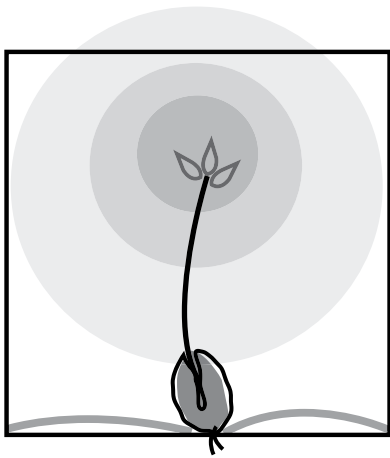


WHY THEOLOGY IS INDISPENSABLE TO THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Joel Meyer



The title of this essay may seem a little strange. I want to argue for something that appears to be a tautology: that theology is indispensable to theological education. But after almost six years of studying theology at a Lutheran seminary, I have come to believe that theological education today risks marginalizing theology exactly when and where it is needed the most.

Our current pluralistic context poses fundamental theological questions to Christians and our practice of Christianity. But since many of our seminaries have long traditions of serving a homogeneously Christian America, theological education is almost unable to answer such basic theological questions faithfully or appropriately. To illustrate my point, it is best to start with my own story. I am currently a PH.D. student at Concordia Seminary–Saint Louis, where I also received my M.DIV. I arrived there after receiving a B.A. in theology from Valparaiso University. My greatest concern at the time was whether I could, as one person put it, flourish in “the lions’ den” of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

The questions I brought from Valpo to my education in St. Louis centered around the debates that had taken place in Missouri over the past fifty years. Is there such a thing as the third use of the law? What is the role of the law in our justification and in our sanctification? How pervasive is Luther’s theology of the cross? These questions had to be answered if I was going to find a place for myself in the Missouri Synod.

To my pleasant surprise, not only did the professors and classes at Concordia willingly engage my questions, but some even challenged me to read Luther and the Lutheran Confessions and decide for myself. I quickly found that these questions had already been posed and wrestled over in many of the fierce theological debates that went on in Luther’s own time and even in the late Reformation.

My first few years at seminary, then, were spent devouring the Lutheran Confessions and diving deeper and

deeper into the “structural logic” of Lutheran theology. (By “structural logic” I mean the proper working relationship between key Lutheran concepts such as the law/gospel distinction, forensic justification, sanctification, the two kingdoms, the Word of God, and the two kinds of righteousness.) Lutheran confessional theology quickly became my passion, and the systematic department became my favorite. I also enjoyed my history and exegetical classes and was occasionally surprised by common themes that crossed departments.

At the beginning of my final year, I decided to take up further studies in the Lutheran Confessions. By that time I felt I had a good grasp on the classic Lutheran theological questions. But also in that final year I began to read Robert Jenson, and I quickly realized that the logic of Lutheranism stems back even further than the Reformation and its subsequent theological debates. Reading

Jenson helped me see that Lutheranism is a particular way to answer questions that are basic to the very practice of theology: the ways we think about God and his relationship to the world.

Jenson intrigued me because he helped place my own thinking in the broader context of reflection on God. It was especially enlightening for me to understand how different fields of rational inquiry operate as theologies. But I did not fully recognize why this greater context was significant until I took a graduate seminar on ecotheology. There was one article in particular that revealed the gravity of the situation. The article, from a recent issue of *Zygon*, is entitled, “Pantheism Reconstructed: Ecotheology as a Successor to the Judeo-Christian, Enlightenment, and Post-Modern Paradigms.” Its author, John Grula, claims that the root cause of the ecological crisis is the basic Christian theological framework. The Christian concept of a God Who is ontologically separate from creation, Grula insists, has provided theological justification for the degradation of the material world, since in such a schema the material world is

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inferior to the spiritual. Grula continues that such degradation provides the impetus for one human people group to claim superiority over another on account of their likeness to that transcendent God.

These claims aren't especially new. In fact, they only recount an argument first posed forty years ago by Lynn

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White. But what is especially troubling about Grula's account of the matter is the way he insists, not only on criticizing the Christian theological framework, but also on constructing a new theology based on the evidences of modern science and the inadequacies of previous theological frameworks to anticipate and resolve the current environmental crisis.

Postulating that "the creator/creation dichotomy is a false one and an erroneous extrapolation from everyday human experience," he argues that the intelligent design evident in creation suggests not the intelligence of a creator but that of creation itself. The complex design of the human body, for instance, proves that the forces of cosmic evolution that are innate to the creation are intelligent. "This intelligent design is the primary basis for regarding our universe and God as one and therefore the creation as divine and sacred." Therefore, Grula concludes, "we see that not only is pantheism compatible and consistent with modern science, but science provides one of two main avenues by which we arrive at a pantheistic viewpoint."

This article showed me that Jensen is right in suggesting that Christian theologians aren't the only people doing theology. The ecological movement not only provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the world and our place within it, but it can further suggest that these frame-

works make both critical and constructive claims on the identity of God. The challenge of ecology is only one example among many today. We practice theology in a pluralistic context where different theologies are as readily available as any other marketed product. In the not-so-distant past, most everyone could assume the basic Christian theological framework. We could all agree that God was the creator of all things and that the incarnation of God's Son was the decisive moment in the history of the world. But we cannot assume that any longer.

The rise of contemporary pluralism and the decline of a distinctly Christian ethos in America pose fundamental questions to our own practice of Christianity. The very identity of God is put to question by our pluralistic context with the result that new questions are posed, even from people within our own communities. Why should I read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as authoritative accounts of Jesus? How do I know that these canonical gospels tell us more about Jesus and God than the non-canonical books? Why do I need to go to church every Sunday? Can I not experience God better by taking a walk in the woods?

These questions are especially challenging to those of us who have been raised and trained to resolve problems like the role of the law in the Christian life, the priority of faith over works, and whatever other issues tend to arise from intra-Christian debate on justification by faith. That intra-Christian type of reflective discourse simply assumes certain antecedent positions—the very positions that are now being questioned by our contemporary American context.

The danger in seminary education is that, while we are taught to address theological questions on an *intra-Christian* level of discourse, we haven't been taught to give an account of our most essential assumptions. Those assumptions and the questions posed by our American context are basic to the

very nature of theology. Who is God and what is God's relationship to the world? The way catholic Christians begin to answer those questions is by telling the story of Jesus. Our most fundamental contention about God is that He has been fully revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus claimed to be the one sent by the God Who created all that exists and Who chose a certain people to be His means of blessing all creation. This Jesus was crucified for his claims to be the one who fulfilled God's promises and Israel's mission. But Jesus was raised from the dead by the very God who sent him and he now sits at the right hand of God and sends the Holy Spirit. (This response, of course, is a rough summary of Peter's sermon in Acts 2.)

A basic explication of the faith such as this raises questions that the structural logic of Lutheran theology assumes but does not explicitly address. For one, if this is our most basic account of God, we are inescapably confronted with the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus the most basic question we must answer when we do theology today is how our typically Lutheran themes like justification relate to the trinitarian identity of God. This will require creative systematic proposals anchored in a deep understanding of trinitarian doctrine.

But the doctrine of the Trinity has a complex historical tradition of theo-

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logical assertions with its own distinct questions and answers. So another of the basic questions we have to answer

when we do theology today is how we can derive the doctrine of the Trinity from the apostolic witness. This requires the practice of historical theology and especially biblical exegesis. Another basic question then is about the authority by which we claim that Jesus of Nazareth is really the defini-

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tive revelation of God. Here we are thrust into the question of the authority of the Holy Scripture. How can we authoritatively use its claim that Jesus is the Son of God? Why was the New Testament written and how do these writings shape our witness to Jesus? And what does the Old Testament have to do with this witness? From these questions about the Scriptures we are driven to consider matters of pastoral theology. How are we to

preach, teach, and speak about God in such a way that we use the Holy Scriptures appropriately?

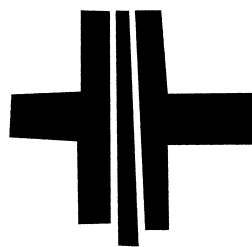
In no way do I mean to suggest that Lutheran theology is incapable of answering these questions. Nor do I mean to make Lutheran theology irrelevant by suggesting that these questions are so basic that traditional Lutheran insights are superfluous to the practice of theology today. My own graduate work is in many ways a constructive attempt to show that Lutheranism, and especially its doctrine of justification by faith, can account for and answer these questions better than most traditions.

What I do mean to say, however, is that Lutheran theological education cannot be satisfied with merely perpetuating a discourse on post-Reformation disputes. Nor can seminary education try to make theology relevant by teaching a good theory of ecology, sociology, or religion. Theological education will fail to be theological and it will fail to be Christian when it stops asking the fundamental questions of the catholic Christian faith, exchanging them for questions posed by other fields of rational inquiry, or by a nostalgia for traditional theological arguments, or by intra-denomina-

tional politics. If the basic questions of our Christian faith are not setting the agenda for the curriculum in all the departments, then our education will lose its theological character in a time and place where we need theology the most. Future leaders of the church will not only be ill-equipped to address our pluralistic context; they will risk losing their unique Christian identity altogether.

The good news is that Lutherans have the tools necessary to accomplish such a task, and many Lutheran theologians today are aware of Lutheranism's deep theological roots. But seminary education must dare to think more deeply about our core Christian beliefs. Seminaries must dare to train pastors and leaders of the church to think at a theological level that appropriately uses the great resources of our tradition. Only when we develop these skills will the Lutheran church be a faithful and effective witness to Jesus Christ our Lord. LF

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