

# **CALLED TO SERVE**

St. Olaf and the Vocation  
of a Church College

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2.  
**THE LUTHERAN  
TRADITION AND THE  
LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE:  
HOW ARE THEY RELATED?  
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In our day two difficulties beset colleges related to the Lutheran church. One difficulty is a steadily decreasing understanding of the educational-theological outlook upon which the colleges were founded. Previously it was sustained and nourished by the shared experience of Lutheran faculty, staff, and students, but such commonality is vanishing. Its disappearance is an unintended, and perhaps even unanticipated, side effect of the colleges' otherwise laudable efforts to diversify their faculty and staff. The second difficulty is a growing confusion among all constituencies, especially among students and their parents, about the character of the liberal arts. Frequently students and their parents see themselves as consumers. In exchange for tuition payments they expect to receive training and access to a better job. They do not expect to be engaged, transformed, or set free. Thus the threat is twofold: in jeopardy are both a healthy, deeply rooted identity and a lively orientation to the liberal arts.

Observers who lack the shared experience mentioned above often find the colleges related to the Lutheran church puzzling. They wonder why these schools have retained their ties to the church when so many institutions begun by other denominations have not. These observers tend to assume that a church relation is inherently stifling, since it yokes the college with a partner that is either anti-intellectual or authoritarian. Perhaps this assumption is what a student tour guide feared when responding to a visitor's question: "Yes, the college is related to the Lutheran church, but it doesn't make any difference." Well, does it?

We begin by asking: why have Lutherans prized education? After all, education is not a high priority for every denomination.<sup>1</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s, Amish parents went to jail rather than allow their children to attend school beyond the eighth grade.<sup>2</sup> Today neither Amish clergy nor teachers in their elementary schools have more than an eighth-grade education. This is not to say that the Amish disparage learning-only that formal schooling is not prized. Likewise, the Pentecostal tradition has often valued the gifts of the Spirit so highly as to make formal education secondary. Ordination into the ministry, for example, is usually not contingent on a college and a seminary degree.

Why have Lutherans valued education? One factor, although not the only one, is the character and influence of its founder. As a monk pledged to obedience, Martin Luther was sent by his superiors to earn his master's and his doctorate in theology.<sup>3</sup> Already a priest, with a Th.D. in hand he was appointed a professor as well. The reform movement which soon became known as "Lutheran" emerged out of the university. Not only were the famous "95 Theses" originally posted for debate on the bulletin board of the University of Wittenberg, and not only did the academic debates that followed form and shape Luther's ideas, but his ideas

themselves were the product of an intense intellectual as well as a religious struggle.

Luther's religious difficulties are well known. While a monk he made diligent use of every religious practice available to him-chastity, poverty, obedience, pilgrimages, penance, communion, prayer, fasting, meditation, Bible study, veneration of relics-but he still felt as if he had not done enough to warrant the grace of God. He had, after all, been taught the theology of Gabriel Biel, which stipulated that the believer must *facere quod in se est*, must do whatever he or she could to please God, and only then would God's grace make up for whatever was lacking.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside this religious turmoil and intimately involved with it was an intellectual struggle; Luther noticed that Augustine (the influential fifth-century theologian after whom his own order had been named) had a quite different view of predestination than did Gabriel Biel. This discrepancy, so at odds with the medieval ideal of doctrinal consensus among the teachers of the church, intensified his study of the Scriptures and led eventually to Luther's exegetical insight that "the righteousness of God" was a gift rather than a demand. That insight was as much a scholarly discovery as it was a religious breakthrough.<sup>5</sup> Luther's teaching and ongoing academic research helped him refine this new understanding of the biblical message and work out its theological as well as its pastoral implications.

In addition to the character of the founder, another consideration should be mentioned. Lutherans have prized education because they are a confessional church. Their denominational identity is defined not by a particular structure (for example, bishops or papacy), nor by a particular set of rituals, nor by a particular piety or ethical standard, but by a set of theological principles. Those principles are enunciated in statements formulated in the sixteenth century, the most important of which are the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism. In order to serve as guidelines, these confessional documents need to be understood, interpreted, and applied to changing circumstances. Moreover, the central element in this confessional identity is a distinction between "the Law and the Gospel," between a communication in the name of God that is received as a demand and a communication in the name of God that is heard as "good news"-that is, as a promise and reassurance of God's favor. Because the distinction has to do not only with what is said but ultimately with what is conveyed, the distinction cannot be captured in a formula. It must be discerned: theological, historical, biblical, and pastoral education is most often the best way to gain this skill of discernment.

All of this would lead one to expect that Lutherans value educated clergy and leaders, and this is in fact the case. Such considerations explain why Lutherans established seminaries and why they built academies and preparatory schools for clergy, but why did they establish colleges whose purpose included the education of laity? And why were church-related colleges a high enough priority that Lutheran immigrants in the United States started them very early-that is, while they were facing so many other pressing problems as they settled in a new land?

Their vision of college education was built on the foundations of a religious outlook. In order to outline that vision, we will identify a cluster of characteristics which, when taken together, suggest its profile. For the sake of clarity and analysis,

these features will be considered separately, but they are ultimately all interlocking. None can be understood in isolation from the others, and no single feature by itself identifies a college rooted in the Lutheran tradition. Each is part of one overall vision regarding the character and purpose of education. All five are decisively shaped by the theological principles in which they are rooted, and each is influenced by how it interlocks with the others.

It will quickly become apparent that the characteristics are not themselves distinctive. They are shared with many other institutions of higher education. What is distinctive is their grounding. In what follows we will explore this grounding and point out its contemporary significance.

A college related to the Lutheran tradition exhibits the following five interlocking characteristics.

1. It serves the community and educates community leaders.
2. It strives for academic excellence.
3. It honors freedom of inquiry.
4. It embraces the ideal of the liberal arts.
5. It organizes itself as a community of discourse.

### It Serves the Community and Educates Community Leaders

Some proponents of church colleges see little distinction between parish education and college education. On their view, the purpose of the college is to train adult church members according to a pattern of doctrinal formation consistent with the teachings of the church and a pattern of moral formation consistent with its ideal lifestyle. In other words, for them the college exists primarily to serve the church. As an arm of the church its purpose is to produce good, dedicated members.

Although one would not want to claim that these purposes are totally absent from the tradition we are examining, its emphasis clearly lies elsewhere.

Again, let us begin with Martin Luther. Seven years after the posting of his "95 Theses," he became concerned enough about the state of education in Germany to write an open letter to the city councils, encouraging them to establish public schools-not only for young men but also (amazingly for that day) for young women-and to establish libraries, even at great public expense. His priorities are evident in that open letter:

Now the welfare of a city does not consist solely in accumulating vast treasures, building mighty walls and magnificent buildings, and producing a goodly supply of guns and armor. Indeed, where such things are plentiful, and reckless fools get control of them, it is so much the worse and the city suffers even greater loss. A city's best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consist rather in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens.<sup>6</sup>

A healthy community, he is convinced, needs "able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens." His overarching concern is primarily the well-being of the community.

Luther extols the virtues of learning languages because they enable people to understand the Scriptures; in this way, clearly, education does serve the church and its purposes, but then he goes on:

if... there were no souls, and there were no need at all of schools and languages for the sake of the Scriptures and of God, *this one consideration alone* would be sufficient to justify the establishment everywhere of *the very best schools* for both boys and girls, namely, that in order to maintain its temporal estate outwardly *the world must have good and capable men and women*, men able to rule well over land and people, women able to manage the household and train children and servants aright. Now such men must come from our boys, and such women from our girls. *Therefore, it is a matter of property educating and training our boys and girls to that end.*<sup>7</sup>

The well-being of the community depends on having men and women who are able "to rule" and "to manage" and to discern right from wrong. The community needs educated leaders. In addition to helping people read the Bible and perform religious tasks, education so much enhances the good of the community that "this one consideration alone" is sufficient to justify its support.

Cannot then people train their own children? Yes, he answers, but:

Even when the training is done to perfection and succeeds, the net result is little more than a certain enforced outward respectability; underneath, they are nothing but the same old blockheads, unable to converse intelligently on any subject, or to assist or counsel anyone. But if children were instructed and trained in schools, or wherever learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses were available to teach the languages, the other arts, and history, they would then hear of the doings and sayings of the entire world, and how things went with various cities, kingdoms, princes, men, and women. Thus, they could in a short time set before themselves as in a mirror the character, life, counsels, and purposes--successful and unsuccessful--of the whole world from the beginning-, on the basis of which they could then draw the proper inferences and in the fear of God take their own place in the stream of human events. in addition, they could gain from history the knowledge and understanding of what to seek and what to avoid in this outward life, and be able to advise and direct others accordingly.<sup>8</sup>

The community as a whole will benefit if people understand the course of human events enough to "draw the proper inferences" and know " what to seek and what to avoid in this outward life. "Such a contribution is one that schools can make and parents alone cannot accomplish. What persons educated at these schools need in order to serve the community, according to Luther, is what I would call "wisdom"- that is, the ability to make proper judgments, to deal with knotty human issues, and to discern what can be said or done to be of help to individuals and/or communities. Unfortunately, there is not enough time in one person's life, or even in two generations, to learn what is needed from experience; with the help of "learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses" wisdom needs to be gathered from the accumulated experiences of humankind down through the ages.

Not only did Luther himself indicate that the purpose of education is to serve the community; such an idea is also consistent with basic Lutheran teaching. One aspect of this teaching is a distinction between the "two kingdoms" or "two, governances" of God. That important distinction also comes from Luther, who frequently identified two different kinds of ruling that are exercised by God.<sup>9</sup> One kind occurs in the gospel, when God shows mercy, forgives, and accepts an individual back into fellowship. Here the goal is personal reconciliation. The other kind of governance occurs when God works through social structures to bring order and justice to the world-when God works through governments, families, communities, economic systems, and so on, in order to restrain those who would harm others and in order to provide the necessities of life to all. Here the goal is justice. The same God is at work in both ways, so it is a mistake (regrettably not always avoided by those who have invoked this teaching) to separate the two, and it is likewise a mistake to assume that they translate easily into a simple endorsement of the separation of church and state. While not to be separated, the two governances of God are to be distinguished, lest one try to rule a country by mercy alone when compulsion may sometimes be necessary, or lest the gospel be perverted into a social philosophy.

In terms of this distinction, college education serves primarily the second form of divine governance. Its purpose is to enable young men and women to discern what makes for justice and what preserves and enhances human dignity. In fact, when asked once what I would most desire for every graduate of a college related to the Lutheran church, assuming the comprehension of some body of knowledge, my answer was, "A passion for justice." It was a Lutheran answer. The college graduate with a passion for justice and some understanding of human beings will make a significant contribution in his/her workplace, family, and neighborhood. Whenever this passion for justice emerges, a central purpose of education, as understood from the Lutheran tradition, has been served.

The principle that education serves the community is also undergirded by another closely related Lutheran emphasis: a sense of vocation. According to Luther, God's adoption of human beings is a free, unmerited gift. For him, the expected response to that gift is, yes, gratitude to God; but this gratitude, surprisingly enough, is not to be channeled directly into obedience, piety, and devotion to God but instead primarily into service to the neighbor. Luther does not intend for the believer to be "looking over his shoulder," wondering whether his/her actions are meeting with God's approval. Luther intends rather that the believer so focus on the needs of a neighbor as not to be thinking of anything else. The believer has been freed *from* worry about one's own status in part in order to be freed for a lively preoccupation with the person in need. Every child of God is "called" into this service. It can be exercised in a variety of ways, through parenting, through serving in government, through one's work (if it does indeed benefit the community; exploiting workers, customers, or the environment is not the content of a vocation'), through one's charitable activities, and so on. The Lutheran tradition directs the energies of believers outward. Thus, educating for justice is also educating for service. To educate for the benefit of the community is also to encourage a sense of vocation.

In passing, we should point out that the word vocation has recently been so corrupted that it is often used to designate a self-serving career. The latter concept is an expression of the prevailing ethos in America, which is individualistic in a way that the Lutheran tradition is not. A genuine sense of vocation, as understood above, is increasingly out of step with the attitudes and self-understanding commonly found in our society. To have a vocation is to see one's life and work as avenues of service to God, the community, and the world, not merely as ways to pursue one's own goals.

This section has asserted that the primary purpose of a college related to the Lutheran tradition is to serve the community and to educate community leaders. This characteristic is rooted in Martin Luther's own philosophy of education and based on two theological principles: vocation and the distinction between the "two kingdoms" of God.

It follows that a college related to the Lutheran tradition may serve the community-and often does so-by educating persons who are not themselves Lutheran. If its primary purpose were to train church members, admitting, educating, and graduating persons who are not members of its own denomination would be a shortcoming, but when its fundamental purpose is to serve the community, the appropriate benchmark is instead the number of wise, good, and able citizens of whatever religious background that it graduates. Its task is to instill a sense of the whole, to cultivate the priority of service, and to equip persons with wisdom as well as knowledge. Given contemporary society's propensity for individualism, instant gratification, and job skills, this is no small task!

### It Strives for Academic Excellence

I begin with an observation seemingly some distance removed from academic excellence, but one that helps locate its theological foundation.

A basic metaphor underlies the whole of the Lutheran tradition. Rather than using impersonal images for God, such as "the wind (spirit)," "the force," or "the rock" Luther (drawing on the Bible) assumes that God can best be understood with images drawn from interpersonal relations, images such as "prince," "father," "bridegroom," or a neighbor from whom one is estranged. God's relationship with humans is of course not the same as that between two human beings, so these interpersonal images function as metaphors. Underlying them is a root metaphor that portrays and understands God as if God were a fellow human being with whom one is estranged and then reconciled, with whom one experiences the complex interactions of nurture and rebellion, of guilt and forgiveness, of fear and trust, of freedom and responsibility. To put this matter differently, for Luther and his followers Christianity is not primarily a set of beliefs or a code of ethics; it is primarily a dynamic set of interpersonal relationships, including a restored family tie with God, freely granted by God's adoption, and along with it a renewed kinship with other human beings. As specified in a whole series of concrete images, the basic conception of religion and of God's interaction with humans is interpersonal, familial, and communal; and faith is trust in this God, not the acceptance of church doctrines. Although Luther's approach has become commonplace wherever the

Bible has exercised influence, it is far from universal and thus deserves our notice. One should add that nature is not excluded, for reconciliation with God and other human beings results also in a restored relationship with creation. As God's gift, the natural world is to be stewarded and tended rather than exploited or abused. However, even here the basic metaphor remains interpersonal and communal, because the stewarding and tending are undertaken in response to God and for the good of all. The personal rather than the impersonal has conceptual priority.

For Lutherans the priority of the personal gives urgency to academic excellence. Before explaining this point, however, let me make another preliminary observation.

Interpersonal relations are complex enough to defy straightforward definition. They invite seemingly contradictory descriptions. The pervasiveness of this basic metaphor has thus enabled Luther and Lutherans to affirm and live with paradoxes that have discomforted others. Luther could talk about believers being simultaneously justified and sinners. He could talk about God's being both hidden and revealed. Lutherans have even settled intense, long-lasting theological controversies about predestination and free will by saying, paradoxically, that *both* predestination *and* free will are right! <sup>10</sup> Similarly, they have said, in the context of the Eucharist, that bread and wine remain bread and wine and yet, paradoxically, are also the body and blood of Christ. The list of such paradoxes could go on and on. All of these tensions have been possible because truth is measured not merely by abstract standards such as internal consistency but by its fidelity to the other with whom the community of believers has an ongoing relationship. Indeed, the truth of an idea or a statement is measured by its effect on relationships (God/human, human/human, and human/nature) as well as by its accuracy.

Lutherans live with paradoxes because for them reality is at root interpersonal and communal. Because ideas affect humans and their relationships, Lutherans also hold that ideas matter. Ideas mattered to Luther himself: one cluster of theological ideas confused his relationship to God, another set him free to "let God be God" and to feel that he "had entered paradise itself through open gates."<sup>11</sup> Ideas matter because they affect the way people everywhere are treated. It was, after all, a set of ideas regarding the inferiority of other peoples that prompted the perpetrators of the Holocaust to murder some 11,000,000 noncombatants. In the 1930s an idea regarding collectivization induced Stalin to starve out the Ukrainian peasants and not stop until some 3,000,000 of them were dead. A set of ideas regarding the "manifest destiny" of the United States prompted European settlers in this land to destroy Native Americans by the thousands. If someone gets the *idea* that the group to which I belong no longer deserves to live, my security is in serious jeopardy. Contrary to the contemporary attitude that sometimes unthinkingly declares one idea to be as good as another, ideas do matter. They matter because people matter.

If ideas are important, and if the purpose of education is to serve the community, then academic excellence is a priority. The college needs to strive to "get it right" in order to help people distinguish between what contributes to justice and what does not. In order to "get it right" academically a college needs at least to be solid or "good," but the standard I have suggested is still higher: a college



should exhibit academic *excellence*. At stake in the distinction between solidity and excellence is leadership-leadership in the community and leadership in the academy. Such leadership involves a level of critical engagement intense enough to uncover new insights into our world: to uncover those as yet unrecognized developments that contribute to justice or to injustice and to distinguish, ever more clearly and perceptively, those forces that foster human degradation from those that support human dignity.

The assumptions of the culture in which a person lives are like the air that a person breathes; those assumptions affect us all in ways and on levels of which we are not conscious. It takes academic excellence to break through those assumptions and to challenge us to discern and face squarely their implications for our own lives and for the lives of others elsewhere on our planet. For this, it is not enough to be "good"; for this, academic excellence is needed. In the end, such excellence is important because and to the degree that it serves wisdom and because and to the degree that it serves the community, not necessarily because it meets the criteria that happen to prevail at the moment in the academy or in any particular discipline or profession.

### It Honors Freedom of Inquiry

I begin with a reminder that the most famous of Martin Luther's teachings was his emphatic insistence on the free, unmerited character of God's adoption of human beings. God does not adopt humans because of their prior goodness or their prior faith, or because of their correct thinking or the way they have or have not subscribed to the status quo. Affirming such an unmerited adoption by God has several important implications.

One is a sense of humor-that is, a readiness not to take things too seriously. The unmerited character of God's favor suggests that humans should not take themselves too seriously (as if they possess some characteristic or quality that others do not), or take their politics, their economic success, their academic disciplines, their piety, or their theology too seriously-indeed, not even take the Bible too seriously. As much as Luther emphasized the religious importance of the Bible, he was quite ready to doubt that Moses authored the first five books of the Bible,<sup>12</sup> to call James an "epistle of straw,"<sup>13</sup> and to joke about removing James from the canon and replacing it with the *Loci Communes*, the exposition of Christian teachings written by his faculty colleague, Philip Melancthon. His readiness to "play" with the canon reveals something of the distinctive flavor of the Lutheran tradition. Each of the things mentioned above-politics, economics, theology, the Scriptures-is important but not ultimate. A sense of humor means not regarding as ultimate anything of secondary or limited importance.

Humans who are gratuitously adopted can afford to be critical of every aspect of life. No "sacred cows" exist that are immune from careful scrutiny; everything is open for investigation. Traditional Roman Catholics get nervous when the magisterium of the church is investigated. Conservative Protestants get nervous when the Bible is investigated. There is nothing comparable that makes (or

at least ought to make) Lutherans nervous if and when it is placed under critical scrutiny.

John Updike, raised as a Lutheran in Shillington, Pennsylvania, has given voice to this outlook:

God is the God of the living, though His priests and executors, to keep order and to force the world into a convenient mold, will always want to make Him the God of the dead, the God who chastises life and forbids and says No. What I felt, in that basement Sunday school of Grace Lutheran Church in Shillington, was a clumsy attempt to extend a Yes, a blessing, and I accepted that blessing.... Having accepted that old Shillington blessing, I have felt free to describe life as accurately as I could, with especial attention to human erosions and betrayals. What small faith I have has given me what artistic courage I have. My theory was that God already knows everything and cannot be shocked. And only truth is useful. Only truth can be built upon.<sup>14</sup>

The divine "Yes" of the gospel sets people free to search for the truth, no matter how messy it may turn out to be. Because humans have no basis for any sort of claim on God, nothing needs to be protected.

No inherited ideas or practices are exempt from critique and evaluation. Religion itself can be critiqued because it is capable of getting in the way of the gospel, indeed even of becoming destructive of the very human dignity it was intended to preserve. The state can be critiqued. To the distress of presidents and deans, the college itself can be critiqued. Whenever loyalty to a learned profession gets in the way of education, it can be critiqued. Every area can be investigated. The results of such investigations may vary in value, but nothing stands in the way of their undertaking. The net effect is freedom of inquiry.

These observations about a sense of humor lead to another closely related implication. Because theology and religious practice cannot place limits upon the freedom of God's initiatives toward humans, a college with such a sense of humor is automatically ecumenical and automatically interested in interfaith understanding. Contrary to the prevailing tendencies of our society, however, this ecumenicity and commitment to interfaith understanding does not issue from indifference or empty tolerance. Religious differences are to be explored, not ignored, because they are but another way of understanding and serving the community. Although religious truth is important and God can be known, humility should prevail because the ultimate cannot be exhaustively captured in any penultimate formulation.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, a college related to the Lutheran tradition appreciates both the sciences, as they analyze and investigate the world, and the humanities, as they seek human wisdom. Disagreements may abound and problems need to be worked out, but there is no fundamental conflict between science and religion when the teachings of each are approached with a sense of humor. Conflict emerges only when either takes itself too seriously.

Given the theological tradition which we have been exploring, freedom of inquiry is *possible* because no inherited ideas or practices are immune from critique and evaluation. Nothing in this world is so ultimate that it cannot be investigated and/or criticized. However, it is not enough to say that it is possible. Freedom of

inquiry is also *needed* and should be encouraged. To discover the reason, we must refer back to our first characteristic: it is needed and encouraged *because freedom of inquiry serves the community*. The purpose of academic investigation is to discern how well individuals, institutions, or ideologies are serving the common good and to suggest and explore proposals with greater promise for improving the life of the community and its members. Thus the reason for the scrutiny, the purpose of the inquiry, is not to foster cynicism or to gain for the critic some elevated status as an "individual in the know." Criticism is not an end in itself but a moment in the quest for truth, for that which edifies and enhances humane living.

The framework suggested here thus provides for criticism a purpose and an urgency without prescribing for it any restrictions or limits.

### It Embraces the Ideal of the Liberal Arts

In our day the meaning of the phrase, "the liberal arts," is often misunderstood. Many adolescents and others assume that it means courses taken from a diversity of disciplines, so that a college becomes a sort of academic buffet where one is permitted or even obligated to sample a certain range of offerings. Although liberal arts colleges in fact often do insist on some breadth of study and exposure to a variety of disciplines, the primary thrust of "the liberal arts" has nothing directly to do with diversity or distribution requirements. The adjective *liberal* in the phrase, "the liberal arts," means "freeing." The liberal arts are those studies which set the student free-free from prejudice and misplaced loyalties and free for service, wise decision making, community leadership, and responsible living.

Given the assumptions prevalent in our society, we must stress that the kind of freedom under discussion here is not simply an unencumbering of the student. It is not just a freedom *from* restraints that stifle individual liberty but also a freedom *for* creative, ethically sensitive, responsible participation in a community. The goal of the liberal arts is not simply self-expression but a kind of transformation-indeed, a transformation disquieting enough to be daunting for many students. Such an education endeavors to wean them (and their teachers!) from their comfortable, uncritical allegiance to societal assumptions and to entice them into both an intense curiosity regarding the worlds beyond their own experience and an intense desire to make their corner of the globe a better place in which to live. The student who is liberally educated is quite often a different person at graduation than he or she was at enrollment. Likewise, the teacher who is truly engaged in the liberal arts is quite often a different person than he or she was in graduate school. Because the goal is genuine freedom (which goes well beyond political freedom) and because people are not in fact free, accomplishing or approximating the goal involves changing people-faculty and students alike. The objective is not merely to "meet the needs of students" or to "help them achieve their own goals"; the objective is to set them free-free "from" and free "for."

Strangely enough, critics in his own day assailed Luther both for ascribing too little freedom to humans and for giving them too much. The first criticism came because he denied that persons were free or able to make themselves pleasing to

God; hence he authored the vigorous defense of religious unfreedom found in *The Bondage of the Will*,<sup>16</sup> one of only two of his many writings that he thought deserved to be preserved.<sup>17</sup> The second criticism came because he objected to coercion in matters of the spirit<sup>18</sup> and granted the community of believers what critics considered to be too much freedom. Members of the community of faith, he thought, should be free to decide together the interpretation of the Bible, the selection of clergy, the choice of devotional practices, and the specific application of ethical principles.

The teachings that elicited the second criticism are of importance here. In his treatise "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther set forth one of his famous paradoxes: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>19</sup> The Christian is free from religious requirements imposed by anyone else but simultaneously free for service to the neighbor and the community. If the community needs a mayor or even a hangman, Luther recommends that a person volunteer. Service to the community has such a high priority that one should serve it even if doing so may threaten one's own moral purity.

Therefore, if you see that there is a lack of hangmen, constables, judges, lords, or princes, and you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the position, that the essential governmental authority may not be despised and become enfeebled or perish. The world cannot and dare not dispense with it.

Here is the reason why you should do this: In such a case you would be entering entirely into the service and work of others, which would be of advantage neither to yourself nor your property or honor, but only to your neighbor and to others.<sup>20</sup>

Luther was continually thrusting the people outward into the community. Their calling was always to build it up, to make sure that justice prevails and human dignity is protected. And, as can be seen in the passages previously cited from his open letter "To the Councilmen" he was convinced that education equips people to discern what actually does contribute to the well-being of the community.

If such is the freedom Luther ascribes to the believer, if Lutheran principles support freedom of inquiry, and if wisdom is the intended outcome of education, then it comes as no surprise that this tradition affirms the ideal of the liberal arts. That is, it endorses, as the intended outcome of education, the freeing of human beings.

Luther's references in his open letter to "the languages, the other arts, and history" that should be taught by "learned and well-trained school- masters and schoolmistresses" and to "the doings and sayings of the entire world" about which the students should hear suggest a study not only of human history but also of the geographical breadth that would today be called "global education. " Included in his outlook is a readiness to explore all cultures, past and present, for any possible wisdom that can be found there.<sup>21</sup>

The purposes of education influence its character. If its purposes are informed by the ideals of the liberal arts, then the goal of teaching, of assignments, and of courses is not primarily technical training or the acquisition of a specific

body of knowledge (as valuable as those may be) but instead the development of the student as a free person. The development of this kind of freedom includes the capacity to investigate, assess findings, and draw conclusions, the wisdom to understand their impact on human beings, a mature ethical sensitivity and understanding, an awareness of the importance of religion, a commitment to justice, and the developed ability to articulate insights in such a way as to be ready to manage and to lead.

Whenever "freedom" is under discussion, a word of caution is necessary. American society continues to be heavily influenced by an outlook, rooted in the Enlightenment, which ascribes to individual human beings a capacity not present in the Lutheran understanding. For the Enlightenment, individuals were considered to be isolated units. Each was free and able to decide for oneself what is true and what is right. Missing from the Enlightenment view was the profound disorientation which Luther perceived in human beings, his sense that humans who were "curved in upon themselves" would unconsciously distort everything to make it fit that orientation. Because those influenced by Enlightenment thinking have overlooked this disorientation, "setting free" for them has meant unencumbering instead of transforming. Also absent from this view has been Luther's profound sense of the community. For him the reoriented human was drawn into community not only as the arena of service but also as the arena where decisions could best be made and the truth could best be sought. Christianity, in his view, was profoundly corporate.

We are thus faced with two alternative visions of freedom. The one prevalent in our society grows out of the Enlightenment and emphasizes individual liberty and individual fulfillment. It can be expressed roughly as follows: freedom is the right to do as I please, and the purpose of education is to equip me to get where I want to go. The second vision of freedom grows out of the Reformation. Freedom, as understood here, has to do with how others are treated; it does not pull an individual away from community but instead draws that person into deeper relationships. In order to serve others, one needs to know and understand them, and this becomes the purpose of education. Because humans and human society are disoriented, the freedom to serve involves risk. The second view can be expressed in the following way: freedom is the courage to do what serves justice and serves one's neighbor even in the face of evil. (The word evil here refers to those societal forces that make doing what is right more difficult and more risky than choosing to go along with a prevailing pattern of injustice or acquiescing to the denigration of some other person or group.)

During the Holocaust the rescuers exemplified the second kind of freedom. Unlike their neighbors who thought they were free when they were not<sup>22</sup> and were merely following the "script" prescribed by Nazi ideology, the rescuers were genuinely free. They were free *for* the person in need. When asked to help a potential victim, they said "yes:" even at great risk to their own lives. In other words, they exhibited courage in the face of evil. Nechama Tec, who herself was hidden by a Polish Christian family, has investigated the rescuers in that country and tried to discern what traits they exhibited.<sup>23</sup> Among the several that she identifies are "independence" (the willingness to take a stand different from the rest of the community), a universal sense of caring (responding to a human in need

without regard to the victim's nationality, class, or religion), and a history of caregiving. Those who said "yes" to the victim at their door were not saying "yes" for the first time; they had developed a habit of helping others. Their freedom for service was not a random occurrence but part of a pattern which grew out of their ties with others. Because their freedom for service was communal at its root, it could be extended to encompass still others, even total strangers. The goal of the liberal arts should be to elicit this kind of courageous freedom!

When rooted in the Lutheran tradition, the liberal arts do not envision an association of isolated individuals each making up his or her mind, but a community in which humans grow into freedom by leaving prejudice behind and equipping themselves for service. Yes, individuals still do make decisions, but their decision making is not an autonomous pursuit of private goals but deliberations undertaken by individuals-in-community.

### It Organizes Itself as a Community of Discourse

If the goal is the kind of freedom discussed in the previous section, then it is not surprising that the liberal arts college is a community. A person can gain new knowledge on one's own, by going to the library, for example, but apart from interaction with others one cannot be set free and can not gain wisdom. In order to risk freedom one needs to be challenged and encouraged. In order to achieve wisdom, one needs to struggle with diversity in a communal setting where those who are different cannot simply be ignored or dismissed.

A commitment to freedom and wisdom thus gives support to the college as a community of discourse. Two other principles also lend support: an understanding of God's activity and a view of authority.

We have already noted the centrality of Luther's insistence on God's unmerited adoption of humans. Less frequently cited but no less important is the second of two central principles: his view of God as active and present. Let me call it "the incarnational principle" because it asserts that the typical way for God to work is through natural and human means. According to this principle the realm of the finite is not closed off and self-sufficient but open to divine influence. And God is not standing above the world, directing its affairs from afar and controlling what happens, but actively involved and at work right in the thick of things. Luther sees God at work amid ambiguity and conflict, even when God gets bloodied and dirtied in the process. However confused, confusing, and out of control the world may seem, God is nevertheless at work "if, with, and under" human agency to create justice and make room for human dignity. God is not restricted to the religious sphere but involved in every aspect of life-albeit often in a (seemingly) "hidden" way.

If one takes seriously this portrait of God, then one never knows where insights may arise. If, as Luther believed, God could be present in the womb of a poor, young Jewish girl and in a baby born in a stable, then one cannot predict where God will be found, nor can one predict where truth will be found. There is no pipeline that offers privileged access. For this reason the search for truth must be

open, and it must be communal. Insight can come from the student as well as the professor, from literature as well as from biology.

Closely related to the portrait of God is another dimension of the Lutheran tradition—namely, its principle of authority. Authority belongs to the Word of God, but the Word is not merely a proposition or set of propositions; it is a living embodiment of the divine being in a person, Jesus, and it is the living voice, the spoken good news of what God has done. The Word is something present, something happening, happening between God and human beings and among human beings. How then can it be discerned? However helpful and important the Bible may be, that collection of authoritative writings cannot be equated with the Word of God.<sup>24</sup> However much an individual person may be able to discern, the individual cannot in isolation decide what is or is not the Word—if for no other reason than that the very character of a person's "world" may be challenged by the Word. However helpful a past experience may be, it is inadequate as a criterion, because the Word draws persons forward into something new. The authority turns out to be the community, but not the community in the debased democratic sense of mere majority opinion; rather the community interacting—interacting with each other, with the Scriptures, and with the traces of God's activity in creation as a whole. Amid that interacting the ordinary can occasionally be broken open and in its midst the transcendent glimpsed. Every person is a potential agent of that breaking open and is to be accorded the dignity befitting that role.

By analogy, the standard of authority in a college that affirms this tradition is also the community. No individual in isolation can know the truth, but the truth emerges amid the engaged deliberations of people. In order for this to be true, the members of the community cannot simply be engaged with each other, however; they also need to be engaged with something transcendent. The members of the community all wrestle with something beyond their knowing.

In a little book entitled *What Is God? How to Think about the Divine*,<sup>25</sup> John Haught calls this dimension "mystery." As Haught points out, mystery is not simply an unsolved problem or a question to which one does not know the answer. A not-yet-answered question is a "problem," not a "mystery." Problems (understood in this way) disappear once their answers are discovered; they decrease in number as knowledge increases. "Mystery," however, does not disappear; it grows along with knowledge. It is like the perimeter of a circle that gets larger as knowledge expands. Mystery is what a parent may feel at the birth of a child. All of a sudden, in amazement, one senses that this child who did not previously exist is now alive and is a distinctive person with identifiable features and a personality. If the newborn's parents were to know all the biology and gynecology and genetics and physiology in the world, they would still wonder at the mystery of what is occurring. Knowledge does not cause mystery to disappear. If we allow the scene to change, mystery is also what one experiences at the death of a friend or family member: what was a life is no more; a distinctive person with identifiable features and personality is gone. John Haught himself discerns mystery in the inexhaustibility of knowledge. Atoms were once thought to be the smallest of particles, but the more scientists learned, the more numerous the subatomic particles became. Similarly, the more they continue to learn about the universe, the

more expansive it seems. Human beings are also inexhaustible. No matter how long and how hard one tries, one can never claim to have fathomed all there is to know about another person.

In a word, the principle of authority within a college is that community's interacting with mystery, with the great questions of "why?" and its endeavor to identify aspects of that mystery. Nothing external to that interaction imposes its authority on the search. The community itself needs to discover depth and beauty and truth and freedom and mystery<sup>26</sup> in such a way as to gain perspective and thereby be enabled to serve human beings and steward the world. The college is a community of discourse, a community whose members are interacting simultaneously with each other and with mystery/transcendence.

The college is a community of *discourse*, not only because interaction automatically involves words but also because its task is to educate leaders. If a person is to lead, normally that person must be able to articulate, to explain, and to persuade others regarding a course of action that benefits the community. And the wisdom to discern what actually does benefit the community needs to be discovered in dialogue, where the subtleties of evaluating complex human issues can be learned. Information can be uncovered by individuals, but wisdom needs to be sought together, and to be beneficial it has to be expressed in proposals which reflect thoughtfully nuanced principles and carefully crafted ideas.

The Lutheran tradition's understanding of freedom, its incarnation that principle, and its principle of authority, considered together, suggest a college founded in that tradition must be a community, a community whose members are engaged with each other and with transcendence. Such mutual engagement involves them in discourse, and such discourse equips them to lead. Participation in the search for truth is open to all members of the community, and no external authority determines in advance the outcome of its engagement with the truth.

## The Colleges Today

We are now prepared to suggest an answer to a question voiced earlier: why have colleges related to the Lutheran tradition retained that connection? One answer is that this tradition so very profoundly undergirds the best aspirations of a liberal arts college. Instead of being at odds with those aspirations, instead of limiting or stifling them, it affirms, enhances, and deepens them. In other words, the Lutheran tradition challenges a college to become more deeply and more profoundly what it already aspires to be. For a college aspiring to advance the liberal arts, this tradition offers an understanding of freedom more profound than the one ordinarily found in American society. For a college aspiring to embody freedom of inquiry, this tradition offers a grounding more deeply rooted than affirmations of "freedom of speech" (however important such freedom may be). For a college aspiring to academic excellence, this tradition offers a rationale more worthwhile than institutional prestige. For a college professing to serve the community, this tradition offers a more profound understanding of what such service entails than can be found in dance marathons or other less self-involving charitable projects (as beneficial as they may also be).



In the college where I teach, I sense no inclination to abandon the church relationship. At root, I think the reasons are those mentioned in the previous paragraph, but they have come to the surface in interesting ways. In 1957, the college, previously all male, admitted women. It did so because the Lutheran church agreed to bail it out of financial trouble, if it went coed. (In this regard the college was, of course, well behind Luther's thinking and well behind some other Lutheran colleges in the United States.)<sup>27</sup> No one in the college today regrets that kind of church influence. In the late 1960s and early 1970s freedom of speech was a big issue. The church representatives on the Board of Trustees rose to its defense, endorsing the college's right to invite a series of controversial speakers. No one today regrets that kind of church influence. In the 1970s one of the supporting synods pressed the college to increase its minority enrollment. No one today regrets that kind of church influence. Why should one object to a church connection if it has the effect of nudging the college to become in actuality what, at its best, it aspires to be?

However, this is not to say that things are what they should be. At one time a college affiliated with the Lutheran church could coast along, safely assuming that the presence of faculty, staff, and students raised in the Lutheran tradition would be enough to keep its identity alive. Now, however, larger and larger numbers of faculty, administrators, and students have had no experience with the Lutheran tradition and do not understand what it has to offer. In order for these colleges to retain the advantages of a tradition that challenges them to become more deeply and more profoundly what they already aspire to be, the tradition needs to be articulated more clearly and affirmed more intentionally.

Does the loss of a shared experience mean that the colleges should abandon inclusivity and give priority to persons socialized in the Lutheran tradition? Under some circumstances, as a limited strategy, seeking Lutherans may be helpful, but I do not regard it to be the preferred response, because persons without such a socialization can and do catch the vision and embody it enthusiastically. What is more important is that the college's theological underpinnings be studied and understood and even celebrated so that its tradition and core identity can be reclaimed.<sup>28</sup> To move to the other end of the spectrum, does inclusivity then imply that faculty and staff of absolutely any persuasion be invited to join the community? No, because the identity of the college provides some limits. For example, a materialist who believes that all human actions are predetermined would have no reason (at least if he/she actually lives the philosophy) to teach in a liberal arts college, because for that person the ideal of freedom for which the college stands would be nonsense. Likewise, a person who was so ideologically committed to a particular political or religious position as to be closed to criticism and further inquiry would not normally find a place on its faculty.

In other ways also, not everything is as it should be. Societal pressures (individualism, specialization, and incivility) are undermining appreciative involvement in a community of discourse. Consumerism and careerism are undermining the ideals of the liberal arts. As fewer and fewer Americans participate in "secondary communities" where people meet face-to-face and as trust declines,<sup>29</sup> a sense of vocation and a dedication to the larger community are more

difficult to inspire. In this setting, reaffirming the Lutheran tradition is not an endorsement of the status quo; it is a commitment to revitalize college education-to revitalize its resolve to educate community leaders, strive for academic excellence, honor academic freedom, embrace the ideal of the liberal arts, and organize itself as a community of discourse and to seek innovative ways to accomplish these goals. Amid the pressures of our society, reaffirming the tradition is a creative and a forward-looking task.

The Lutheran tradition lives with paradoxes and unresolved tensions. For a college related to the Lutheran tradition, one such tension is that between rootedness and engagement with the world. Things would be clearer if the college could simply endorse the assumptions of the academy (be they modernist or postmodernist) or could disregard the surrounding society and focus on preserving its own tradition, but the Lutheran tradition precludes either of those simple alternatives. It does so because accommodation leaves contemporary cultural fads and social assumptions uncritiqued, while isolation leaves the religious tradition unchallenged. The Lutheran heritage summons the college to work out the tensions inherent in a "both ... and," *both* an affirmation of its own tradition and an engagement with today's world. Its underlying conviction is that the tension is a productive one-productive of insights that actually serve society, of insights that help foster social justice and produce free/courageous individuals, and of the kind of discernment that differentiates between what is humane in religion and in society and what is not.

Two features of contemporary American society affect the tension under discussion here. One is the tendency toward homogenization: the strip malls sprouting in the cornfields west of Chicago are indistinguishable from those being carved out of the mountains of West Virginia. Identical fast food can be found in restaurants along the interstate highways of the West and the South and the Northeast. Colleges contend with this pressure. In the face of homogenization, they must affirm their roots and their distinctive heritage, not for reasons of nostalgia but for reasons of serving the community with a more independent and critical voice. The other feature of contemporary society is a "culture of disbelief"<sup>30</sup> which so marginalizes religion as to create the impression that it is unimportant. Such marginalization occurs also in colleges.<sup>31</sup> Colleges can best resist this cultural trend by exploring a "third option" between the imposition of religion and its marginalization-one that reclaims its importance through careful, discriminating assessments. For much of the twentieth century Lutheran colleges, in some cases while emerging from an ethnic enclave, have stressed engagement with the world. In its day, that emphasis was appropriate, but in the face of the two tendencies under discussion, the task has shifted. The priority at this moment is a critical reappropriation of the tradition so that the distinctive voice of a college related to the Lutheran church can once again be heard. In order to preserve the productive tension, the tradition and core identity of the college need to be reclaimed.

## Epilogue

The Lutheran vision was such that training would not do. Indoctrination would not do. Education was needed—education that would strip away whatever was false and whatever distorted human dignity, education that would edify, education that would free people from prejudice and ignorance and from taking too seriously anything that was penultimate, education that would free people *for* service and *for* doing justice, education that would not just serve the church but, even more importantly, serve the community.

And so, as Lutherans came to this country, they established schools and colleges. And the institutions of higher learning they founded were from the beginning (or soon became) liberal arts colleges dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom and intent upon developing, not docile followers, but community leaders in every avenue of community life. Each college related to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is an heir of this tradition. I can think of no better goal for these colleges than to reclaim the tradition and become more fully what that tradition calls them to be.

## NOTES

1. On four separate occasions between 1995 and 1997, earlier formulations of the ideas in this essay were presented to various gatherings of faculty, staff, and guests at Muhlenberg College, Gettysburg College, and Susquehanna University. I want to thank those in attendance for the benefit of their questions, criticisms, and affirmations and gratefully acknowledge the hospitality of Chaplains Nadine Lehr and Christopher Thomforde. In addition, a special word of thanks to my colleague, Professor Nelvin Vos, for his initial invitation to discuss these issues and for his ongoing encouragement and counsel.

2. Donald R. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Aish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989) esp. 119-140.

3. This "sending" contributed to his sense of vocation; he felt he had been called to become a teacher of the church and thus had an ecclesiastically endorsed responsibility to speak out.

4. Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology. Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1963) esp. 131-134.

5. The famous passage in which Luther describes this insight can be found in his "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings," *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986) 34: 337.

6. Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 704-735. The quotation is from 712-713. This open letter can also be found in *Luther's Works* 45:347-378.

7. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* 725, emphasis added.

8. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* 725-726.

9. Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," *Luther's Works* 45: 91-93.
10. They did so in the Madison Agreement in 1912.
11. Luther, "Preface to Latin Writings" 337.
12. Martin Luther, "Table Talk," No. 4964, *Luther's Works* 54: 373, and Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 193-194.
13. Luther, "Preface to the New Testament," *Luther's Works* 35: 362.
14. John Updike, *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989) 243.
15. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the words frequently uttered by the director of Hillel at the college where I teach, who tells Jewish parents that "this is a good place for your (son or daughter) to be Jewish, not *despite* its being a Lutheran college, but because it is a Lutheran college."
16. Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," *Luther's Works* 33: 15-295.
17. Luther, Letter "To Wolfgang Capito, July 9, 1537," *Luther's Works* 50: 172-173.
18. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" (also referred to as "The Treatise on Christian Liberty"), *Luther's Works* 31:333-377. The reference here is specifically to 356-359.
19. *Luther's Works* 31: 344.
20. Luther, "Temporal Authority" 95-96.
21. Although Luther opposed some of the religious practices of the Muslimspractices which he sought to verify by examining the Qur'an-Luther refused to denigrate the Turks who at the time were threatening to overrun Europe. "Anyone favoring a military struggle against them," writes Luther, "must begin with prayer and repentance for Christian behavior worse even than that of the Turk? (171). "On War Against the Turk, 1529," *Luther's Works* 46:161-205.
22. Cf. the words regarding freedom from the small-town lawyer, George Hanson, played by Jack Nicholson in the movie, *Easy Rider*. "talking about it and being it is two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. Of course, don't ever tell anybody that they are not free, because then they are going to get real busy killing and maiming to prove to you that they are. Oh, yeah, they're going to talk to you and talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom, but if they see a free individual, it's going to scare 'em. ... it makes 'em dangerous."
23. Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford, 1986) 150-183. A summary can be found on 154.
24. "And the gospel should really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called his teaching not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth." Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels," *Luther's Works* 35: 123.

25. John Haught, *What Is God? How to Think about the Divine* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

26. Cf. Haught's discussion of these concepts, each of which functions for him as a symbol of the divine.

27. According to Richard W. Solberg, Thiel College in 1870 was "the first Lutheran college to open as a coeducational institution and to maintain itself as such throughout its history." *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 93.

28. In my experience these ideas can be understood and affirmed by persons who are not themselves Lutherans. I have in mind a colleague who is a Reform Jew, another who is an "ex-Roman Catholic," and a third who is a "lapsed Unitarian," all of whom have voiced such affirmations.

29. For an excellent analysis of the declining participation by Americans in social groups (from parent-teacher associations to bowling leagues) and the resulting decline in social trust (or "social capital"), see Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone- America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 65-78.

30. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

31. One place where this point is discussed is in George M. Marsden, *The Soul of an American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford, 1994) e.g., 433-434.