

Life-Long Christian Learning

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ABSTRACT: This editorial essay argues several interlocking theses: most broadly an historical thesis that an ideology of this-world-only secularism dethroned the antecedent ideology of Christendom (the Christian people under Pope and Emperor) but is currently in steep decline, subverted by postmodern ideologies of nihilism creating a cultural vacuum. This broad thesis is then integrated with a theological thesis that congregational life is basic to Christian vitality and that congregational life is a comprehensive inculturation by the Holy Spirit into the reign with the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus by learning the mind of Christ. The decline of congregational vitality in this light is diagnosed as a failure of Christian pedagogy. The remedy of it, it is finally argued, is lifelong Christian learning of the Reformation vision of holy secularity, grounded in the gracious justification of the ungodly. Hence: a renewed catechesis to know the mind of Christ given to us working a new evangelization of faith active in love in hope against hope for a perilous time.

Christianity and Congregational Life

According to Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the Large Catechism, the Spirit's gift of congregational life belongs essentially among the benefits of the gospel. It is the Holy Spirit's community on earth which, as a mother, bears into being every believer through the proclamation of the gospel. Christianity at its base is such congregational life, new life of a new society animated by the Holy Spirit at work uniting believers to Christ by conformation to his death and resurrection. How are we to understand today these extraordinary claims?

Congregational life is a dynamic culture formed ever anew by the gospel as it intersects with the surrounding human cultures of this present age that is passing away. Culture is the primary field of Christian congregational life. Formation of culture is the work of education, the pedagogy that at its best conducts youth

into adult responsibility; sustains adults in this responsibility through the changes, challenges, and chances of life; and prepares each person to face the end of life with dignity and hope. Every Sunday school session, every confirmation class, indeed every sermon, every liturgy, every choir rehearsal and hymn selection, every counseling session, every council or committee meeting, every adult forum, and every Bible study are occasions for Christian pedagogy in the cultivation of Christian congregational life.

The purpose of such instruction is to make and ever remake a caring community of Christ's people, confessing in word and deed the Lord Jesus to the glory of God and for the good of neighbors. That is why Luther counted his catechisms as chief contributions of his enduring theological legacy, modeled on the biblical book of Deuteronomy, to equip every new generation for faithful life amid the allures of Canaan. Similarly, amid the present-day ruins of Christendom, where tottering but still dominant secularism distracts us one and all with its glittering allures, a gaping spiritual vacuum grows exponentially, opening the jaws of nihilism. It will be checked either by *lifelong* Christian catechesis enabling congregational renewal at the heart of our wider, often indifferent, and sometimes hostile Western culture. Or, perilously, it will be filled by seven returning demons worse than the one of ecclesiastical triumphalism expelled with the demise of Christendom's for its sordid reliance on political patronage to underwrite religious hegemony. The urgent update to meet this unprecedented situation of post-Christendom congregational life is to institute *lifelong* Christian learning that will be equal to rapid and unpredictable change.

The pastoral vocation consists in the concrete responsibility to deliver the promise of God in Jesus Christ by sermon and sacrament for the assembly of the baptized and, in just this way, to shepherd the flock of God. The cultivation of this vocational self-understanding of the pastor, this particular theological *subjectivity* (*fides qua creditur*, "the faith by which one believes") is essential to the educational mission of the Institute of Lutheran Theology and its journal *Promissio*. Now, more than ever, amid the ruins of Christendom, to be a pastor is to embrace a person-shaping calling within the broader baptismal call of all Christians where faith in the particular call of God to gospel-pastoring marks the difference between a hireling and a true and faithful servant of the Good Shepherd.

Something matching this must also be said about membership in the congregation of Christ, as the rite of confirmation once indicated. Such publicly affirmed membership also acknowledges a person-shaping calling in baptism faithfully to receive by the gift of the Spirit the promising word of God delivered in word and sacrament in self-entrusting faith and, so informed and enabled, to rise up into one's unique contribution to the community of faith and from the community of faith to the neighborhood. The pastor uniquely ministers *to* the word and sacraments to see that these are proclaimed and enacted in accord with the gospel of God. Each member of the body of Christ uniquely ministers *from* word and sacrament to the

flourishing of this unlikely social reality: the community of God-graced *disciples*—pastor and people together—who, as befits disciples, are ever *learning* what they do *not already know* so that each and all love one another as Jesus has loved them. In this way manifesting the beloved community of God, outsiders and newcomers know that here the Christian people are to be found into whom the Holy Spirit is also drawing them.

The bitter joke is told of the country parson whose church steeple had become infested with bats. Desperate for a solution, he asked at the monthly luncheon gathering of the village clergy if any had an idea. A hard-shell but allegedly “nondenominational” pastor spoke up immediately and said that he would come fix it. He rigged booby-traps to make sound and smoke explosions and triggered the device in the evening as the bats were coming to roost. It worked for a day or two, but the bats returned to the now damaged steeple. At the next monthly meeting, the parson asked again for help. The gentle Unitarian minister spoke up and said that she would come fix it. She rigged up a sound system to play “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” to the Beethoven tune. Sure enough, at the start of the music, the bats retreated, only to return again in a few days. Once more, the parson asked for help, and this time the Lutheran pastor spoke up: “I can fix it for sure.” That evening he ascended to the steeple and waited for the bats to arrive and then spoke some words from a book. The bats then flew out of the steeple and never returned. After some months the parson asked the Lutheran pastor how he accomplished what the others had failed to do. The Lutheran pastor replied, “Oh, it was easy. I just confirmed them.”

Bitter, indeed. What then has gone wrong? Why has congregational life declined? Indeed, why are so many congregations characterized by strife and dysfunction? Why do so many pastors burn out, or beaten up hunker down in abject passivity? Why do so many members turn away and drop out? Why are one and all baffled, paralyzed, or fanaticized by cultural change? Of course, in any given case there may be many factors involved in coming to a diagnosis of the sick and sorry state of any particular Christian community in the contemporary West. Indeed, a central frustration in contemporary congregational life is the difficulty of prospering what is called in secular terminology a “voluntary organization,” for a pastor’s livelihood depends on its prosperity. Financial support of the congregation should be a joyful declaration of Christian freedom, i.e. spiritual independence from the corrupt allures and harsh disciplines of the larger economic culture. Embarrassment from candid discussion of sordid money matters by parishioners so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good inhibits a culture of holy secularity in a congregation’s financial life. The apparent mission of these heavenly minded is to keep the pastor poor and humble and, thusly, under control. The consequent material distress forces pastors to attend to the voluntary organization like a glad-handing, fundraising CEO when the pastor ought rather to be at work inculcating the mind of Christ in the community. Christ did not come as a king to be served but as a priest to serve, giving himself for the sake of others. This baptismal mentality, pastor and people together,

is holy secularity in Christian congregational life. It is not ideological secularism but the sanctification of life in this passing age. But we are all too ignorant of this basic teaching of the Lutheran Reformation.

Thus, a fundamental source of decline afflicting all under the conditions of modern secularism is the failure to prioritize lifelong Christian learning by which disciples are taught to follow Christ in sanctifying the secular without being absorbed into secularism. Otherwise, we experience pastors who have no clear idea of their calling to feed the sheep with the Bread of Heaven and also a laity that doesn't know the difference between being a member of Christ and belonging to a club. Wandering in the dark or at cross purposes, neither pastor nor people are enabled to cooperate intelligently in the gospel mission of making disciples of all peoples. Un-discipled disciples little know how to be little Christs to the neighbor in need on the job or in school, in the family, the workplace or the civic forum, let alone within the congregation. Abysmally ignorant of such Christian word-and-deed *savoir faire*, evangelism becomes the demand that the pastor recruit more dues-paying members. Works of mercy and social ministries become pretexts for partisan political organizing aimed at acquiring secular clout. Congregational life declines into securing a family chapel in the control of major donors.

Inevitably, under the mindset of Western secularism, everything, including the sacred, becomes a commodity to be bought and sold just as business metrics are deployed to assess threats and opportunities. In the spiritual vacuum of secularism, a virtual omniscience is ascribed to marketplace allocation and this calculation spills over from needful and efficient processing for the exchange of temporal goods and services to become an operative deity, consulted like an oracle to chart direction in religion-business stratagems predicated upon meeting perceived needs as defined under dominant secularism. Can Christianity survive a mentality in which the customer is always right? Not according to the gospel narrative in which customers chanted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" In religion thusly advertised as a business seeking market niche, pastors cannot but be hirelings, and church vitality cannot otherwise be measured than by the metrics of social status and sundry other perks of private club membership. But what this secularist religiosity in any case produces bears little resemblance to the community of disciples anticipating the beloved community of God.

What is missing and at the root of this debilitating confusion today about the nature and mission of Christianity in congregational life is the *sine qua non* of discipleship: lifelong catechesis just as Luther required, commenting that in all the changes and challenges of life, no one ever fully masters the theological essentials of God's commandments, the creedal summary of the gospel telling what God has done and continues to do for us, the Lord's Prayer as evangelical instruction in our common Christian life lived conscientiously before God in responsibility for the little piece of his creation given to our interim care, and the sacraments that ever freshly initiate new life and so sustain the life together

of the improbable society on this earth of mutual love in Christ spilling out into a deluded but hurting world.

Holy Secularity

The independent and committed educational mission of the Institute of Lutheran Theology arose because of the urgent need amid these ruins for the postmodern reconstruction of *objectivity* (*fides quae creditur*, “the faith which is believed”). With Dr. Dennis Bielfeldt and Dr. Mickey Mattox, this editor, back in 2010, co-authored a book titled *The Substance of the Faith*, urging the recovery of doctrinal objectivity in theology in the tradition of Luther. Renewed and knowing focus on the object or “substance” of faith—namely, the peculiar object who is the living subject Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever—emerged from this study to indicate how congregational life may be revitalized as the Holy Spirit pleases. Pastors and people continuously educated this way know that they are not vicars of an absent Christ but servants of the present One who comes into the world to justify the *ungodly*, i.e. the hopelessly *secularized*, making Himself their redemption and sanctification by the Pauline “word of the cross.” The saving cross of the incarnate Son, the Messiah of Israel, thusly initiates the real event of *holy secularity*, as theological mentors like William Lazareth and Gustav Wingren characterized Christ’s earthly body as present and at work in human culture.

One might well tease the Reformation theological program of *holy secularity*, for today, out of the 28th article of the Augsburg Confession, a vision fatefully obscured if not aborted by the vicissitudes of the subsequent wars of religion that were only settled by the initial secularization of religion under political patronage (*cuius regio eius religio*: whoever the ruler, his the religion). This new post-Reformation Babylonian Captivity, not the Reformation doctrine of holy secularity, is the source of the decline of Christianity under the ideological secularism that emerged in the West from the time of the European Enlightenment onward. But holy secularity in the true sense consists in the lifelong learning of what does not occur to us naturally, namely, the Holy Spirit’s ever new correlation of theological subjectivity with the object of faith and to create in lost and dying sinners a justifying faith in Christ alone operative in new life led by the Spirit in the beloved community of God. Indeed, such dying to the old self and arising to the mind of Christ is *union with Christ* already now in the midst of the still unredeemed creation. Thus, united with Christ, each Christian is a living instantiation of holy secularity!

Luther explained the union between the subject and object of faith this way: “First, what one should believe, that is, the *objectum fidei*, that is, the work or thing in which one believes or to which one is to adhere. Secondly, the faith itself, or the use which one should properly make of that in which he believes. The first lives outside the heart and is presented to our eyes externally, namely, the sacrament itself, concerning which we believe that Christ’s body and blood

are truly present in the bread and wine. The second is internal, within the heart, and cannot be externalized. It consists in the attitude which the heart should have toward the external sacrament. . . . Up to now I have not preached very much about the first part, but have treated only the second, which is also the best part. But because the first part is now being assailed by man, and the preachers, even those who are considered the best, are splitting up into factions over the matter. . . . the times demand that I say something on this subject also” (LW 36:335; WA 19 482:25–483:19). As such, confident of union with Christ, Luther went to work to learn and to educate as a theological subject employing the best secular tools of scholarship in the left-hand kingdom task. Just so, lucid apprehension for teaching the faith in its cruciform objectivity was attained. This exercise in holy secularity constituted his work as a theologian, and it represents a model for us in a transformed culture where the supposedly Holy Roman Empire of Luther’s time has been replaced by the secularized West.

In the first part of his career, friar Martin had been a pastoral instructor in the university (his students were predominantly fellow monks) and a pastor-preacher at St. Mary’s, the town church in Wittenberg. In the second half of his career, the biblical scholar Luther became a doctrinal theologian to meet the pressing problem of subjectivity losing its object and so going astray into “enthusiasm.” Centuries later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer allied with Herman Sasse in 1933 Germany to compose the initial draft of the abortive Bethel Confession (a prescient diagnosis of a lost church a year before the appearance of the Barmen Declaration) to expose and oppose the enthusiastic error of the so-called “German Christians” who saw in the rise of Hitler a new thing being done by the Holy Spirit—how timely this precedent is when the ostensibly Christian influencer Nick Fuentes gains traction! At Barmen, heirs of Luther confessed the Lordship of Jesus Christ against the German Christians’ *Führerprinzip* ascribing Lordship to Adolf Hitler. In these cases, the subjectivity of faith lost its essential correlation with Christ and His crucifixion, the object of faith. The journal, *Promissio*, in the trajectory of these two giants, Luther and Bonhoeffer, undertakes an urgent mission today in probing the issues involved for renewed theological education where renewal entails lifelong learning as the key to the renewed vitality of Christianity in congregational life.

In today’s secularism, we experience an avalanche of information overwhelming us via mass social and AI-generated media, provoking the Christianly fatal but easy and tempting resort to propaganda to make sense of it all, indeed, to participate meaningfully in the dominant culture of secularism. Yet, as the French Protestant theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul pointed out more than 60 years ago, succumbing to propaganda consumption and its regurgitation as the de facto alternative to lifelong Christian learning more powerfully deChristianizes both pastor and people than does any overt and malicious propaganda attacking the faith.

Indeed, resorting to propaganda even in supposed defense of the faith is the unholy secularization of ministry and congregational life, the profound if subtle subversion of life together in Christ. Resorting to propaganda confuses proselytism with evangelism; it lays another foundation in some sectarian party line, piggybacking on some partisan faction to manufacture the groupthink of a religious business franchise rather than the vulnerable confession before the world of Christ and his cross as sole foundation—a confession that today will cut across increasingly meaningless denominational lines even as it renders pretentious politics as usual bit players in the cosmic contest of the God of the gospel against powers and principalities usurped by spiritual forces of wickedness in high places. But hitching the wagon to some secular faction and its propaganda replaces common confession even as the sense of common confession to bind together across otherwise powerful worldly divisions is lost upon such secularized thinking. How many pastors today are more certain of and, indeed, more interested in their politics than they are of Christian theology? If we concur with Luther that Christian theology should be catechetical instruction in the objectivity of the faith, lifelong theological education is the healthy way into the Holy Spirit's certainty of faith, i.e. theological subjectivity, that rests in Jesus Christ. Catechesis and the community of deliberation that it enables is as well the politically savvy way through the endemic and debilitating confusions of a total system of propaganda that is penetrating but also perverting congregational life under secularism today.

Theological Subjectivity: A Pastoral Testimony

Permit me to describe some credentials I bear as a theological subject for writing this editorial even at the risk of sounding like a Pauline fool who boasts of his revelations. When I was a young pastor, I took a call to a hurting and diminished congregation in a poor rural area. Nowadays, a pastor would too often have used such a call as a steppingstone to something better, leaving behind an even more depleted congregation waiting for its property to be sold off to the benefit of others anticipating a monetary largess from its demise. But I wanted to see if my kind of Lutheran theology put into practice would, by the grace of God, revitalize congregational life, even under challenging circumstances. At the heart of my new call (which included a tent making element as a chaplain in the United States Naval Reserve), I undertook a comprehensive ministry of education, both instantiating and instructing congregational life as the community of disciples anticipating the promised victory of the beloved community of God.

Unhappy with the canned Sunday school programs we were getting, I recruited Sunday school teachers to meet monthly for my instruction in the upcoming Sunday gospel lessons wherein they would teach the children and then brainstorm effective pedagogical strategies. During the Sunday school hour before the main service, I would teach the Scripture lessons of the day for those willing to be taught in advance

of the sermon. Children's sermons were simplified to provide memorization with succinct explanation of a Bible verse selected from the Sunday Scripture lessons. As the congregation had a raft of people on the books but no longer participating, I committed to visiting each and every one within the first year to teach what the church was really about and invite renewed participation. Consequently, I learned just how poorly catechized so many had been and, consequently, what strange ideas and expectations they had of Christian life in the congregation: stewardship had never been taught and the congregation supported itself through fundraising activities that exhausted depleted volunteers. How struck I was when hearing that "I don't need the church. I already know what I need to get into heaven" (recall the bitter joke above)!

Discovering so many such folks on the margin, I recruited what we called "lay home visitors" to be catechetical evangelists for the congregation. They went through careful training before they went out—often in a proper mood of fear and trembling—but prayerfully they bravely went! Their task was to listen and in response to offer in vulnerable mode only their human testimony as one beggar telling another beggar where she has found bread. A pastoral visit was offered to every newcomer who passed through the church doors on Sunday, and these were followed up with a lay visitation with the mission to teach what the church is about rather than to proselytize or otherwise motivate participation by heaping guilt upon the lapsed. Eventually, this visitation program morphed into a training program for lay deacons in collaboration with other congregations experiencing the double plight of the clergy shortage and inadequate denominational support for struggling congregations. On the home front, we had year-long Bible studies, rotating on weeknights through a series of member-host's homes, where amid prayers and hymns I had the congregation learn the Torah of Israel, i.e. the great books of Moses in the Old Testament, since the Hebrew Bible and not Platonic philosophy is the true preparation of the gospel. In my preaching, I was always careful to teach and explain to enrich the mind as well as to voice the promises to feed hungry saints. I also began to publish theological opinion pieces in the local newspaper and, after some years of such ministry, undertook the editorship of a theological journal. The congregation was pleased, even proud, to support their pastor at work in the public as a theologian of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for this was an extension of its ministry to the wider church and world.

All of this happened because what I had primarily done as a pastor was to educate with the rich resources we have in Scripture and the Reformation Confession and, thusly, to put into practice the holy secularity interpretation of the doctrine of vocation, the priesthood of all believers, to inform and activate discipleship as a lifelong task of learning together the Christian life. When I left after almost eight years of such ministry, congregational renewal had been granted. I conclude this testimony again as a Pauline fool asking the reader to imitate me as I have imitated Bonhoeffer and Luther in knowing *the mind of Christ* as the subject-object key to revitalized congregational life.

I do not present this testimony, then, as a literal prescription (Latin: *imitatio carnis*) but as illuminating a mentality (*imitatio mentis*) to show how a pastoral ministry focused on lifelong Christian learning supplies what is lacking for congregational renewal. Not only do disciples want and enjoy learning from the pastor who teaches, the teaching enables them to become intelligent cooperators in the work of the gospel. And, as every teacher knows, the study involved in preparing to teach is itself renewal and growth in pastoral ministry, an essential but particular vocational exercise in lifelong Christian learning.

I once heard a liberal pastor say that he stayed away from teaching the Bible because deep exposure to it would be disillusioning, stupidly revealing that he kept the congregation going on the basis of undisturbed illusions and unwittingly showing as well how little he understood the prophetic critique of the religion business for the sake of kingdom business that occurred in the Lutheran Reformation, not to mention the cleansing of the temple by Jesus! In any case, I couldn't be afraid of the inevitable challenges, even trauma, that people experienced when teaching the gospel from scripture as informed by the best scholarship available confronted the potpourri of confused theologies in their heads absorbed from the surrounding culture of decaying Christendom, whether of fundamentalist-reactionary or of secularist-progressive inspiration. Admittedly, negotiating such potential minefields is a missiological art and acquired skill in the historically unprecedented situation of Western post-Christendom now evolved into regnant if tottering secularism. It is an art to tread through minefields that must be learned practically even as it presupposes a considerable investment on the part of a teaching pastor in ongoing theological study. But the hard work, if not drudgery of study, can be invigorated in and after the classroom by the exchange of experience with sisters and brothers in the ministry of the gospel. Missiological expertise in third order theology for congregational leadership is the pastor's goal in lifelong Christian learning.

If pastors have to assert formally their authority by citing an M.Div. degree, they surely have already lost it. Pulling academic rank and professional expertise on secularist grounds is not the way to establish pastoral authority in the community of disciples. Spiritual authority is practically gained by displaying the learning and exercising the wisdom of the generous orthodoxy (universal, not limited atonement in Christ alone!) of classical Lutheranism as this is acquired through theological study. The pastor's lifelong Christian learning is embodied in winsome care of souls and sage counsel of the community. Such a pastor can cultivate curiosity and entertain serious questions, even objections to the faith, without sweet talking easy answers in bromides of pious poppycock, let alone in ostentatious displays of learned esoterica. Such honest exhibition of the intellectual humility that comes from deep, curious, never satisfied, and continuous learning displays common human solidarity before the ultimate mystery of God. Such learned ignorance, such knowing and open acknowledgment of what one does not know in light of what is given for us to know in Christ crucified, is what rightly elicits congregational confidence in

theologically educated clergy. Such education enables the practice of servant leadership, which in turn inspires active discipleship; as in the apostle Paul, the pastor follows Christ and summons the people to follow him. For one and all, pastor and people, discipleship never ends: learning our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in daily *metanoia* is a lifelong task extending into eternity. *Metanoia* literally means “change of mind,” which happens by learning *the mind of Christ!*

Since that ministry now almost 40 years ago, the cultural situation of our churches has only worsened. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer acutely diagnosed in the darkest hours of the 20th century, the Western polity of the “Christian people” under the alliance of throne and altar has dissolved into its component parts, namely, the body of Christ and the secular regime. That dissolution marks the end of Christendom, a utopian dream for Christian empire in the West to check Byzantium and expanding Islam in force ever since Charlemagne was coronated by the Pope to preside over a new and would-be “holy” Roman Empire. Nevertheless, since Bonhoeffer’s time and in spite of his witness to the contrary, much ink has been spilled, wittingly or not, on restorationist attempts. Attempts to regain a supposed former glory are undertaken in one direction or the other on the spectrum between theological accommodation to the secular regime among theological liberals and indiscriminate ideological resistance to “secularism” among theological conservatives up to and including the aspiration to restore the so-called medieval synthesis.

Such attempts to regain former privileges do not remedy our plight. As the Institute of Lutheran Theology itself exemplifies, we must learn to stand on our own two feet, which are the gospel and the Scriptures as enabled for understanding by the ecumenical Creeds and the vital contemporary work of living theology in the tradition of Luther. Such standing in turn necessitates some serious learning from serious scholarship. The wholesome remedy to the decline of Christian congregational life is neither cultural warfare nor political patronage but lifelong Christian learning. This is so because the profound problem troubling our declining churches is the absence of the mind of Christ among us. This absence, already in the glory days of Christendom past, was the real root of its theological rot and final collapse after the dreadful 20th century of Hitler, Hiroshima, and Stalin—faith-wrecking catastrophes all occurring on the soil of allegedly Christian civilization.

Learning the Mind of Christ for Holy Secularity

The only society that the adjective Christian can properly modify is the *ecclesia*, which exists in the world as the harbinger of the age to come, the earthly body whose head, i.e. mind, is Christ. *Ecclesia* exists truly just because and only because it is given as the mind of Christ. Possessing this treasure is all and only what distinguishes it from the other societies of this age. By contrast, “secularism” is a post-Christendom worldview/ideology claiming as truth this present age only; the secularist ideology was invented and knowingly weaponized against

the “opium of the people,” “going to heaven when you die,” the pie-in-the-sky in the sweet-by-and-by of Christendom’s caricature of biblical eschatology. As such, secularism thinks itself to be an active repudiation of Christian hope for the redemption and rectification of the fallen and oppressed creation even when it has forgotten this ideological origin. This mentality is pervasive today; it is the very air we breathe culturally and, as such, infiltrates both accommodation and resistance, or even sovereign indifference to the blandishments, pomp, and prestige of contemporary Western culture.

Thus secularism, be it carefully noted, is not *simply* apostasy. As mentioned, we still experience believers who are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. Secularism’s critique of otherworldly evasion of this worldly responsibility is valid in important respects and indeed an essential ingredient of Reformation theology. Nevertheless, in theological perspective, it is an ideology that has fallen into literal hopelessness as we see in gathering outbreaks of nihilistic “tear-it-all-down” violence erupting today. Secularism is in an advanced state of decay because it grasps neither how costly nor how needful the sanctifying redemption and rectification of the sinful and oppressed creation must be. Its optimistic illusions about human wisdom, power, and moral goodness to do what God allegedly has failed to do for creation in any case are crashing against the hard rocks of sin, death, and the power of the devil, realities that do not go away just because we refuse to talk about them. The real issue is not secularism versus Christendom’s otherworldly utopia but how to sanctify the profaned creation in creative amplifications of the gracious justification of the ungodly in Christ the crucified.

The Reformation turn of discipleship from the monastery to meeting the needs of our hurting world for healing and forgiveness in this present age is faithfulness in following Jesus, not apostasy from him. Jesus leads disciples into the workaday world of Galilee to heal and to forgive and, accordingly, into the kingdom-business confrontation with the religion business moneychangers in Jerusalem. It is crucial for us to understand theologically that contemporary secularism is the distorted descendent of the Reformation’s doctrine of holy secularity, i.e. the affirmation of the vocations of the baptized in this time upon this earth whereby the neighbor in need is served the love of God in word and deed, thereby inviting into the beloved community of God. Here and now, God’s kingdom comes on earth as in heaven as his will is done, thusly sanctifying profaned spaces, as daily bread is provided and mutual forgiveness is realized and sustained. Here, the devil is driven back on the field of the groaning creation and times of trial are endured in persevering faith until in public fullness the kingdom, the power, and the glory are God’s alone.

The Reformation doctrine of baptismal vocation was articulated against papist notions of monastic vows undertaking a superior religious life achieved by “self-chosen” practices of self-denial consisting in separation from mundane concerns, as if such evasion of the common life of bodily labor on the earth were the “mind of

Christ.” As Luther knew, however, baptismal vocation undertaken in following Christ deeply into the unredeemed world of this present age to care and to serve would entail bearing many crosses. Holy secularity is, he emphasized, nothing other than the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it can *only* be the Spirit’s sanctifying work in that such faith in the divine value of secular works of mercy and justice is needed to sustain disciples amid the manifold adversities of sin and death and the devil still raging against them. The ultimate and enabling sanction of holy secularity, e.g. to invite those who cannot repay into our dinner parties, therefore, was faith in resurrection to the eternal banquet promised in Christ. Indeed, this hopeful faith and persevering faithfulness in the present temporal kingdom, i.e. in this secular age, is *the mind of Christ* that believers are given to have in them.

Tragically, however, the European wars of religion after the Reformation grew so destructive and disillusioning that the Christian hope, instead of being the assurance that our present day and local labor in the Lord is not in vain, became the target of incipient secularists who, as mentioned, attacked it as Marx’s “opium of the people.” In this sense, it is not incorrect to say, “we [Western secularists!] are all Marxists now,” yes, even we who are *capitalist* opponents of Marxism! Nothing seems less plausible to us and less desirable than betting this life on a vague and dubious promise of postmortem, albeit ghostly, survival. As Kant bitterly pointed out, even traditional or “conservative” pastors who preach present denial for heavenly reward are first in line to receive scientific medical treatment in desperate efforts to prolong secular life and so delay the joys of heaven, no matter what the cost to loved ones or society. Sanctified greed is not holy secularity! What is missing in us is cultivation of *the mind of Christ* to entrust our truly finite selves, ultimately in true death, to the resurrection promises of the living God. What else could be the discipleship lifestyle of those who have been invited by pure gift alone to the everlasting banquet of God, the very end for which God created the world?

Theological education in the epoch of secularism has been torn into pieces under the pressures of these confused and conflicting dynamics, precisely when the need for lifelong Christian learning is more urgent than ever since the time of the patristic church. In those days, the difference between the body of Christ and the secular regime as distinct modalities of divine governance of the wayward creation was unmistakably clear and also theologically understood. On the eve of baptism, the pastor-bishops gave “catechetical lectures” expositing and explaining the new culture of congregational life the baptismal candidates were about to undertake. Here, the biblical texts in Romans 13 and Revelation 13 vividly portrayed a range of “Christ and Caesar” possibilities ranging from respectful cooperation to open hostility. The difference between Romans 13 and Revelation 13, to be sure, can mislead us into thinking that they contradict each other when in fact, theologically, they share the gospel insight that the secular regime is a *temporal* order of *coercion*, which, as such, can serve God’s emergency governance of a fallen, not yet redeemed creation. But the sword cannot analogize the promised peace of the gospel’s God.

By contrast with the secular regime, in the community of Christ no one lords over another; faith is free and willing or it is not faith at all, and teaching is not propagandistic indoctrination but persuasion of the Holy Spirit by teaching and learning the mind of Christ. The secular regime, then, is acknowledged as an emergency order instituted by God to keep the fallen creation from spiraling into anarchic violence until the ascended Lord Christ has subdued every enemy of God and humanity. God grants the power of the sword to keep tolerable peace in rough justice, and believers are conscience bound to respect this institution of God by civil obedience. Precisely so, however, the secular regime, with its monopoly on the means of violence, can also be demonized, setting itself up as a terror on the earth in violation of its divine institution to keep peace by rough justice. Just as believers conscientiously obey the institution of God in submitting to secular government, they may conscientiously resist when a particular regime violates its divine institution. It is better then to obey God than man.

Theologically educated Christians can and must be on watch and alert to discern the difference between conscientious obedience to the divine institution in secular government and the possibility of conscientious disobedience when that divine institution is manifestly violated. With the same diligence, however, they are on watch to see that the earthly body of believers is and remains under the Headship of Jesus, as they are conscientiously bound to disobey false prophets and pseudo-messiahs if and when this normative arrangement of the mind of Christ to his earthly body is violated. For this, too, they have *the mind of Christ*, knowing to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

Theology for Lifelong Christian Learning

Indeed, this distinction also explains the ancillary recourse in Christian theology to secular wisdom, the classical "love of wisdom" that is philosophy with its methodical search for truth in critical thinking. The presence of wisdom literature in the canonical Scriptures is biblical warrant enough for recognizing the discipline of theology as intellectual work flowing out of the universal mandate of creation for human dominion in the image of God. For this reason, academic credentialing is and should be a prerequisite for the church's ordained service to word and sacrament. *Knowing* the controversial *mind of Christ* is the reason why theology adopts a scholarly method practicing the holy secularity that it preaches, for scholarly method is a prophylactic against propagandizing the gospel and turning evangelism into proselytism by confusing our secularized minds with the mind of Christ.

In other words, if God rejects the wisdom of this world, how much more does God reject its folly! Theologians beginning with the apostle Paul hastened to appropriate the scholarly methods of the learned Greeks to articulate with precision the faith that is believed, a need that daily increased as the gospel advanced

into new languages, cultures, and learning. In the tradition of Luther, theological education formally depends on the study of humanity (*studia humanitatis*: grammar and the languages, logic, rhetoric, history, mathematics, music and cosmology). Lutheran theology has always been coupled with the vocation of the researcher and educator as well as on the scholarly model of those Renaissance humanists returning to the sources, Luther and Melancthon. (Renaissance “humanism” is *not* the incipient philosophy of secularism but a literary hermeneutic requiring that texts be understood in their original contexts; thus, its motto was *ad fontes*, “to the sources,” to seek the original sense of authoritative texts).

Consequently, these theologians argued chiefly by way of exposition, the so-called “deep reading” of authoritative texts, but also of texts in contemporary controversy, by which the points relevant for the case being made are pushed to the surface. They did theology by constructing arguments in this hermeneutical fashion to demonstrate any particular thesis concerning the knowledge of God. The credibility of this method, of course, depends on fair, even generous interpretations of source-texts, especially when critique is being executed. This intellectual skill in critical thinking and hermeneutical art is what academic theology inculcates. Academic theology, moreover, does not evade difficulties but embraces them as opportunities for a deeper knowledge of God than hitherto known, even as orthodoxy is the Holy Spirit’s work in progress. A premature resort to apologetics under these circumstances subverts this forward movement in theology (as above, in nostalgic hankering after the “medieval synthesis”). It fails to listen for the truth in critiques of, even attacks on, Christianity and thusly fails further to attend to such discomfiting truths better than hostile critics do. It fails in lifelong learning and substitutes hasty polemic for enlightening and healing insight. Good theology at its best faces difficulties and does not sweep them under the rug (where they only fester like a neurosis producing undiagnosed dysfunction). Certainly, on a case-by-case basis, an ad hoc apologetics that soberly corrects the record against hostile anti-Christian propaganda is a considered work of theology, yet this is anything but a nervous and hasty dive into counter-propaganda broadsides.

So, if one is looking for a fast and easy take on a case being made in Luther’s kind of theological rationality, one impatiently deprives oneself of the deliberative process of scholarly theology that luxuriates in deep dialogue with competent interlocutors parsing the common source of canonical Scripture in order to exposit *the mind of Christ*, in the process contending against abuses, misreadings, and outright error. The perhaps jarring juxtaposition that will occur in this journal of evidence and argument from the varying modern disciplines of biblical studies, history of doctrine, philosophy, and contemporary theology is quite deliberate. Overcoming the siloing of these disciplines instituted at the turn of the 18th century in the quixotic effort to have Christian theology recognized as a modern science in the secularist university is fundamental to the critical retrieval of doctrinal theology from the tradition of Luther. Christian doctrinal theology is precisely what is being exiled from the secularist “humanities” today. In any case, its natural habitat is the

confessing church of the Lord Jesus in mission to this world where it is a premier instance and exercise in Reformation holy secularity. Formally then, our theology exemplifies critical thinking and articulates in learned language and irenic argument, which are, ironically, the intellectual virtues increasingly absent in the debased cancel culture of academic secularism.

Substantively, however, theology is freedom, as our colleague Andrea Vestrucci urges. Bound to our liberating Lord, we are freed thinkers. Jesus means freedom—freedom to love, to be sure, but the love of God pleasers, not people pleasers. In this age of totalizing propaganda, we stand out in the freedom for which Christ has set us free. We surrender neither intelligence nor conscience to any other lord than Jesus. Lifelong Christian education is the fortification freed thinkers need to persevere in this freedom for which we have been set free. Competing, aggressive narratives, worldviews, and party lines fill the spiritual vacuum created by secularism's refusal of the gospel hope for the redemption of our bodies in the resurrection, the baby tossed out with the dirty bathwater of Christendom. In rejecting *holy* secularity in anticipation of the redemption of our *bodies*, this secularist refusal of Christian hope *profanes* creation by regarding it as beyond need of redemption, as if to set in stone its fall into ungodliness as a new normal. From the seed sown, it reaps the creeping harvest of nihilist despair all around us under the masks of eating, drinking, and making merry.

However, underneath the gilded surface of our secularism, “rich in things but poor in soul,” there is a culture of despair over all human relationships that have been commoditized and are experienced as predatory. Christians inevitably participate in this culture, but for us the sufferings of this present age are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to come. We seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness. We can no longer serve both God and mammon. There may be many gods and lords contending over this decaying culture of secularism, as secularism presided over the decaying culture of Christendom, but for us there is one God, the one Father from whom all things are and the one Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things are. This we know in theology because the Holy Spirit here and now in this present age binds together the faith with which we believe and the faith in which we believe, so forming in us the mind of Christ. Theological education is this work of God the Holy Spirit to sanctify the secular, or it is not theology at all but only religious propaganda (even if dressed with Christian verbiage). What matters is knowing *the mind of Christ*; that is why Christian learning is a lifelong task of the body of Christ and “orthodoxy” is the Holy Spirit's work in progress. To this labor we are called as theologians, professors, pastors, and laity alike.

Preachers now must be teachers, not glad handers or ambulance chasers, local theologians who have learned well and are given time to study and expected to use it to stay fresh in the knowledge of God in our rapid and ever-changing circumstances in a perilous time of decay yet pregnant with the groaning of new birth. Likewise, the congregations must be taught by such preacher-teachers and willing

to learn if they are to have in them the same mind that was in Christ according to the hymn of Philippians 2. The curiosity, if not perplexity, of the laity at our cultural decline likewise must be honestly acknowledged if we are together to understand what we are experiencing so that pastor and people may each in their own way live out the word of God in “holy secularity,” i.e. not accommodated to secularism but extending Christ in the sanctifying Spirit into the needs of this hurting age of personal despair and social hopelessness, publicly being and so vocalizing the hope that is in them.

Our Educational Mission for a New Evangelization

The bitter joke recounted earlier in this editorial makes the point about the sorry loss of youth in post-Christendom secularism. The Christendom habit of treating confirmation as a once for all rite of adolescent passage for admission to the Lord’s Table inevitably sent two deleterious messages. First, it presented Christian learning as a kind of qualifying exam, purely intellectual, which being mastered need never again be attended to, like a driver’s license. Just so adult disciples are fixed forever in an adolescent faith. One graduates from Sunday school, culminating in confirmation class with the sophomoric conviction that one already knows all that one needs to know to go to heaven when one dies. Of course, this adolescent know-it-all knowledge of God crashes upon the rocks of hard experience before long, not to mention upon the significant intellectual discoveries of historical knowledge and scientific research that any thinking adult will experience today.

Second, the liberal attempt to remedy this problem with the mantra that confirmation is about “belonging, not believing,” as if positive teenage experiences with other teens will emotionally bind to faith and public confession of Jesus as Lord by a kind of social osmosis. This fix, however, unwittingly makes experience of beloved community in Christ the source rather than the delicious fruit of the shattering and life-transforming encounter with Jesus Christ through the gospel word and sacraments. It is this present Christ coming into secular life as saving Lord that forms the body of Christ here and now on this earth. The polarization in these two deleterious outcomes of our youth ministry practices reflect the deep and abiding schism in Lutheran theology between the Orthodox and Pietist iterations of it. In a better Christian anthropology, however, heart and head are not alternatives but an integrated organic system such that lifelong learning in the books of nature and history as well as the book of revelation inevitably inform any person’s character, whether for likeness or unlikeness to God our creator.

With Jesus Christ as the image of God and his mind the subject-object of our faith, we can and must do much better in making our congregations centers of lifelong Christian learning. Explicating the correlation of the theological subject who believes and the theological object that is believed by the work of the Holy Spirit is the educational task undertaken in ILT’s new journal, *Promissio*. This editorial has

argued with renewed urgency for an educated clergy enabling an educated laity in an updated arrangement for lifelong Christian learning. We can no longer rely on the wider culture to support Christian congregational life; in fact, Christian congregational life swims against the stream of regnant if also decaying secularism. Unarmed by theological knowledge, congregational life flounders and drowns in the floods of propaganda all around us. Our wider culture sustains a theological vacuum in which diverse but predatory agents seek to instrumentalize the remnant Church of God for alien purposes while reactionary Christians lobby for renewal of political patronage by the production of their own propaganda, which only makes matters worse. Rather than retreat into a corner, however, we must in hope be prepared and eager with the Christian knowledge of God when opportunity is given to come to the rescue in this dying culture. To this end, we must learn to stand on our own two feet in a way that does not repeat the failures of Christendom, at the root of which was an unholy reliance of altar on throne. Comprehending this unprecedented predicament is the beginning of a new evangelization to come forth by way of lifelong Christian learning.

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