

Guest Editorial

The Accents of Theology in Theological Education

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On the Orientation of Theology
at the Institute of Lutheran Theology

Theological education is never neutral. It always proceeds with accents—ways of stressing what matters most, ways of ordering questions, and ways of forming habits of judgment. These accents are often implicit, yet they decisively shape how theology is taught, learned, and practiced. They determine whether theology is approached primarily as historical description, practical training, or disciplined engagement with truth. In this sense, theological education is always already theological, even when it attempts to bracket theological commitments.

At the Institute of Lutheran Theology's (ILT's) Christ School of Theology, we have become increasingly aware that clarity about theology's *orientation* matters as much as clarity about its content. Our programs are not organized around a single method or school, nor are they driven by a desire to mirror prevailing academic fashions. Rather, they are ordered by a conviction about what theology is and how it knows.

We understand theology not first as a field of academic specialization, nor primarily as a professional skill set, but as a disciplined participation in the truth of God's self-communication. Theology is learned not merely by the accumulation of information, but by formation within a grammar of faith that enables truthful speech about God, the world, and the human creature. This conviction governs the accents of theological education at ILT across degrees, contexts, and vocations.

This grammatical emphasis is decisive. The creeds and confessions are not treated at ILT merely as historical artifacts, denominational markers, or boundary documents. They function as rules of theological speech. They shape what counts as a meaningful theological question, what kinds of answers are intelligible, and how apparent contradictions are to be held rather than prematurely resolved. Far from closing inquiry, they make inquiry possible by orienting it toward its proper object.

This orientation also explains why theology at the Christ School of Theology is unapologetically confessional without being intellectually closed. Confession here does not mean repetition without reflection or loyalty without judgment. It names a posture of accountability. Theology answers to a reality it does not control. The creeds and confessions locate theology within a living tradition that authorizes theological speech even as it disciplines it.

For this reason, ILT resists two distortions that increasingly shape contemporary theological education. On the one hand, theology is often absorbed into a general humanities model, where it becomes a descriptive study of religious traditions, practices, and experiences. In this mode, theology risks losing its subject matter. God becomes an object of cultural analysis rather than the living reality to whom theology is answerable. Theological language is evaluated primarily in terms of social function, historical development, or psychological effect rather than truth.

On the other hand, theology is frequently reduced to pragmatic training, oriented toward ministerial technique, institutional leadership, or cultural relevance. Here theology becomes instrumental. Doctrinal claims are assessed less by their truthfulness than by their perceived usefulness. The result is often a thin theology—flexible in form but fragile in substance—unable to sustain either critical reflection or pastoral depth over time.

The Christ School of Theology's programs are intentionally structured to resist both reductions. Theology is treated neither as a merely descriptive discipline nor as a set of tools to be deployed. It is approached as a truth-seeking practice that demands intellectual rigor, historical depth, and confessional accountability. Students are formed not simply to use theological language, but to *inhabit* it responsibly.

This orientation also governs how theology at ILT relates to other disciplines. We do not set theology in competition with the sciences, nor do we retreat into expressive subjectivism when metaphysical claims are contested. Instead, students are encouraged to attend carefully to the conditions of intelligibility operative within their own fields of study—whether philosophy, history, the natural sciences, or the social sciences—and to ask how theological language names what those disciplines presuppose but cannot finally ground for themselves.

In this way, theology at ILT remains both critical and receptive. It is critical of reductionisms that collapse meaning into mechanism or normativity into preference. At the same time, it is receptive to truth wherever it is found, confident that truth is not threatened by inquiry. Theology does not claim a monopoly on knowledge, but it does insist that knowledge itself is not self-grounding.

Pedagogically, this orientation has concrete consequences. ILT emphasizes close reading of primary texts, conceptual clarity, historical seriousness, and patient argument. Students are trained to distinguish levels of discourse, to recognize the difference between descriptive analysis and theological judgment, and to resist both polemical shortcuts and premature synthesis. Such formation takes time. It cannot be rushed or automated.

This orientation comes to particularly clear expression in ILT's PhD program. Doctoral students are formed not simply as specialists in a narrow field, but as theologians capable of sustained judgment across historical, philosophical, and doctrinal domains. Their work is grounded in close engagement with Scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran confessional tradition, while also requiring serious study of the philosophical conditions under which theology speaks meaningfully. Figures such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and the orthodox scholastics are read alongside Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Levinas, and modern critics of metaphysics, not in order to domesticate theology to philosophy, but to clarify theology's own grammar and limits. Contemporary work in philosophical theology, hermeneutics, and the philosophy of language likewise plays a central role. The aim is not synthesis for its own sake, but the cultivation of theologians who can navigate modern intellectual pressures without surrendering theological realism or confessional depth.

This same conviction also explains why advanced theological formation at ILT places sustained emphasis on disciplines often treated as ancillary to theology. Serious engagement with logic and formal reasoning is not pursued as technical specialization for its own sake, but as training in clarity, distinction, and the disciplined handling of intelligibility itself. Likewise, sustained work in the Reformation tradition is not approached as antiquarian retrieval, but as immersion in a historical moment when the grammar of theological language was tested under extraordinary pressure. Finally, theology's relation to the natural sciences is taken up neither defensively nor triumphalistically, but as a question of non-competitive intelligibility: how distinct forms of explanation coexist without reduction or rivalry. In each case, the aim is the same—to form theologians capable of sustained judgment across domains without surrendering theological realism.

Christ School of Theology's approach is especially important in a cultural moment marked by intellectual fragmentation. Many students arrive having internalized a false choice between scientific naturalisms, which reduce meaning to efficient causation, and self-invented idealisms, which locate meaning entirely within human construction. Both options ultimately fail. One drains the world of significance; the other collapses truth into preference. Theology, rightly practiced, cuts a path through this impasse by refusing both evasions.

Theology dares to speak of God as real without treating God as an object among objects. It affirms transcendence without competition and immanence without reduction. It insists that meaning is neither imposed nor illusory, but given. This conviction does not deny finitude, pluralism, or historical contingency. It acknowledges them. Yet it refuses to infer from finitude that truth must therefore be inaccessible or merely relative.

In this sense, theological education at ILT is not primarily about producing specialists or technicians, though it may do both. It is about forming judgment. It is about cultivating the capacity to speak truthfully under conditions of uncertainty, to

reason patiently amid disagreement, and to remain faithful to the object of theology even when cultural pressures pull in other directions.

These accents do not constitute a single method or party line. They describe an orientation—a way of standing within the theological task. This inaugural issue of *Promissio* explores that task from several angles. Future issues will extend the inquiry: to the necessity of an educated clergy, to Scripture as the basic language of faith, and to the creeds and confessions as the grammar that sustains theological speech across time.

For now, it is enough to say this: theology at ILT begins where truth is taken seriously, where faith seeks understanding without fear, and where speech about God is disciplined by the reality it names. That is the accent we seek to cultivate, and the grammar we hope our students will learn to speak with clarity, humility, and confidence.

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