

Guest Editorial

Some Theological Reflections on the Notion of Life-Long Christian Learning

Dan Hackmann

A casual look at the demographic makeup of the student body and faculty at the Institute of Lutheran Theology and its Christ School of Theology immediately displays a strong commitment to life-long learning. We have students of all ages, many of whom are studying with us as a part of their second or sometimes third career plans. Many of our older students continue to study with us because they have felt a calling to learn that goes far beyond what is necessary for a particular position or career. They speak often of the joy that accompanies continued learning. Many of our professors are past normal “retirement” age but continue to teach and do research because of their commitments to Christian life-long learning. A great example is our Distinguished Professor Dr. Dennis Ngien who, though gradually retiring from teaching at Tyndale University, is working and planning with ILT to start a new project called the Center for Reformational Theology and Spirituality. There are certainly numerous other examples of this type of activity among theologians and biblical scholars, one of the most outstanding being Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) who wrote more than 20 books after reaching the age of 65. As inspiring as these examples may be for young and old alike, I would like to raise the question of what theological and biblical justifications exist for advocating Christian life-long learning.

This is an important question for us today because one if not the only reason for engaging in life-long learning propounded in our secular age is to develop and improve ourselves due to the fact that self-development is inherently good for the person and does not need any further justification or grounding. If there are other reasons, be they societal or altruistic, they are secondary to the ultimate truth of the goodness of self-development. The purpose of the individual (if there is one) is to lead a self-directed and enjoyable life, and life-long learning is an important part of achieving this purpose. Of course, it is undeniable that self-improvement

is a positive thing, and we do not want to claim that Christian life-long learning should only be done for others but with no benefit for the self. However, this brief reflection on the reasons for engaging in life-long learning, especially pertaining to Christian learning, raises with it the motivation or motivations for doing so. What might be some theological or biblical reasons that motivate us toward Christian life-long learning?

I would like to submit that the reasons for Christian life-long learning are threefold. The first has generally to do with the Creator and His Creation. We are each part of an ongoing creation process that the Creator God planned and began and within which He is still active. That is, we do not believe in the watchmaker god of the Deists who created once in the past and afterward had no continuing role in either the physical world or in the lives of humans. No, the creator God created each of us in His image, which includes features like reflection on the way things are in the world in the past, present, and future. We are endowed with seemingly endless curiosity about all of reality. We tend to be dissatisfied with explanations that are “cut and dried” and instead search for knowledge and understanding in all areas imaginable. Early scientists like Newton and Copernicus drew on their Christian understanding of the nature of God and His creation and felt certain that because God is a reasonable God and created the world in a reasonable fashion that they could use their God-endowed reason to explore the natural world.

John Calvin claimed that the primary end of human life is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” From the earliest accounts in the book of Genesis, it is clear that God created humans to have fellowship and a relationship with them. A relationship and fellowship glorifying God and enjoying Him forever are terms that include continual action. Thus, the first reason for life-long learning has to do with our created nature. We were created with the desire to know more about God and the universe we inhabit. How was this to be facilitated? The Reformers answered this question clearly: the Scriptures inform us, and this understanding leads to the second reason.

The second reason has to do with the endless breadth and depth of the Scriptures and the theological tradition. It is interesting to note that as many Christians achieve very old age, they claim that there is still so much to learn about God and the Christian life and have the feeling that rather than having “learned out” the Scriptures or the tradition, there is still ever so much to learn and discover. A great example of this sentiment comes from Martin Luther: because the Bible can be understood, it is important that every person make a life-long effort to understand it better. Luther expresses the depth of insights he found studying the Bible thusly:

Now, I have many years read the Bible through twice, and if it were a large, strong tree, and all its words were little branches or twigs, I went through and shook all of its branches and twigs and really wanted to know what

they contained and what they meant, and every time I shook a pair of little apples or little pears down.¹

The Scriptures and the theological tradition can never be “learned out,” certainly not in a single lifetime. Furthermore, if we look carefully in the New Testament, we find this kind of admonition and encouragement: “Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2, ESV). The subject matter to be tested that leads to discernment is primarily the Scriptures and teachings surrounding those texts. The emphasis here is on renewal and continual action, an emphasis that fits perfectly with Christian life-long learning.

Thirdly, a major reason for Christian life-long learning has to do with our calling or vocation. In contrast to a purely self-oriented motivation, Christian life-long learning is motivated and grounded in a call to a life of service and a life of community. We are called to share what we have learned, to teach and encourage others, and to build a life characterized by loving Christian fellowship. Of course, our students, professors and staff profit personally from both participating in life-long learning and from its positive impact and results, but a deeper motivation for doing so has to do with our service to others. Christian life-long learning entails hard work and discipline for the higher purpose of serving the Church and God’s kingdom.

On a practical note, ILT offers a whole range of courses that may be taken at graduate or undergraduate level in the Open Studies program without the necessity of joining or finishing a particular program. We also offer a Pastoral Ministry Certificate program designed to provide a good basis for those with no prior theological education. This commitment to Christian life-long learning is not sustained only by the enthusiasm of individual students and teachers but is also nurtured through the shared stewardship of the Institute of Lutheran Theology itself. The Boards of Directors and Regents along with the faculty bear responsibility for safeguarding the Church’s teaching mission in this place. Their deliberations concern not only the practical governance of an institution but the deeper question of how the Church may continue to learn, teach, and pass on the faith in changing times. In this way, the governance of ILT participates in the same vocation described above: the continual pursuit of understanding in service to the Gospel and the formation of those called to teach, preach, and lead within the Church.

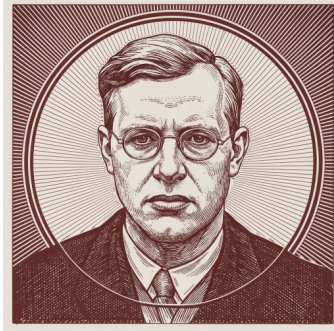
1. “Ich habe nun etliche Jahre her die Bibel zweimal gelesen, und wenn sie ein grosser, mächtiger Baum wäre und alle Worte wären Ästelein und Zweige, so habe ich doch alle Ästelein und Zweige angeklopft und gerne wissen wollen, was daran wäre und was sie vermöchten, und allezeit noch ein Paar Äpflein oder Birnlein herunter geklopft.” (My English translation in the text above.) Martin Luther, *Christlicher Wegweiser für Jeden Tag*, Paul Hartung, 2. Auflage, 1983, p. 207.

Finally, let me close by noting what a good and satisfying exercise it is to do Christian life-long learning *together*. As our minds and hearts are opened to new insights regarding the spiritual applications of what we are learning, we can be truly grateful for this aspect of the Christian life we live together.

Daniel Hackmann is Professor of Philosophical Theology and Academic Dean at Christ School of Theology. He received his Ph.D. in philosophical theology at the University of Iowa and his field of special interest is theology and science. In addition to his academic work, he is an entrepreneur in the area of high-tech consultancy. He lives with his wife close to Zürich, Switzerland.

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