

# Forming the Theologian of the Cross

## A Lutheran Vision for Person-Formative Theological Education in an Online Age

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**ABSTRACT:** This article articulates a Lutheran account of person-formative theological education ordered by the *theologia crucis* and the external Word, proposing that theological schools—whether residential or distributed—should structure curriculum, community, delivery, and assessment by Luther’s triad of *oratio–meditatio–tentatio*. The argument contends that adult-learning frameworks (andragogy and heutagogy) serve ecclesial formation only when disciplined by the Word and embedded in the Church’s life: synchronous seminars that sustain public, prayerful speech; vocal rumination on Scripture aimed at proclamation; and supervised field education as the crucible of *tentatio* where doctrine is tested in the neighbor’s need. The model resists technocratic professionalization and expressive individualism by reframing faculty as theological elders who exercise authority through discernment and pastoral presence while learners assume responsible agency under the cross. Assessment is reoriented toward marks befitting theologians of the cross: doctrinal clarity that “calls the thing what it is,” scriptural habituation, pastoral discernment under trial, communal maturity, and cultural wisdom. Conceived as *seminaria*, theological schools become seedbeds where the Spirit forms workers who confess Christ and serve the Church’s public witness in a digital age.

### Introduction: Christ’s Word, Christ’s Way, Christ’s Workers

**A** Lutheran school of theology must aspire to participate in the Spirit’s work of forming persons who confess the crucified and risen Christ, speak truthfully about God and neighbor, and suffer and rejoice under the incarnate Word’s lordship. In our present moment, the precipitating factor for reconsidering the shape of such dynamic formation, as well as actively pursuing the ultimate goals, proves to be the global shift to online and hybrid delivery in theological education. The question that arises concerns not whether digital modalities can carry theological content but

whether institutions of higher education can serve the Church's vocation to form theologians of the cross, those women and men whose subjectivity gets formed and so disciplined by the objectivity of the gospel, disciples who honestly profess the truth of the Word under the authority of the Heavenly Father.

Regarding educational practices, "pedagogy" refers to the general art and science of teaching across ages; "andragogy" specifically focuses on adult learners through student-centered, experience-rich, problem-oriented, and collaborative practices;<sup>1</sup> and "heutagogy" extends andragogy toward a more mature self-directedness wherein the learner shapes pathways and evidences of learning while the instructor serves as guide.<sup>2</sup> To envision quality Lutheran educational stewardship, these terms shall be used in service of theology rather than as ends in themselves. Our thesis is simple—proper Christian theological education focuses entirely upon whole-person formation. The institution and those involved in the formation process apprentice adult learners into cruciform wisdom under the external Word by ordering the school's life around Luther's three rules of study: "*Oratio, Meditatio, and Tentatio*." The practices of the Institute of Lutheran Theology can demonstrate this claim, but the general claim itself explicitly pertains to the nature of Christian formation rather than the profile of any single institution.

## I. The Theological Center: Theologia Crucis and the External Word

In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther contrasts a theologian of glory with a theologian of the cross, writing that "a theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Luther states, "He deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."<sup>4</sup> Luther's language avoids rejecting reason or imagination, instead aiming at a renunciation of enthusiasm that separates theological subjectivity from theological objectivity. Imagination matters (Luther is among the most rhetorically creative of theologians) as does speculative reflection, particularly when disciplined by the external Word and ordered to proclamation and pastoral care.

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1. See Gina Decelle, "Andragogy: A Fundamental Principle of Online Education for Nursing," *Journal of Best Practices in Health Professions Diversity* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 1264.

2. See David William Stoten, "Positioning Through Epistemic Cognition in Higher Education: Conceptualizing the Ways in which Academics in a Business School View Heutagogy," *Higher Education* 87, no. 4 (April 2024): 992-003, and Zulyar Kavashev, "A Bibliometric Performance Analysis of Publication Productivity within Pedagogy, Andragogy, and Heutagogy Continuum: Outcomes of SciVal Analytics," *E-Learning and Digital Media* (2024).

3. Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputations*, Thesis 21.

4. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputations*, Thesis 20.

Cruciform orientation requires a living authority, the *external* Word of God. As such, Luther insists that God gives His Spirit through the external Word being preached, read, sung, confessed, and borne into a believer's life (Ps. 119). Scripture thus serves as the *prima norma normata*—the primary normed norm—under the norming norm (*norma normans*) of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hence, *sola scriptura*, with *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, witness that Christ (*Solus Christus*) exists as the sole object of faith and the Lord known instrumentally by grace, through faith, and according to Scripture. The Word thusly guards against undiscerning biblicism while also defending the objectivity of revelation against privatized spirituality.

Luther's three rules—*Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*—name not a ladder but a life. *Oratio* initiates in prayer and unfolds as faithful speech, be it in reading, preaching, disputing, or singing. *Meditatio* signifies rumination, hearing and speaking the Word aloud as well as repeating and digesting Scripture so that the Word “takes hold.” *Tentatio* refers to spiritual struggle and suffering as the crucible in which faith gets progressively driven from self-reliance to Christ-reliance. The three aspects socially and spiritually work together in unison; they ideally occur in the communion of saints and for the sake of the neighbor.

In considering such principles, the Lutheran-based education, as well as the wider Christian theological education, exists not primarily as a system for transmitting religious information, professional competencies, or academic credentials but aims, rather, to be person-formative, ordered toward the developing of theologians who speak truthfully of God and neighbor because they themselves have been addressed, judged, and consoled by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The question before theological schools today—especially in light of the global expansion of online and hybrid delivery modes—concerns not whether theological content can be delivered effectively but whether a school's common life can be soundly ordered so that adult learners get formed under the cross rather than trained solely for intellectual mastery.

At the crux of formational Lutheran instruction, Luther's theologia crucis resists every attempt to ground theology in human ascent, technique, or control. Quite specifically, the theologian of glory seeks God through visible success, intellectual achievement, and speculative coherence while the theology of the cross confesses God where He has bound Himself to be found—in the suffering, weakness, and hiddenness of Jesus Christ crucified. As Luther insists in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, the true theologian “calls the thing what it is,” not because of superior insight but because God has first called and named us through the cross of Jesus.

The truthful speech therein presupposes a definite and living authority, namely God's external Word. God does not provide His Spirit apart from this Word but through the vehicles of gospel being preached, read, sung, confessed, and, thusly, carried into the theologian's life. Within such speech, clarity and precision is undoubtedly vital. Canonical Scripture serves as the authoritative and sufficient witness by which the gospel creates and so governs the Church's hearing, teaching, and proclaiming. Ultimately, this distinction safeguards a cruciform

Christ-centeredness from two equal distortions: privatized spirituality that severs the Spirit from the Word and undiscerning biblicism that mistakes the Spirit's historic witness for the object of faith.

In so naming the Word as *external*, Luther insists upon its objectivity over against our perceptions, preferences, and projects. We are not formed by what we imagine God to be but by what God has given and revealed Himself to be in Christ. Scripture, the Spirit's living witness through the written Logos, and the neighbor to whom Christ binds Himself constitute the concrete means through which God addresses and forms His people. A theological education faithful to this conviction does not, therefore, begin with learner autonomy or academic creativity but rather with receptive obedience—listening attentively and learning patiently to be addressed before presuming to speak.

This theological posture decisively rejects enthusiasm, the perennial temptation to separate theological subjectivity from theological objectivity, or the Spirit from the cross. The danger herein pertains not to imagination or speculative reflection as such. Indeed, imagination exists as a genuine rational faculty, and Lutheran theology—from Luther's own rhetorical creativity onward—has remained consistent regarding philosophical or speculative engagement. Instead, the danger subsists in speculation unmoored from the gospel's address, in an imagination set loose from Scripture's judgment and promise. Fortunately, when properly disciplined, reason and imagination serve theology when ordered toward proclamation, consolation, and truthful confession before God and the neighbor.

Within this framework, then, Luther's previously stated three rules for theological study—*oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*—signify not a method to be practiced at various intervals but a life lived under the Word. Again, *Oratio* encompasses prayerful and communal speech: reading, disputing, preaching, singing, and confessing the Word aloud so that theology remains public, audible, and ecclesial. *Meditatio* names ruminative engagement with Scripture and with all human knowledge as judged and clarified by Scripture. Further, this is not quietist introspection but a vocal demand involving repeated hearings until the Word “takes hold” and forms discernment for teaching and pastoral care. *Tentatio* names spiritual struggle—trial, suffering, and resistance—as the crucible in which theology is tested, illusions are stripped away, and confidence is driven from the self onto Christ alone.

Luther's three components belong together, combined as a single disciplinary outlook. They are at once both spiritual and social, unfolding in the communion of the Church and for the sake of the neighbor. The Spirit engages the theologian precisely as the theologian engages the Word in the world God loves. In this way, *theologia crucis* resists scholastic abstraction, modern methodolatry, and postmodern self-curation alike, replacing them with a pattern of obedient hearing, communal discernment, and cruciform endurance. Such formation emerges as necessarily ecclesial. In recognizing that God works through external, public means, theologians of the cross are not formed in isolation but in congregations and ministries

where preaching, catechesis, pastoral care, and *diakonia* stand as ordinary arenas of learning. Within such arenas, personal struggles are inseparable from social and spiritual conflict, battling the powers and principalities that Scripture names in caring for suffering neighbors whom Christ claims as His own. Theology learned apart from such engagement quickly becomes either technique without compassion or conviction without patience, outcomes contrary to their grander *telos*.

If truly considering the breadth and depth of Luther's triad as described, and in conjunction with superior intellectual cultivation, theological schools must order their common lives—curriculum, community, assessment, and delivery—under the cross. This remains indisputably true whether instruction occurs in brick-and-mortar classrooms or via synchronous online gatherings. What matters for the students seeking formational and academic development and the instructors delivering the teaching is not the modality itself but a school's sustaining a shared rhythm of *oratio–meditatio–tentatio*, speech disciplined by the external Word and binding learning to the Church's life of suffering witness in the world.

Academic institutions shaped in this way measure success not by speculative brilliance or professional polish but by truthful speech and faithful practice—doctrinal clarity calling the thing what it is, scriptural habituation showing the Word has taken hold, pastoral discernment under trial, communal maturity in and for the Church, and cultural wisdom resisting conformity to the age. These are the true marks of theologians formed under the cross, those whose confidence rests not in themselves but in Christ crucified.

## II. Adult Learning under the Word: Andragogy, Heutagogy, and the Way of the Cross

Due to the reality that most theological learners today are adults, formation must be andragogically administered, built around a student-centered, experience-based, problem-oriented, and collaborative approach.<sup>5</sup> Instructors become facilitators and co-laborers eliciting responsible agency under the Word rather than mere reception of data. *Tentatio* anchors experiential learning, and trials—personal and social—force learners to confront limits and depend upon grace.<sup>6</sup> “Personal and spiritual struggles,” as such, cannot be severed from social forms of suffering under the oppressive powers and principalities that Scripture names (Eph. 6:12).

In increasingly online and hybrid contexts, heutagogical methodologies place mature learners at the centers of their respective learning journeys while the instructor serves as a wise guide.<sup>7</sup> Properly immersed in the *theologia crucis*, self-direction does not mean autonomy from the Word but rather devoted responsibility

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5. See Decelle, 1269.

6. Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 1991).

to it. Synchronous online engagement, therefore, strengthens real-time conversation, catechetical questioning, and communal discernment, all immensely crucial for *Oratio* and *Meditatio*. Simultaneously, embedded service-learning binds doctrine to *diakonia* so that learners meet Christ in the neighbor, discovering *Tentatio* not as abstraction but as pastoral reality.<sup>8</sup>

As such, forming theologians of the cross in the present age requires serious attention to the educational realities of the adult learner. In contrast to pedagogical models oriented toward children or adolescents, Christian higher education today serves students bringing prior learning, vocational experience, social responsibility, and deeply formed patterns of thought and practice into the classrooms. These students are not merely accumulating information but are seeking wisdom adequate for preaching, teaching, pastoral care and servant-leadership, and faithful congregational witness amid concrete historical conditions. Further, knowledge of God comes where Christ has bound Himself to be known: in weakness, suffering, and the lived struggles of vocation. Adult learners often endure such struggle already with lives marked by ministry responsibilities, family obligations, financial constraints, institutional pressures, and social conflicts. Within this reality, theological education must not pretend to be neutral or detached but rather must engage experience critically, interpreting it under Scripture so that suffering becomes *tentatio* rather than despair, and persevering ministry becomes cruciform service rather than self-assertion.

In understanding the contemporary adult learner, the term “pedagogy” simply does not apply. Instead, andragogy designates the proper practice in such settings. As far as the pertinent aspects of andragogy, such a system “is student-centered, experience-based, problem-oriented, and requires collaboration between learners and educators. It represents a process of self-mastery in which learners must be highly motivated and engaged,” and includes certain tenets, such as “personal experiences are a rich source of learning; ... adult education programs should center on ‘life application’ and progress in relation to learner readiness; [and] adults are competency-based learners and need to apply newly acquired skills in real-life applications and immediate circumstances.”<sup>9</sup> In the andragogical model, learners are characteristically self-directed, internally motivated, experience-rich, and oriented toward immediate application, all traits being gifts to be ordered under the Word. Properly understood, andragogy aligns well with Luther’s rejection of speculative theology in favor of experiential faith shaped through trial, responsibility, and accountability.

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7. See Stoten, 992-1003, and Kavashev.

8. Abraham David Benavides, Laura M. Keyes, Ivonne Linares-Hernandez, and Veronica Martinez-Miranda, “Service-Learning in Higher Education: Andragogy in Argentina, Mexico, and the United States,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 34, no. 4 (2022): 278-279.

9. Decelle, 1264.

The andragogical system may be utilized in a face-to-face classroom or within the online environment, though the primary principles remain the same; Roe provides six key elements:

First, adults become more self-directed in their learning as they age... Second, adults learn best through experiences and lean on their prior learning... Third, adults' readiness to learn is intertwined with their social roles. Fourth, adults are problem-centered as opposed to subject-centered... Fifth, adults tend to be internally motivated... Sixth, adults need to understand why they need to know something.<sup>10</sup>

From a pragmatic perspective, several of these components apply to all learners, but the incorporation of meaningful experiences, the focus on solving immediate problems, and the desire to know the value of presented material separates the adult student from children. Roe's six principles certainly apply to theological instruction, as the inclusion of experience-based lessons, the interconnectedness of social interactions (be they familial, spiritual, or occupational), and the deeper impact of biblical and metaphysical studies and a lifestyle integrating those elements reside at the core of pastoral preparation.

Within an andragogical classroom, instructors do not function primarily as the source of all knowledge but as guides, facilitators, and theological elders. Authority gets exercised through discernment, modeling, and pastoral presence. The teacher and student are bound together under the same external Word, accountable to the same gospel, and mutually implicated in the work of formation, which leads to a shared submission that guards andragogy from devolving into mere consumer preference or pragmatic skill-building.

As useful as the andragogical structure may be for adult learners, the natural progression into a heutagogy further advances intellectual growth through a more efficient methodology and more effective principles and procedures. Essentially, heutagogy "is ... known as an extension of andragogy" that offers a better experience "for self-directed learners predominantly over the age of 25."<sup>11</sup> Stoten gives an expansive definition of heutagogy, writing that "heutagogy places the learner at the center of the learning journey through a ... curriculum in which the nature and scope...are determined by the individual" due to the inherent demand that "the learner has the requisite level of competence and capabilities... [T]he function of the educator," then, "is to support the learner as a guide or a coach."<sup>12</sup> Heutagogy extends the andragogical adult-learning orientation by emphasizing self-directed learning among mature students, especially within online and hybrid contexts. In

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10. Lisa Roe, "Applying Andragogy to Service-Learning in Graduate Education: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* 29, no. 1 (May 2023): 148-149.

11. Kavashev.

12. Stoten, 992-1003.

heutagogical practice, learners take increasing responsibility for the direction, scope, and application of their studies, while faculty serve as coaches who help students discern faithful pathways rather than prescribe uniform outcomes. When yoked to a theology of the cross, this self-direction is not autonomy from authority but responsibility before Christ. When properly ordered, then, heutagogy reflects Luther's insistence that theologians are developed by being driven back to the Word in the midst of struggle. Students learn by doing theology in context—researching real questions arising from preaching, catechesis, ethics, and pastoral care; testing claims under Scripture; and submitting work for communal examination. Self-direction becomes disciplined rather than liberated, cruciform rather than merely expressive.

The contemporary prevalence of online theological education makes the implementation of such a disciplined heutagogy especially urgent. Asynchronous content delivery alone cannot sustain the communal and dialogical dimensions of theological formation, so synchronous engagement—real-time conversation, disputation, prayer, and mutual exhortation—surfaces as critical for sustaining *oratio* and *meditatio* within a distributed learning environment. Without such practices, theological study risks collapsing into solitary credentialing rather than ecclesial formation.

An intrinsic element of adult learning in a Christian context is service-learning, which functions in this environment not as an extracurricular supplement but as a cruciform center. Adults learn best when faced with real problems that demand faithful judgment. In congregational and community contexts, students encounter the neighbor to whom Christ has bound Himself, and they discover that theological claims are not merely propositions to be defended but words that either console or wound, either bind or free. Such encounters expose inadequacies, provoke repentance, and drive learners back to Scripture—not only as information, but as promise.

Finally, assessment within the andragogical-heutagogical models shaped by the cross must likewise be reoriented so that success is not measured only by content mastery or production volume but by demonstrated competence in truthful proclamation, pastoral discernment, ethical reasoning, and communal accountability. Adult learners in theology get evaluated based on their respective abilities to articulate doctrine clearly, to apply it faithfully, to think critically, and to endure correction without collapse, all marks of formation under the cross. In this way, Christian higher education avoids two false paths: it firstly resists technocratic professionalism that treats ministry as skill acquisition detached from spiritual formation while secondly resisting expressive individualism that treats theology as personal meaning-making. As such, it retrieves a Lutheran vision in which mature learners become apprenticed into lifelong theological discernment—formed not once for all, but continually through the Word, for the neighbor, and under the cross. Ordered rightly, andragogy and heutagogy serve the lordship of Christ. Adult self-direction, disciplined by the external Word and tested through *tentatio*, therefore becomes a means by which theologians of the cross are formed for faithful service in a complex and suffering world.

### III. Church, Culture, and the Formation of Persons

Human life should be realized as obviously cultural and irreducibly theological. Created in the image and likeness of God, human beings receive both physical life as well as vocational responsibilities: to speak, name, tend, and relate within God's glorious creation. From the beginning, this creaturely calling gets exercised through language, symbols, practices, and relationships, and humanity's first acts—naming the animals, recognizing the other, and speaking truthfully about creation—are cultural and creative acts, performed before God and for the sake of a connected life (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:19-23).

Such creaturely creativity, however, never exists autonomously. Although human beings have been endowed with genuine capacities to imagine, order, and produce meaning, sin corrupts such abilities (Genesis 3). Sin does not merely deform moral behavior but distorts perception, language, imagination, and desire. As a result, the most sincere cultural assumptions, traditions, and “common sensical” beliefs may become vehicles of self-justification, domination, or false security. Therefore, the theologian of the cross must think critically, learning to distrust both private intuition and inherited norms, submitting all human meaning-making to the judgment and promise of God's external Word. The Reformation entailed a reform of church doctrine in the light of Scripture and such reform is an ongoing task as Christian orthodoxy as the Holy Spirit's work in progress.

As human beings get formed within shared patterns of belief, value, and practice, a recognizable culture, not optional or incidental, by its nature intertwines with being. Culture names the accumulated and transmitted ways a people come to understand who they are, how the world works, and what appears worth loving or fearing.<sup>13</sup> Every person arrives in theological education already molded by such patterns—familial, ecclesial, political, and economic. As such, theological formation never begins with a blank slate, instead always working with subjects already formed, for better or worse, by the cultures claiming them.

Religion emerges as one of the most powerful of these formative structures. Far from being a purely private or interior phenomenon, religion binds people into a moral community through shared symbols, narratives, and practices.<sup>14</sup> As a social reality, religion orders time, confers identity, and authorizes particular ways

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13. The socio-cultural functionalist perspective views society as a complex system with interconnected parts that work together to maintain stability and social order, thus emphasizing how different aspects of culture, such as social institutions, norms, and values, contribute to the overall functioning and survival of society. Functionalists see culture as serving specific purposes or functions that meet the needs of individuals and the collective.

14. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields, (Free Press, 1995), 44.

of speaking and acting in the world. The Church lives not merely as a voluntary association of like-minded individuals but as a visible community created by the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments through which God forms a people for Himself.

Christian theology takes this social and cultural reality with the utmost seriousness in order to confess how God chooses to work in and through such means. God gives Himself through external, public, embodied instruments—Scripture read and preached, water poured, bread broken, wine shared, sins forgiven, and neighbors served. Formation under the cross is, therefore, never a solitary project of inward development but a communal apprenticeship in faithful hearing, truthful speaking, and cruciform service.

Within this sociological framework, Christianity functions as a distinct cultural community within the broader societies it inhabits with the Church called to be “in” the world without being “of” the world, i.e. not by withdrawal from society or coercion in it but by faithful presence shaped by the cross. Christian transformation ordinarily works from the inside out, similar to yeast hidden in dough.<sup>15</sup> Meanings get reoriented before structures are altered, and hearts get turned before habits change.<sup>16</sup> Such transformation slowly arrives, being contested and costly, often marked by suffering rather than success.

For this reason, theologians of the cross must be formed not necessarily as cultural managers and religious technicians but primarily as discerning witnesses who can read both Scripture and culture truthfully. To love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love the neighbor as oneself<sup>17</sup> means to refuse both uncritical conformity to the age and anxious retreat from it. Faithful theology learns to honor creational goods, unmask idolatries, and endure opposition without surprise, thereby trusting that God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

Historically, the Church recognizes that such formation requires more than the transmission of ideas. From early catechesis and episcopal mentoring, through monastic schools and Reformation seminaries,<sup>18</sup> and into the Pietist insistence of lived faith, theological education repeatedly returns to a holistic vision: doctrine joined to devotion, study joined to prayer, and knowledge joined to love.<sup>19</sup> Where theology degrades into technique or professionalization, renewal movements arise to recall the Church to the formation of persons rather than the production of experts.

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15. Matthew 13:33 (NRSV).

16. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture,” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson and Michael J. Sleasman (Baker Publishing, 2007), 31.

17. Mark 12:29-31 (NRSV).

18. Gonzalez, *The History of Theological Education*, 117.

19. Pietist movement sought church reform with a focus on experiential faith, biblical studies, new birth, lived faith as demonstrated in prayer and Godly devotion, and missional outreach.

Accordingly, theological education ordered toward forming theologians of the cross must attend carefully to anthropology, specifically assuming embodied, social, and historically situated learners whose imaginations have been shaped by competing claims upon their loyalty. Formation, therefore, requires sustained participation in practices governed by the Word—prayerful speech, ruminative study, and costly engagement with suffering neighbors. Only in such contexts are students trained to “call the thing what it is” without illusion, fear, or self-glory.

In this way, the Church’s theological schools serve not as engines of cultural domination nor refuges of retreat but as seedbeds (*seminaria*)<sup>20</sup> where persons get continually re-formed under the cross for witness in the world. The task is not to escape culture but to be delivered from its idols so that culture itself may be transformed, slowly and quietly, by men and women shaped by Christ crucified.

#### IV. A Lutheran Model for Formation under the Cross

The following practices promote Luther’s three rules to govern the life of a quality theological institution—curriculum, community, assessment, and mission—so that a Christ-centered formational program becomes a seedbed (*seminarium*) for theologians of the cross (Gonzalez 2014).

- Ordering the Curriculum by *Oratio–Meditatio–Tentatio*:
  - *Oratio*: *Oratio* pertains to a community of prayerful speech. Each course begins and ends with the Word spoken and sung, and daily prayer, mutual consolation, and theological disputation become conventional means of grace by which the Spirit conforms learners to Christ.
  - *Meditatio*: *Meditatio* involves ruminative study in and for the Church. Core sequences in Scripture, dogmatics, and history are structured for memorization, recitation, and vocal rumination so that the external Word “takes hold.” Reading happens to form as it informs, writing aims at proclamation, and exegesis terminates in confession and consolation.
  - *Tentatio*: *Tentatio* employs pastoral practicum as a crucible wherein the individual receives challenging instruction to properly apply knowledge in the world. Field education, research seminars, and

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20. The term *seminaria* or *seminary* was coined by Cardinal Reginald Pole who was the archbishop of Canterbury. *Seminary* means “seedbed.” What was intended was, as in a seedbed, to plant large numbers of candidates, care for them in their spiritual and academic growth, and finally transplant them in the various communities and congregations where their ministry was to take place.

service-learning placements emerge as cruciform foundations of the program. Students face suffering, ambiguity, and opposition, and supervision meetings interpret *Anfechtung* by the Word, training discernment and driving learners back to Christ.

- **Andragogical/Heutagogical Delivery.** Synchronous online seminars sustain oratio and communal meditation while self-directed research trajectories and ministry projects cultivate responsible agency under the Word. Assessment establishes demonstrated competence in doctrine, proclamation, catechesis, pastoral care, and ethical deliberation.
- **Ecclesial Embedding.** Formation occurs within congregations and local ministries. Pastors and lay leaders serve as co-mentors, and students get grafted into existing communities of prayer and service rather than being trained above or apart from them.
- **Cultural Discernment as Ordinary Christian Wisdom.** Courses in “Bible and Culture,” “Theology and the Arts,” and “Public Theology” teach students to read and absorb cultural texts seriously, not as equals in the authority of Scripture but as sites for confession, critique, and compassion, all under the governance of the external Word.
- **A *Theologia Crucis Practicum*.** A culminating practicum binds together preaching, catechesis, pastoral care, diaconal action, and public witness. Students articulate how oratio, meditatio, and tentatio have formed their discernment and commit to submitting their lives and ministries to examination for the sake of Christ’s Church.

#### V. Assessment and Accountability: Calling the Thing What It Is

A Lutheran school loyal to the cross measures formation by truthful speech and faithful practice rather than speculative mastery. To that end, assessment should name particular aspects and address question related thereof: doctrinal clarity (does the student call the thing what it is, cruciformly?); scriptural habituation (has the Word “taken hold?”); pastoral discernment under *tentatio* (does suffering drive the student back to Christ and into the neighbor’s need?); communal maturity (is formation in and for the Church’s life?); and cultural wisdom (does the student discern and witness without conforming to the age?).

#### Conclusion: The School under the Cross

To truly form theologians of the cross, our institutions must function under the cross as servant leaders, thereby refusing the lordship of technique, renouncing the seductions of glory, and yielding to the Spirit’s work through the external Word.

The triune discipline of *Oratio–Meditatio–Tentatio* must suffuse our praying, reading, singing, disputing, serving, suffering, and hoping. Because God delivers His Spirit through the sacred Word, graduates will be fitted for their vocations to confess Christ, to love the neighbor, and to call the thing what it is until the Crucified—our righteousness, wisdom, and life—appears.

The indispensable practice of academic coaching dutifully operates as a ministry of presence and pastoral care. Through mentoring by faculty and advisors, students receive guidance that integrates academic rigor with spiritual disciplines, embracing Luther's three rules while fostering fellowship and resilience. Coaches do significantly more than assist with coursework; they help learners translate knowledge into wisdom for personal discipleship, ecclesial service, and mission so that theology becomes lived truth. Such sagacity proves especially vital for graduate and postgraduate students already bearing pastoral responsibilities and who often work and live without receiving pastoral care themselves. In such cases, academic coaches function not only as educational guides but as pastoral companions, strengthening those who shepherd others so that the Church may be served by leaders formed under the Word and the cross.

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