God’s mission; we are invited to take part in the work of this mission. Theological education has to do with understanding what the authority and call of Jesus Christ might mean for us, in our generation and in our particular circumstances, and committing ourselves to servants of Christ for the sake of both neighbors and strangers.

3. “among wolves”—The world into which we are sent and in which we live is not now nor has it ever been a friend of the Gospel. In North America, we imagined that the world was friendly to the mission of the Gospel through the Church during the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s. This was an illusion projected by American civil religion and its many agencies, one of which was American Protestantism. The reality of the world’s animosity is not something to be regretted or bemoaned or even feared. Rather it is a fact of life to be taken as a given. It is a dynamic to be better understood, through theological education, so that the mission of the Gospel of God’s love for this world might be better realized.

4. “wise as serpents”—The wisdom or “Sophia” articulated in Proverbs 8 and 9, as well as in Psalm 104, manifests itself in creativity and shrewdness, in bringing harmony out of chaos, in transforming depravity and want into wellbeing, and in engaging in life with hospitality at the crossroads of the city. Theological education, for the sake of the mission of the Gospel, has to do with living and acting wisely.

5. “gentle as doves”—The character of those engaged in the mission of the Gospel is to be one of gentleness, empathy, even innocence. The prophet whose words are remembered in the Suffering Servant Songs of Second Isaiah articulates this attitude with particular beauty and force. The Church remembered these words as it sought to better understand the life and work of Jesus. If we are to be about His ministry, by His invitation and with His edification, may we be shaped and informed by His character, as well! Theological education has as much to do with engendering and forming the character of the Suffering Servant in us as it does in strengthening our hands for service and enlightening our minds to the truth of the Gospel.

6. Thus theological education has many different but complementary dimensions. Among these are:

- The understanding or confession that ministry is God’s work to which we are called, by Grace, to participate;

- The discerning and the affirming of one's call to the ministry of the Gospel;
- The discovery and acceptance of one's own giftedness by the Holy Spirit to serve well;
- With the necessity to become wise in understanding the world, the Gospel, and the praxis of ministry;
- With the shaping of one's heart and soul and mind through prayer, life in community, intellectual inquiry, use of the means of Grace, and spiritual formation;
- And with the ongoing admonition and encouragement by brothers and sisters within the life of community, which sustain a life of ministry.

### **Some Practical Considerations**

7. Considering the future of theological education in and through the Church, particularly the ELCA, is a matter of stewardship. Stewardship has to do with managing the resources of the household of God's people for the sake of mission and ministry. The good and wise steward helps to develop the context within which ministry can be lived out. Therefore, the consideration of the future of theological education has to do with questions about the use of the Church's financial resources, its human resources, its traditions of faith and worship and service. Stewardship has to do with considering the life of the world in which we now live in order to imagine what life might look like in years to come, given the current trajectory of things. Stewardship has to do with understanding what "The Gospel" has meant historically, of acknowledging and celebrating the traditions which have shaped us in the past. Given the movement of life into the future and given the traditions within which we stand, how can we, as good stewards of the mysteries of God, imagine future programs for the preparation of the faithful for the ministry of the Gospel? Finally, stewardship has to do, perhaps foremost, with discernment. Where are the winds of the Spirit blowing and how do we align the resources of the Church with God's movement so that our imagination and planning might be in harmony with God's work? We do not want to be found clever and strategic but, ironically or sadly, out of tune with the very One and the very ones whom we seek to serve.

8. "What's reasonable?" can be the kind of question we bring to bear upon our discernment, our imagination, and our planning. By saying this, I believe that reason is one of God's gifts to be used by us in matters of stewardship and governance. Theological education is a matter of the First Article of the Creed, creation. It is not a matter of salvation or of sanctification. With regard to matters of creation, God has blessed humankind with reason as an instrument to be used for the sake of the long-term effective use of resources and for the generating of equitable relationships among the people most immediately involved in ministry. "What's reasonable?" is a God-given, reliable guide to our discourse and planning for the future of theological

education. “What is easy to accomplish?” “How can we avoid disturbing the current equilibrium?” “Why change anything?” are the kinds of questions to be avoided.

9. In this regard, I would also urge us to consider “What’s daring and new?” as a question to test our thinking and planning. From time to time, the “daring and new” can become captive of the “best” or the “expedient” or “the doable” or what seems “good enough for now.” “What’s reasonable?” challenges our sense of stewardship while “What’s daring and new?” challenges our imagination. Both challenges are called for now, I believe.

### **Some Concepts to Consider**

10. Ministry: God’s mission in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is alive and active in the world, both within and outside of the activity of the Church. When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we affirm the coming of God’s reign of righteousness and justice, and we pray that it may come to us, as Luther says. Theological education functions in support of this mission, turning men and women in the direction of the movement of the Spirit. It frees us to recognize, claim, and give thanks for our own vocation/giftedness/charism. It attunes our ears to hear the cry of the poor and equips us to serve. It informs our lives to grow into the shape of Christ. Theological education is, therefore, a means to an end and not an end in itself. Ministry is the means by which God’s mission by the Holy Spirit generates faith in men, women, and children through Word and Sacrament.

11. Ministers: Currently the ELCA recognizes a variety of “ministers.” Among them are all the baptized, AIMS, Diaconal Ministers, and Clergy/Pastors. Other expressions of Lutheranism in North America have a variety of designations and orders of ministry as well. The LCMS has a wonderful tradition of recognizing the ministry of its parochial school teachers and its Deaconesses. While we are considering the future of theological education, is this the time to re-order the ministries of the Church according to the principles articulated in the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document (*Faith and Order Papers* no. 111, the World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982)? Such a re-ordering would bring the ELCA and other Lutheran expressions into greater harmony with the Biblical, the Church’s Tradition, and Ecumenical understandings of ministry and the ordering of ministers of Word and Sacrament. Also, such re-ordering of ministries would provide more widely recognizable titles of office to those called to serve.

12. Finances: The buildings and grounds of the seminaries, their endowments, and the personnel of the various educational ministries of the ELCA all represent a considerable heritage/inheritance from the church’s past. They will also call for ever greater investment of capital in the future. What is the viable, long-term financial model which will provide support for theological education going forward? How buildings-and-grounds-centric should theological education be in the future? What

must be taught and learned “on campus” and what can be taught and learned “off campus”?

13. Pedagogy: How are the discoveries of neuroscience and psychology into how men and women learn to be incorporated in the Church’s theological education curricula and settings? How is the ever expanding world of information and educational technology to be incorporated in the Church’s theological education curricula and settings?

14. Resources outside of the Church: How might the vast educational resources outside of the Church’s immediate circle of direct influence and control, like the colleges and universities of the land or The Corporation for Public Broadcasting or National Public Radio, or city, state, and national library systems and archives be made use of to support the theological educational programs of the Church? How do we reduce redundancy?

### **Some Straw Models Consider**

15. Let me propose some straw models for theological education. They are proposed to encourage discussion around some particular points of reference. None is meant to be definitive. Each seeks to come to terms with the property, the endowments, and the human resources currently in place which need to be addressed as we consider the future of theological education and the finances involved to support them. Also, each seeks to address issues of what I would call a foundational curriculum for theological education, which includes Biblical studies, History, Philosophy, Greek and Hebrew, Psychology, Sociology, and an understanding of the Lutheran traditions in particular. In addition, each seeks to address the issue of training ministers for the praxis of ministry and for providing opportunities for the critical reflection upon one’s own practice of ministry through internships and fieldwork. Finally, each seeks to address the issue of spiritual formation for ministry which includes learning how to pray, living and worshiping in community, and spiritual direction or guidance. As you will see, different models imagine different emphases and different locations for these various ingredients, so to speak, which make up the whole of theological education.

16. A West Point Model: This model is, to some degree, in place now in the LCMS and the ELCA: a campus, possibly owned by the Church, to which students come to live and to study with faculty. It has a distinguished heritage. What follows modifies the current model. The work of theological education would be focused upon one seminary campus. Students and faculty would live and study and worship together. Opportunities for fieldwork and internships would be provided for and supervised from this one campus community. Such a model has the advantage of financial viability. The maintenance and operation of one campus makes more sense, in many ways, than the maintenance and operation of many campuses scattered

throughout the land. Also, a kind of “esprit de corps” could be developed among ministers who had had a shared, common experience of theological education. Such a common experience could nurture not only an “esprit de corps” among ministers of the Gospel but also an understanding that ministry is not a personal undertaking and adventure in Grace but an expression of the whole Church, for the sake of the Gospel in service to the world and for the glory of God. Finally, the “West Point” model could position the seminary to be the “thought center” of the Church, where open inquiry, study, and conversation about the controversial issues confronting the Church could be entertained on behalf of the Church as a whole.

17. A University/Academic Model: In this model, the Church would cease to operate and manage its own seminary campuses, now scattered around the country, and, instead, would partner with one or perhaps two university divinity schools, which have a tradition of Lutheran interaction (Yale or Chicago, for example) and designate them as the “official”/“approved” site for Lutheran theological educational preparation for ordained ministry. A Lutheran House of Studies on the campus would provide “a home” for students preparing for the Lutheran ministry, offering opportunity for spiritual formation, and supervising off-campus internships and fieldwork.

The possible benefits of such a model include greater long-term financial viability, living together in community with other Lutherans and with other brothers and sisters from the broader ecumenical world. The intellectual challenge that comes with studying at a major research university could also enliven theological education. The interaction with students and faculty from other professional schools like law, medicine, and business could provide students of theological education with a variety of insights into the context and practice of ministry.

18. A Bishop/Chapter House Model: This is a model that has been used by the Church earlier in its historical experience to good effect. In this model, theological education would be focused not upon places or campuses, but upon the work of several Bishops, people recognized by the Church for their giftedness as teachers and mentors. Bishops and the synods in their care would be designated as “official”/“approved” teaching sites for Lutheran theological education. In addition, faculty members would be called to assist the Bishops in this ministry. Students would follow an apprentice model of education: living in community, discerning their own giftedness through the active work of service, discovering the meaning of the Gospel under the tutelage of the Bishop and the faculty members of the Chapter, being equipped to serve, and being shaped in the Christian life by daily prayer.

Possible benefits of this model could include greater long-term financial viability. Given the fact that many people now preparing for ministry through theological education come from a variety of backgrounds, geographical locations, and levels of family responsibility, the Bishop/Chapter House model would allow for a broad regional rather than central focus. I could imagine the office of the Bishop

being strengthened by recognizing it for its teaching ministry. Students would be “learning by doing,” and this model of pedagogy could serve the various needs and learning styles of students better than the traditional, classroom method. Finally, the educational methodology of working with a mentor while learning how to serve could enhance the central importance of understanding ministry as relational and missional rather than hierarchical and administrative in nature.

### **A Concluding Thought**

19. Jesus charged His disciples to be “gentle as doves and wise as serpents” as they lived out their call to ministry. Martin Luther King, Jr., charged the members of his congregation to be “tough minded and tenderhearted” as they lived out their lives as children of God for the sake of justice. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel thought a person could be filled with awe and wonder as well as committed to “mitzvah,” the doing of good deeds for the sake of one’s neighbor, in response to God’s work and word in the world. Theological education is a means of preparing and supporting men and women to hear God’s call to serve their neighbor in love for the sake of the Gospel and to be enabled to live out that call day by day. Over the millennia, the Church has discovered many ways of providing theological education for its members. Now, the Church sets out, once again, to imagine a new way of doing theological education. Whatever shape the Lutheran theological education programs may take in the days to come, may God’s people be not only learned and well trained but also people shaped and formed by/into the character of Christ as well.

Blessings to you, one and all!

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 176.