

Confession of a Lutheran University

David W. Loy

I. Introduction

It is a tough time to be a Lutheran university. Lutheran students do

This article argues that a Lutheran university must, in fact, maintain a substantive, public theological confession. The argument falls into two parts. The first part examines Luther's 1524 letter "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" and the 1530 sermon "On Keeping Children in School," showing how the concept of vocation as concrete social relationship provides guidance about the ends schools ought to pursue.³ The second part turns from Luther to the

sought within each vocation as well as the means to be used in achieving them.

As social institutions, Lutheran educational institutions might also be said to have vocations. Each exists in relationships with other institutions and individual human beings, and its particular social context generates norms that govern the ends it ought to seek. In fact, when Luther addressed the importance of educating children, his argument rested on the nature of

for educated clergy), children, parents, city leaders and church leaders. The councilmen, as leaders of both the city and the local church,⁹ have vocational obligations with respect to schools because of their responsibility to the city and its people as well as the church and its people.

Naturally, once Luther establishes the vocational obligation of city leaders to establish and maintain schools, he offers advice about the schools' curriculum. Occupational training alone is not sufficient, because "a city's best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consist rather in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens."¹⁰ These traits will be developed by students who "hear of the doings and sayings of the entire world, and how things went with various cities, kingdoms, princes, men, and women."¹¹ Luther turns to history not simply so that students imitate it; rather, if they study history, "they could then draw the proper inferences and in the fear of God take their own place in the stream of human events. In addition, they could gain from history the knowledge and understanding of what to seek and what to avoid in this outward life, and be able to advise and direct others accordingly."¹² Luther is arguing that students who study history can learn from the mistakes (and successes) of others rather than having to amass their own experience.¹³

Moreover, for Luther, Christian schools exist to undermine the work of Satan. "If he is to be dealt a blow that really hurts, it must be done through young people who have come to maturity in the knowledge of God, and who spread His word and teach it to others."¹⁴ Preaching and teaching God's word requires students to know the original languages in which it was written. The schools must therefore teach Greek and Hebrew. They must also teach Latin, according to Luther, although his argument on this point is not as well developed as his argument for teaching Greek and Hebrew.¹⁵ It appears that he valued Latin because it, along with Greek and Hebrew, is a great "ornament, profit, glory and benefit, both for the understanding of Holy Scripture and the conduct of temporal government."¹⁶ Since Latin was still the *lingua franca* in both civil and churchly realms, "without a basic

the city.²² Later in the sermon he lauds the work of civil servants, claiming, “We shamefully despise God when we begrudge our children this glorious and divine work and stick them instead in the exclusive service of the belly and of avarice, having them learning nothing but how to make a living, like hogs wallowing forever with their noses in the dunghill, and never training them for so worthy an estate and office.”²³ Luther calls withholding a good education from children “service of Mammon,” “caring for their bellies,” “horribly ungrateful,” and idolatry.²⁴ To people who do so Luther says, “you want God to serve you free of charge both with preaching and with worldly government, so that you can just calmly turn your child away from him and teach him to serve Mammon alone.”²⁵ As beneficiaries of the social order and Christians who are to love their neighbors, parents have a duty to ensure their children receive a proper education.

should be needed there.”²⁹ A proper education prepares students to love their neighbors more effectively in all of their future vocations.

As in the “Letter,” the educational objectives Luther articulates in “Sermon” flow from the vocations of the Christian school. The school has an obligation to the church to prepare boys for further theological study. It has an obligation to the city to prepare students to read and write in the legal language of the day, understand the subtleties and complexities of civil service or private business, and engage the riches of the culture in order to provide wise direction for home, business, and state. “The jurists and scholars in this worldly kingdom are the persons who preserve this law, and thereby maintain the worldly kingdom,” Luther writes.³⁰ What the Lutheran school should teach can be inferred from its concrete vocation in its specific time and place. Given its vocation to the church, a substantive theological confession is a necessary part of its curriculum.

III. The Modern Lutheran University

Like schools in Luther’s day, the university in the modern United

of alienating potential students.³⁵ This section argues that Lutheran universities should not abandon their public confessions in the face of these challenges. They have obligations toward parties besides students, their parents, and the government. Two vocations in particular are important for

the matter succinctly: “Learning in a Lutheran university also means that the pursuit of knowledge is interwoven with concern and care.”³⁹ Although we can achieve amazing technical feats, “many of the successes of the technological project of mastery make us all feel less rather than more in

wisdom and informs our understanding of the world. For that reason, the Lutheran university's vocation toward society requires it to maintain a substantive, public confession.

The Lutheran university also has a vocation toward the church—that is, those called and gathered by the Holy Spirit to faith in Christ. In the Lutheran tradition, one significant component of that vocation is to prepare church workers to proclaim the good news of salvation in Christ.⁴³ In Luther's day, that meant pastors; in our day, it means students bound for seminary as

and irrelevant to contemporary society.⁵⁶ Such concerns are not unfounded, but the danger is not exclusive to universities with a substantive confession of faith. George Marsden has observed, “While American universities today allow individuals free exercise of religion in parts of their lives that do not touch the heart of the university, they tend to exclude or discriminate against relating explicit religious perspectives to intellectual life. In other words, the free exercise of religion does not extend to the dominant intellectual centers of our culture.”⁵⁷ If marginalization of competing views can plague secular and secularized universities as well as universities with a substantive theological confession, then the confession itself is not the problem. The problem is more likely the character of the faculty. Faculty who are intolerant of competing views display a disposition to eschew dialogue in favor of monologue and to discount positions contrary to their own. As a result, they are unable or unwilling to entertain the kinds of dialogue that explore issues of significance for contemporary society in the spirit of inquiry associated with the liberal arts.

If intolerance has more to do with the character of the faculty than their confession, then requiring faculty to hold a confession need not suppress dialogue. Naturally, Christian faculty should conduct such conversations in accord with St. Peter’s admonition, “in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile

write them off or ignore their contribution. On the other hand, if we acknowledge that reasonable people can come to differing conclusions about important issues, we are more likely to be open to dialogue with them. Having a substantive theological confession does not predispose one toward pride, nor does the lack of a theological confession predispose one toward humility. In fact, if the kind of inquiry associated with the liberal arts is an important feature of Lutheran higher education, and if humility is a precondition for that kind of inquiry, then their own confession requires faculty at the Lutheran university to cultivate humility in themselves and to seek to inculcate in their students as well.⁵⁹ A Lutheran university that encouraged pride in its faculty would not be living up to its own ideals.

IV. Conclusion

I have argued that we can understand what makes a university Lutheran by explicating the obligations associated with its vocations. On this account the liberal arts are important because they prepare students to reflect in a value-laden way on technical, medical, and economic problems that face society. They provide the material that 1) shows students how to reflect on significant questions, 2) engages students in substantive answers to those questions—including answers informed by the Christian faith, and 3) exposes students to threads and currents that have formed our contemporary culture's answers to those questions. The liberal arts tradition exposes students to the best of human wisdom in hopes of helping students down the road toward wisdom. This account also makes clear that the Lutheran university has a significant vocation toward the church. Both vocations entail an obligation to maintain a substantive theological confession, both so that church-work students receive an excellent grounding in the teachings of the Scriptures and so that all Christian students appropriate and apply the objective content of the faith to the challenges they face in their present and future vocations.

The challenges facing higher education in the next decade are significant, and the challenges facing Lutheran and other Christian universities may be even greater. The challenges, however, are not new. Our Lord called the earliest church to confess him in the face of opposition and even outright persecution, and he promised to be with his church until he returns again. His promise does not entail a guarantee that no Lutheran university will ever close. His promise ought, however, to provide a Lutheran university with boldness in the face of difficult challenges, including the boldness to maintain a substantive, public theological confession that informs academic life across the entire curriculum. In fact, it is precisely because the influence of Christianity in our culture at large is declining that Christian students need to hear humble, thoughtful, Christian faculty reflect on the

⁵⁹ For a helpful account of humility, see Martin Franzmann and F. Dean Lueking, *Grace Under Pressure: Meekness in Ecumenical Relations* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 4.

relevance of the Christian faith for their disciplines and professions—and for the pressing questions that our nation and world face. This can happen only if the faculty members themselves maintain a clear confession of the Christian faith. A Lutheran faculty that maintains a substantive theological confession helps ensure that the church has people who are prepared to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ accurately for the salvation of God's people, and it helps to ensure that Christians are prepared to live out their faith wisely, intelligently, and humbly in a complex and fallen world.⁶⁰

David W. Loy, M.Div., Ph.D., is Professor of Philosophy, Theology, and Ethics as well as Associate Dean of Christ College at Concordia University Irvine.