

# Confession of a Lutheran University

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## I. Introduction

It is a tough time to be a Lutheran university. Lutheran students do not reflexively choose Lutheran higher education, and Lutheran church bodies provide little to no direct financial support. The economics of higher education favor economies of scale, but the pool of college-bound students is projected to decrease in the next decade. As a result, Lutheran institutions of higher education compete with other colleges and universities to attract any and every academically qualified student regardless of religious background. In such a difficult environment, a Lutheran university may be tempted to hide its lamp under a bushel, so to speak. Required theology courses may be replaced with subjects deemed less divisive, and the objective content of the Christian faith may even be relegated to the safe confines of a poorly enrolled religion major. The university may be tempted to forego a public confession. Would it be wrong for Lutheran university to do so? More specifically, must a Lutheran university and its faculty maintain a substantive, public theological confession that informs the academic life of the institution—not merely in the theology department but across all departments?

Tom Christenson and Darrell Jodock have argued that a Lutheran university need not maintain a public theological confession. Christenson contends that a Lutheran university reflects its theological commitments when it provides an education in the technical skills necessary for good work in society and the wisdom necessary for good decisions in society.<sup>1</sup> Jodock argues that the university serves primarily the left-hand kingdom of God. What makes a university Lutheran is a theologically informed conception of the purpose of education—namely, preparing students to pursue justice in their future vocations.<sup>2</sup> Both Christenson and Jodock articulate an understanding of the Lutheran university that is grounded in the doctrines of the two kingdoms and vocation but does not require the university to have a public theological confession.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Christenson, *Who Needs a Lutheran College? Values, Vision, Vocation* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Darrell Jodock, “The Lutheran Tradition and the Liberal Arts College: How Are They Related?,” in *Called to Serve: St. Olaf and the Vocation of a Church College*, ed. Pamela Schwandt, Gary De Krey, and L. DeAne Lagerquist (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College, 1999).

This article argues that a Lutheran university must, in fact, maintain a substantive, public theological confession. The argument falls into two parts. The first part examines Luther's 1524 letter "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" and the 1530 sermon "On Keeping Children in School," showing how the concept of vocation as concrete social relationship provides guidance about the ends schools ought to pursue.<sup>3</sup> The second part turns from Luther to the contemporary Lutheran university to identify the social relationships that give rise to its vocations. The argument focuses on two vocations in particular: to society at large and to the church. Both vocations require the Lutheran university to provide a liberal arts education within the framework of a substantive, public theological confession.

## II. Luther on Education

To quote John Donne, "No man is an island." Each of us lives in a variety of social relationships within which God uses us to care for one another. Lutheran theology identifies these particularized social relationships as our vocations.<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of vocation affirms the spiritual worth of the works associated with these relationships. It also presupposes that each vocation has associated norms based on the particular social context that constitutes it. The overriding norm is, of course, love. However, love is always embodied, and as such it is always enacted within a specific social context. The husband's love of his wife is different from his love of other women—his sisters, his mother, his grandmother, or even his daughter.<sup>5</sup> We expect a husband to love his wife differently than other women, because his relationship to her is different from his relationship to other women. The norms of love for these various relationships are different because the relationships are different. These norms govern the ends to be

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools (1524)," trans. Albert T. W. Steinhauser, in *Christian in Society II*, vol. 45 of *Luther's Works: American Edition*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 347–78; Martin Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School (1530)," trans. Charles M. Jacobs, in *Christian in Society III*, vol. 46 of *Luther's Works: American Edition*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 213–58.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Gene Edward Veith, *Working For Our Neighbor: A Lutheran Primer on Vocation, Economics, and Ordinary Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian's Library Press, 2016), 7; Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957; Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1994), 72; and Kenneth Hagen, "A Critique of Wingren on Luther on Vocation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 259. The story is actually slightly more complex: an individual's relationships constitute the person's stations [*Stände*], and the Christian's calling within those stations constitute vocations.

<sup>5</sup> See Gene Edward Jr. Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, Focal Point Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 84. On the more general point, see Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount (1532)*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, in *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, vol. 21 of *Luther's Works: American Edition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 237.

sought within each vocation as well as the means to be used in achieving them.

As social institutions, Lutheran educational institutions might also be said to have vocations. Each exists in relationships with other institutions and individual human beings, and its particular social context generates norms that govern the ends it ought to seek. In fact, when Luther addressed the importance of educating children, his argument rested on the nature of the school's relationships to other social institutions, particularly the church and the city. This section of the paper examines two of Luther's main works concerning education: "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" and the sermon "On Keeping Children in School." It argues that vocation-specific norms underlie Luther's argument in both of these works and shape his conception of the purpose and content of education.

"To the Councilmen" is the earlier of the two works. Written in 1524, it addresses two movements in Germany: the breakdown of the educational system in evangelical territories in the wake of religious reforms and the occupation-oriented mindset of parents concerning their children's education. As cloisters' property was expropriated by the princes of the various territories, the schools attached to them were shut down. However, many municipalities did not step in to open new schools in their place.<sup>6</sup> Luther wrote "To the Councilmen" to urge them to do just that.

His argument rests on vocation-specific norms. He anticipates the objections municipal leaders are likely to make against his admonition, beginning with the claim that a child's education properly belongs to the parents. Luther points out that parents are not doing the job—sometimes out of laziness, sometimes out of ignorance, and sometimes because they do not have the time or resources. "It therefore behooves the council and the authorities to devote the greatest care and attention to the young," Luther writes.<sup>7</sup> The task belongs to them for two reasons: first, because they have the financial means for achieving it, and second, because they are responsible for the present and future well-being of the city. "Since the property, honor, and life of the whole city have been committed to their faithful keeping, they would be remiss in their duty before God and man if they did not seek its welfare and improvement day and night with all the means at their command."<sup>8</sup> Luther urges city leaders to establish and maintain Christian schools because the schools exist within a social network consisting of a city (with its need for educated laity), the church (with its need

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<sup>6</sup> See John Witte, Jr., "The Civic Seminary: Sources of Modern Public Education in the Lutheran Reformation of Germany," *Journal of Law and Religion* 12, no. 1 (1995–1996), 177–78, 185–201, for further background.

<sup>7</sup> Luther, "To the Councilmen," 355.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

for educated clergy), children, parents, city leaders and church leaders. The councilmen, as leaders of both the city and the local church,<sup>9</sup> have vocational obligations with respect to schools because of their responsibility to the city and its people as well as the church and its people.

Naturally, once Luther establishes the vocational obligation of city leaders to establish and maintain schools, he offers advice about the schools' curriculum. Occupational training alone is not sufficient, because "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>10</sup> These traits will be developed by students who "hear of the doings and sayings of the entire world, and how things went with various cities, kingdoms, princes, men, and women."<sup>11</sup> Luther turns to history not simply so that students imitate it; rather, if they study history, "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>12</sup> Luther is arguing that students who study history can learn from the mistakes (and successes) of others rather than having to amass their own experience.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, for Luther, Christian schools exist to undermine the work of Satan. "If he is to be dealt a blow that really hurts, it must be done through young people who have come to maturity in the knowledge of God, and who spread His word and teach it to others."<sup>14</sup> Preaching and teaching God's word requires students to know the original languages in which it was written. The schools must therefore teach Greek and Hebrew. They must also teach Latin, according to Luther, although his argument on this point is not as well developed as his argument for teaching Greek and Hebrew.<sup>15</sup> It appears that he valued Latin because it, along with Greek and Hebrew, is a great "ornament, profit, glory and benefit, both for the understanding of Holy Scripture and the conduct of temporal government."<sup>16</sup> Since Latin was still the *lingua franca* in both civil and churchly realms, "without a basic

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<sup>9</sup> See Lewis Spitz, "Luther's Ecclesiology and His Concept of the Prince as *Notbischof*," *Church History* 22, no. 2 (June 1953):114–115; and Witte, "The Civic Seminary," 175–177.

<sup>10</sup> Luther, "To the Councilmen," 356.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jodock, "The Lutheran Tradition," 17–18.

<sup>14</sup> Luther, "To the Councilmen," 350.

<sup>15</sup> Just four years later, in the Saxon visitation articles, Luther would write, "In the first place, the schoolmasters are to be concerned about teaching the children Latin only, not German or Greek or Hebrew" (Martin Luther, *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony (1528)*, trans. Conrad Bergendoff, in *Church and Ministry II*, vol. 40 of *Luther's Works: American Edition*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958], 315).

<sup>16</sup> Luther, "To the Councilmen," 358.

knowledge of Latin one could not fully participate in theological dialogue or in the worship life of the church,” much less the business of government.<sup>17</sup>

Luther’s argument identifies the numerous relationships within which the school exists. Its curriculum must be driven by the needs of the constituencies it serves. It serves the city by shaping the boys and girls who will eventually step into leadership roles in the family, governance, and work—in Luther’s words, “. . . 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. . . . Therefore, it is a matter of properly educating and training our boys and girls to that end.”<sup>18</sup> It serves the church by preparing boys for further theological study. Luther’s curricular suggestions are undergirded by his understanding of the social relationships of the school and the vocation-specific norms that go along with those particular vocations.

Luther’s later work, the 1530 “Sermon on Keeping Children in School,” follows a similar method. As Luther indicates in the introductory letters, the sermon is aimed at parents. Some city leaders had already listened to Luther’s 1524 admonition and provided schools for the children of their cities; in other cities, pious and faithful citizens had pushed their city councils into action. However, in some cities schools were underutilized because parents came to believe “the dastardly notion that because monkery, nunning, and priestcraft no longer hold out the hope they once did, there is therefore no more need for study and for learned men, that instead we need to give thought only to how to make a living and get rich.”<sup>19</sup> Luther is bold enough to claim that clergy must encourage and admonish parents to take advantage of the schools for the sake of the church and the city.

Luther mercilessly criticizes the claim that occupational training is a sufficient education.<sup>20</sup> His rhetoric is harsh. He points out that parents who refuse to permit their boys to be educated may well be robbing the world of future pastors.<sup>21</sup> They might thus be contributing to the eternal damnation of many souls who would otherwise have been saved through the preaching of these young men, had the parents only sent them to the schools provided by

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Korcok, *Lutheran Education: From Wittenberg to the Future* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 70.

<sup>18</sup> Luther, “To the Councilmen,” 368.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, “On Keeping Children in School,” 217.

<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that Luther was opposed to occupational training; on the contrary, in “Letter to the Councilmen” he explicitly states, “My idea is to have the boys attend such a school for one or two hours during the day, and spend the remainder of the time working at home, learning a trade, or doing whatever is expected of them” (370). His point is that occupational training alone is not enough to provide the kind of life that God would have Christians enjoy.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, “On Keeping Children in School,” 222–23.

the city.<sup>22</sup> Later in the sermon he lauds the work of civil servants, claiming, “We shamefully despise God when we begrudge our children this glorious and divine work and stick them instead in the exclusive service of the belly and of avarice, having them learning nothing but how to make a living, like hogs wallowing forever with their noses in the dunghill, and never training them for so worthy an estate and office.”<sup>23</sup> Luther calls withholding a good education from children “service of Mammon,” “caring for their bellies,” “horribly ungrateful,” and idolatry.<sup>24</sup> To people who do so Luther says, “you want God to serve you free of charge both with preaching and with worldly government, so that you can just calmly turn your child away from him and teach him to serve Mammon alone.”<sup>25</sup> As beneficiaries of the social order and Christians who are to love their neighbors, parents have a duty to ensure their children receive a proper education.

Such an education requires students to learn the important languages of the day, the wisdom of the intellectual tradition, and the ability to think and write. This is true for both boys and girls, but it is particularly true for any boy who might eventually become a theologian. Luther argues that even boys of lesser ability should receive such an education. “They ought at least to read, write, and understand Latin, for we need not only highly learned doctors and masters of Holy Scripture but also ordinary pastors who will teach the gospel and the catechism to the young and ignorant, and baptize and administer the sacrament. That they may be incapable of doing battle with heretics is unimportant.”<sup>26</sup> Latin is a necessary part of their education. Likewise, boys who might serve in civil administration or the private sector need such an education, because “it is not the law of the fist but the law of the head that must rule—not force but wisdom or reason—among the wicked as well as among the good.”<sup>27</sup> An education in Latin and the classics provides youngsters with the linguistic facilities, cultural literacy, and body of wisdom they need to help preserve the law (in the case of civil administrators) or help run businesses wisely.<sup>28</sup> Luther concedes that not every boy will become a pastor or civil servant. Nevertheless, his education will not “hurt his capacity to earn a living. On the contrary, he can rule his house all the better because of it, and besides, he is prepared for the office of preacher or pastor if he

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 229–30.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 213–214; 219; 223; 216. The epithets cited here are merely a sampling.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>28</sup> Luther sometimes sounds like the prognosticators of our own age, as when he says “There is not a nobleman who does not need a clerk. And to speak also about men of ordinary education, there are also the miners, merchants, and businessmen” (*ibid.*, 244). In other words, a liberal arts education will give young people skills and knowledge that will guarantee them jobs. Luther would have been at least vaguely familiar with the need for educated employees among businessmen, since his father ran mines.

should be needed there.”<sup>29</sup> A proper education prepares students to love their neighbors more effectively in all of their future vocations.

As in the “Letter,” the educational objectives Luther articulates in “Sermon” flow from the vocations of the Christian school. The school has an obligation to the church to prepare boys for further theological study. It has an obligation to the city to prepare students to read and write in the legal language of the day, understand the subtleties and complexities of civil service or private business, and engage the riches of the culture in order to provide wise direction for home, business, and state. “The jurists and scholars in this worldly kingdom are the persons who preserve this law, and thereby maintain the worldly kingdom,” Luther writes.<sup>30</sup> What the Lutheran school should teach can be inferred from its concrete vocation in its specific time and place. Given its vocation to the church, a substantive theological confession is a necessary part of its curriculum.

### III. The Modern Lutheran University

Like schools in Luther’s day, the university in the modern United States exists in social relationships with numerous people and institutions. These include students, students’ parents, state and local governments, the federal government, accrediting agencies, and the various disciplines taught at the university, to name only a few. Many Lutheran universities also have direct relationships to congregations of their own denominations, other congregations, and their own church bodies.<sup>31</sup> Despite this vast web of relationships, public discourse tends to focus almost exclusively on the relationship between the university and its students. The student pays tuition, and in exchange the university provides an education and credentials. The government requires what we might call “full disclosure” and “truth in advertising” so that students and parents can make fully informed decisions about which university students should attend. Clearly, universities have obligations—and significant ones—toward students and their parents.

As institutions whose immediate task is to provide students with an education and evidence of successful completion of that education (i.e., a

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 239. He later clarifies, “Now when I speak of the jurists I mean not only the doctors but the whole profession, including chancellors, clerks, judges, lawyers, notaries, and all who have to do with the legal side of government; also the counselors at the court, for they too work with law and exercise the function of jurists” (240). I have collected these various offices under the umbrella of civil service. Luther mentions what I am calling the private sector as an aside in a few passages: I have given it equal weight with civil service because of its greater relative importance in our own day compared to Luther’s.

<sup>31</sup> One could argue that non-Christian universities also have relationships with congregations and church bodies, but these relationships are at best indirect, as when they provide academic credentials for individuals who will be called to serve at congregations.

degree), Lutheran universities through the ages<sup>32</sup> have not escaped the forces that affect all of higher education. In our own day, as in Luther's, many students, parents, and governments demand that universities and colleges provide occupationally useful skills rather than a liberal arts education, and even fewer people—even within the church—value a specifically Christian liberal arts education. This devaluation of a Christian liberal arts education is driven by many factors, including the declining influence of Christianity in our culture at large, the perceived irrelevance of the Christian faith (even among Christians) to issues of everyday life, the rising cost of a college education, economic and occupational uncertainty, and many others. At the same time, an increasing percentage of the population has been attending college over the decades because governments and businesses have looked to higher education to provide technical education and credentials for an increasing number of fields. On the other hand, declining birth rates in recent years mean that the pool of traditional undergraduate students is shrinking, even as the maturation of online education has created the capacity for universities to reach non-traditional students across the country who might otherwise have sought an education at local institutions. Universities thus find themselves competing for students.<sup>33</sup>

In the face of such forces, Lutheran institutions that have traditionally maintained a substantive theological confession or strong ecclesial connections face the temptation to retreat from both in the interest of institutional survival.<sup>34</sup> The difficulty of finding Lutheran faculty, the graduate-level training of those faculty in universities that do not attend to theological questions, and the disciplinary autonomy fostered by research specialization only heighten the difficulty of maintaining a substantive confession that informs the entire academic life of the institution. A variety of factors thus conspire to put the Lutheran university onto the horns of an apparent dilemma: either it remains attractive to a broad range of students by diminishing its public confession, or it maintains its confession at the risk

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<sup>32</sup> See Russell Dawn and Jeff Mallinson, "A Genealogy of Lutheran Higher Education," in *The Idea and Practice of a Christian University*, ed. Scott A. Ashmon (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 42–44 for a discussion of the social context of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran universities.

<sup>33</sup> See Perry Glazer et al., *Restoring the Soul of the University: Unifying Christian Higher Education in a Fragmented Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017) for a historical overview of some of the forces at work from a Christian perspective; John McGee, *Breakpoint: The Changing Marketplace for Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) for an account of the forces from the perspective of contemporary university administrator; and Nathan Grawe, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018) for a nuanced analysis of the so-called demographic storm based on regional variations in the birth rate as well as variations in college attendance among different demographic subgroups.

<sup>34</sup> Such forces are not new, nor is the temptation to retreat. See James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), especially ch. 5, as well as George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).



of alienating potential students.<sup>35</sup> This section argues that Lutheran universities should not abandon their public confessions in the face of these challenges. They have obligations toward parties besides students, their parents, and the government. Two vocations in particular are important for the argument: the vocation toward society and the vocation toward the church. Each vocation requires the Lutheran university to maintain a substantive, public theological confession that informs not just instruction in theology but instruction across the entire curriculum.

Universities in the United States exist as corporations by leave of the state.<sup>36</sup> States grant this corporate status and its associated privileges because the university stands in a particular relationship to society at large: it is composed of people from the society's communities, it draws students from those communities, and it promises to provide benefits to the communities (or at least to the students drawn from those communities). In other words, the university has a vocation to the community, and with that vocation come specific obligations. The university has an obligation to shape and form students to make positive contributions to the communities. Certainly, these positive contributions can be medical, technical, and economic. In fact, even universities which claim not to inculcate any moral values are at least providing occupational training to students, and occupational training prepares students to make such medical, technical, and economic contributions. However, as Luther says, "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."<sup>37</sup> The city also needs people with the wisdom to use its medical, technical and economic goods well.

This means that the Lutheran university must, for the good of society, form and shape students not only to pursue occupations but to pursue them responsibly, to contribute to their professions and communities in wise ways, and to analyze social and political issues not only from a technical perspective but also from a broader, moral perspective.<sup>38</sup> Christenson puts

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<sup>35</sup> For various *diagnoses* of the problem, see Robert Benne, *Quality With Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), ch. 2; Jodock, "The Lutheran Tradition," 13–38; John W. Wright, "How Many Masters? From the Church-Related to an Ecclesially Based University," in *Conflicting Allegiances: The Church-Based University in a Liberal Democratic Society*, ed. Michael L. Budde and John Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 13–28.

<sup>36</sup> In the United States, non-profit colleges and universities are generally organized as public benefit or religious corporations. See Cindy Steinbeck, "Fulfilling Laws and Advancing the Mission: The Vocation of the Board of Regents," in *The Idea and Practice of a Christian University*, 147–150.

<sup>37</sup> Luther, "To the Councilmen," 355–56.

<sup>38</sup> The argument here is not based on what society requests from universities. Rather, it is grounded on the observation that university graduates, who make medical, technical, and economic contributions to society, do so more or less wisely. Given its responsibility to society, the university ought to attend to the cultivation of wisdom among its students as it trains them to make medical, technical, and economic contributions. In the words of L. Deane Lagerquist, students at Lutheran colleges and universities "are equipped to use their gifts—talents, training, and opportunities—in

the matter succinctly: “Learning in a Lutheran university also means that the pursuit of knowledge is interwoven with concern and care.”<sup>39</sup> Although we can achieve amazing technical feats, “many of the successes of the technological project of mastery make us all feel less rather than more in control of our destinies. Moreover, a purely technological education fractures community.”<sup>40</sup> In the Lutheran tradition, the means for developing wisdom have been both the Scriptures and the liberal arts.<sup>41</sup> In his treatment of Reformation-era pedagogical reforms in evangelical lands, Thomas Korcok observes that the general disciplines to be taught included religion (catechesis), Latin, literature (beginning with *Aesop’s Fables*, which Luther and other reformers praised), history, and music.<sup>42</sup> Each discipline was chosen to help students develop wisdom and good character. In our contemporary context, the selection of disciplines will likely differ. However, the key is to inculcate wisdom through value-laden reflection on technical issues, and such reflection requires the liberal arts.

If the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Ps 111:10, Pr 1:7, 9:10), then the liberal arts alone are not sufficient for developing wisdom in its fullness. The Gospel will also be necessary. While the purpose of the Gospel is not to legislate regarding matters of God’s left-hand reign in the world, the content of the Christian faith nevertheless has implications for our understanding of and relationship to the world in which we live. That the Father gave his Son to redeem sinful human beings shapes the way Christians understand authority. That Christ shed his blood for every human being informs the way Christians relate to those around us. The Scriptures are therefore indispensable for cultivating wisdom in the fullest sense of the word. The point is not that the liberal arts without a clear Christian confession are useless. They are not. They can and do contribute to a certain level of civic righteousness. However, the Christian faith also contributes to

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ways that benefit their communities” (“The Vocation of a Lutheran College in the Midst of American Higher education,” in *The Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education*, ed. Jason A. Mahn [Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2016], 44). For a similar argument from a different perspective, see Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Christenson, *Who Needs a Lutheran College?*, 76.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Schwehn, *Exiles From Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 134. See also Darrell Jodock, “Vocational Leadership,” *Intersections*, no. 41 (2015), passim.

<sup>41</sup> Here the distinction between the two kingdoms which Jodock so ably lays out becomes important. The Scriptures serve God’s right-hand work—that is, his work in the world to reconcile sinners to himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Human wisdom unaided by the Scriptures serves God’s left-hand work—that is, his work to provide for the basic human needs in this life. The Scriptures can provide some guidance in left-hand matters, but human wisdom cannot provide any guidance in right-hand matters. Luther had severe words for those who believed that Christians can dispense with a liberal arts education because we have the Bible.

<sup>42</sup> Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 76–84. The meaning of the term “liberal arts” is itself hotly contested; for a helpful historical overview see Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, expanded edition (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995).

wisdom and informs our understanding of the world. For that reason, the Lutheran university's vocation toward society requires it to maintain a substantive, public confession.

The Lutheran university also has a vocation toward the church—that is, those called and gathered by the Holy Spirit to faith in Christ. In the Lutheran tradition, one significant component of that vocation is to prepare church workers to proclaim the good news of salvation in Christ.<sup>43</sup> In Luther's day, that meant pastors; in our day, it means students bound for seminary as well as those preparing to serve in auxiliary offices. Students preparing for such vocations ought to be well-versed in the Scriptures, exegetical methods, the Lutheran confessions and Lutheran doctrine, the history of the church, and the like. Those headed toward seminary should also, when possible, be prepared to read the Scriptures in the original languages. Moreover, congregations and church bodies rely on universities to certify that each candidate for a church work office has the relevant knowledge and competencies. The student's education is thus not simply about the student. It is also about the churches which students will serve—about the young people and adults with whom students will share the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ. For this reason universities ought not simply rubber stamp degrees and ought to hold students to high standards.

A second component of the Lutheran university's vocation toward the church is to help students called by the Spirit to faith in Christ to understand, share, defend, appropriate, and apply the Christian faith in their various vocations as family members, citizens, community leaders, congregation members, and so forth.<sup>44</sup> The basis for this task is not merely students' desire for such an education. It lies more fundamentally in Paul's admonition to all Christians: "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" (Rm 12:2).<sup>45</sup> This component cannot be relegated to the status of a co-curricular activity to be accomplished by the campus ministry or student life team. Such a relegation implies that the Christian faith neither touches on the life of the mind nor involves objective content.

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<sup>43</sup> Colleges of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod started off focused on this vocation. However, during the 1960s and 70s, LCMS colleges faced a variety of challenges. "Of greatest significance for the Missouri system were the persistent challenges to the single-purpose character of the higher education program. The major contributing factor was the growing rate of 'general,' or non-church-worker, students to the preparatory and teachers colleges" (Richard W. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985], 343). Burtchaeall, *Dying of the Light*, 524–25, 528–32 describes forces that contributed to this trend.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Lagerquist, who claims, "For church bodies (especially the ELCA), Lutheran education additionally aims to cultivate in their members the skills and virtues that are necessary for faithful participation in congregational life and to provide lay and clerical leadership" ("The Vocation of a Lutheran College," 44).

<sup>45</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Yet the Christian dogmatic tradition has long affirmed that “Christian faith” must be understood in terms of both the individual’s trust in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and the objective content of the “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3)—both *fides qua creditur* and *fides quae creditur*. Christian theologians through the ages have followed the example of Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets in applying the objective content of the faith to the issues facing Christians in the various vocations in which they find themselves. The Lutheran university should do the same for its Christian students. If it fails to do so, it fails to show the relevance of the doctrines of the Christian faith to the Christian’s life in society.

In this regard Jodock’s and Christenson’s accounts of Lutheran universities fall short. Both Jodock and Christenson acknowledge that the Lutheran university has some obligation to the church, but both argue that the obligation is fulfilled when the university aims “to instill a sense of the whole, to cultivate the priority of service, and to equip persons with wisdom as well as knowledge.”<sup>46</sup> While both Jodock and Christenson reach nearly the same conclusion, they deploy different arguments. Christenson writes,

The assumption seems to be that learning, thinking, and teaching (the primary activities of academics) is not itself church. But what (returning to our prism or rainbow analogy) if learning and teaching are ways in which the love of God is refracted into the world? Is teaching a vocation? As such is it a service of the deep needs of the world? It should be. Is it a service of the real needs of our students? Is it not, therefore, *Gottesdienst* [worship]?<sup>47</sup>

Jodock, on the other hand, insists that “college education serves primarily the second [that is, the left-hand] 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.”<sup>48</sup> In more recent writings, Jodock suggests that the college can be likened to a bridge: its theological commitments serve as footings, its educational values as the pillars, and the daily activities as the deck of the bridge.<sup>49</sup> The theological commitments inform the educational values and thus the activities taking place “on the deck,” but those commitments may not be explicitly visible in the daily activities.

Yet these arguments understate the Lutheran university’s vocation to the church and its correlative obligation to engage the objective content of the Christian faith in the curriculum, both in preparing servants of the church

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<sup>46</sup> Jodock, “The Lutheran Tradition,” 19.

<sup>47</sup> Christenson, *Who Needs a Lutheran College?*, 101–102.

<sup>48</sup> Jodock, “The Lutheran Tradition,” 18.

<sup>49</sup> See Jodock, “Vocational Leadership,” 6 and Jodock, “The Third Path, Religious Diversity, and Civil Discourse,” in *The Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education*, 84–85.

and in helping all Christian students understand the implications of the faith for their various vocations as well as its implications for justice in society, human dignity, the environment, and other vital issues. Jodock's image suggests that the university's theological commitments can be safely hidden, as it were, in the metaphorical footings of the bridge: theological commitments simply bear the weight of the university's everyday activities without any visible effect on their character. The nature of the commitments is irrelevant so long as the footings support the deck. However, the relationship between theological commitments and a university's everyday activities is much more complex. To cite just one example, atheistic, materialistic commitments support an entirely different understanding of the human being than do Christian theological commitments, and our understanding of justice cannot be easily separated from our understanding of the human being. Lutheran universities' vocation to the church—and to Christian students—thus requires them to articulate how the faith informs a variety of important issues.<sup>50</sup> That, in turn, requires that Lutheran universities maintain a substantive, public confession of faith.

In fact, as Ernest Simmons has observed, our culture is one within which intelligent, corporate reflection on religious issues is neither prevalent nor welcome.<sup>51</sup> A Lutheran university can and should model for its students how to engage in intelligent reflection on such questions, and it should draw students into such reflection and train them to engage in it. O. P. Kretzmann writes,

Having rooted its educational approach in historic Christianity, the essential task of the instruction is to establish the relevance of Christian truth to all areas of human knowledge and life. The method of doing this may vary from course to course, but the objective is always the same. The instructor in chemistry may do it one way, the professor of history in another, and the teacher of English in still another.<sup>52</sup>

A Lutheran university with substantive theological commitments is in a unique position to show the relevance of the Christian faith in this way. First, it has a solid set of core commitments. Christian faith is important for the university, as is reflection on the implications of that faith for students'

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<sup>50</sup> Which is not to say that the Christian faith has "all the relevant data and knowledge about our life in this world, but it does claim to offer a paradigm in which those data and knowledge are organized, interpreted, and critiqued" (Benne, *Quality With Soul*, 6). Cf. Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol. II, God and His Creation (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), ch. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Ernest L. Simmons, *Lutheran Higher Education: An Introduction for Faculty* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 8–9, 40.

<sup>52</sup> O. P. Kretzmann, "Christian Higher Education," in *Readings in the Lutheran Philosophy of Education*, ed. L. G. Bickel and Raymond F. Surburg, Thirteenth Yearbook (River Forest, IL: Lutheran Education Association, 1956), 133.

various vocations. Secondly, because Lutherans believe that the Holy Spirit works through the Word of God to bring people to faith in Christ, Lutheran universities can admit non-Christians students in obedience to Christ's command to make disciples of all nations without requiring students to convert. Finally, because Lutherans believe that the stations of the left-hand kingdom are common to all, Lutheran colleges can admit non-Christian students without requiring a faith statement of any kind.<sup>53</sup> Having non-Christian students opens the door to true dialogue about religious questions. The existence of such conversations does not call into question the core commitments of the university; instead, faculty can represent the university's core commitments within that conversation.

This has implications for the hiring of faculty, as Russ Moulds points out:

Teacher identity, then, is a critical feature of two-kingdom education. The church needs such teachers [those committed to a substantive theological confession] because we not only have the Gospel to teach, we also have much to teach about the Gospel. Without both this community perception and the teacher's self-understanding of identity as a teacher of the church, our education will lapse into secular drift and simply regress to the mean.<sup>54</sup>

In order to articulate how the faith informs our understanding of the various disciplines taught in the university and the issues addressed by those disciplines, a Lutheran university must have faculty members who are conversant with their respective disciplines, with the broader issues to which their disciplines speak, and with the objective content of the Christian faith. Thus, to remain faithful to its vocation toward the church, a Lutheran university must maintain a substantive confession of faith among its faculty—not simply among its theological faculty, but among a critical mass of faculty across all disciplines.<sup>55</sup>

This claim will certainly raise the objection that requiring a substantive theological confession of faculty will, at best, suppress the kind of dialogue that makes the liberal arts so helpful and, at worst, turn the university into a center for indoctrination that is both intolerant of diversity

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<sup>53</sup> In fact, if preparing students to live as wise citizens is one vocation of the Lutheran university, and if that wisdom can be acquired in part through the liberal arts, then a Lutheran university can happily admit—and graduate—non-Christian students without displeasing God.

<sup>54</sup> Russ Moulds, "One Kingdom Teaches the Other: The Two Strategies of Lutheran Education," in *Learning at the Foot of the Cross: A Lutheran Vision for Education*, ed. Joel D. Heck and Angus J. L. Menuge (Austin, TX: Concordia University Press, 2011), 93. Burtchaell observes: "For although it is the vocation and mission of the Lutheran venture in higher education that most counts, Lutherans are likely to be the only people who could be committed to it enough to dedicate their careers and their very lives to it" (*Dying of the Light*, 538).

<sup>55</sup> See Benne, *Quality With Soul*, 49 ff. for the various ways in which critical mass can be interpreted in this context.

and irrelevant to contemporary society.<sup>56</sup> Such concerns are not unfounded, but the danger is not exclusive to universities with a substantive confession of faith. George Marsden has observed, “While American universities today allow individuals free exercise of religion in parts of their lives that do not touch the heart of the university, they tend to exclude or discriminate against relating explicit religious perspectives to intellectual life. In other words, the free exercise of religion does not extend to the dominant intellectual centers of our culture.”<sup>57</sup> If marginalization of competing views can plague secular and secularized universities as well as universities with a substantive theological confession, then the confession itself is not the problem. The problem is more likely the character of the faculty. Faculty who are intolerant of competing views display a disposition to eschew dialogue in favor of monologue and to discount positions contrary to their own. As a result, they are unable or unwilling to entertain the kinds of dialogue that explore issues of significance for contemporary society in the spirit of inquiry associated with the liberal arts.

If intolerance has more to do with the character of the faculty than their confession, then requiring faculty to hold a confession need not suppress dialogue. Naturally, Christian faculty should conduct such conversations in accord with St. Peter’s admonition, “in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1Pt 3:15–16). This kind of gentleness and respect flows from the virtue of humility. Mark Schwehn has argued persuasively that humility is an important prerequisite for learning:

Humility on this account does not mean uncritical acceptance: it means, in practical terms, the *presumption* of wisdom and authority *in the author*. Students and faculty today are far too often ready to believe that Kant was just, in a given passage, murky or that Aristotle was pointlessly repetitive or that Tolstoy was, in the battle scenes of *War and Peace*, needlessly verbose. Such quick, easy, and dismissive appraisals preclude the possibility of learning from these writers. Yes, some of these judgments may be warranted, but the practice of humility at least prevents them from being made summarily. *Some* degree of humility is a precondition for learning.<sup>58</sup>

Such humility is also a precondition for meaningful dialogue. If we assume that our interlocutors have nothing worthwhile to say, we are more likely to

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<sup>56</sup> For this objection, see for example, Jodock, “Vocational Leadership,” 7 and Jodock, “The Third Path,” 82–83.

<sup>57</sup> Marsden, *The Soul*, 6. See also Benne, *Quality With Soul*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Schwehn, *Exiles From Eden*, 48–49.

write them off or ignore their contribution. On the other hand, if we acknowledge that reasonable people can come to differing conclusions about important issues, we are more likely to be open to dialogue with them. Having a substantive theological confession does not predispose one toward pride, nor does the lack of a theological confession predispose one toward humility. In fact, if the kind of inquiry associated with the liberal arts is an important feature of Lutheran higher education, and if humility is a precondition for that kind of inquiry, then their own confession requires faculty at the Lutheran university to cultivate humility in themselves and to seek to inculcate in their students as well.<sup>59</sup> A Lutheran university that encouraged pride in its faculty would not be living up to its own ideals.

#### IV. Conclusion

I have argued that we can understand what makes a university Lutheran by explicating the obligations associated with its vocations. On this account the liberal arts are important because they prepare students to reflect in a value-laden way on technical, medical, and economic problems that face society. They provide the material that 1) shows students how to reflect on significant questions, 2) engages students in substantive answers to those questions—including answers informed by the Christian faith, and 3) exposes students to threads and currents that have formed our contemporary culture's answers to those questions. The liberal arts tradition exposes students to the best of human wisdom in hopes of helping students down the road toward wisdom. This account also makes clear that the Lutheran university has a significant vocation toward the church. Both vocations entail an obligation to maintain a substantive theological confession, both so that church-work students receive an excellent grounding in the teachings of the Scriptures and so that all Christian students appropriate and apply the objective content of the faith to the challenges they face in their present and future vocations.

The challenges facing higher education in the next decade are significant, and the challenges facing Lutheran and other Christian universities may be even greater. The challenges, however, are not new. Our Lord called the earliest church to confess him in the face of opposition and even outright persecution, and he promised to be with his church until he returns again. His promise does not entail a guarantee that no Lutheran university will ever close. His promise ought, however, to provide a Lutheran university with boldness in the face of difficult challenges, including the boldness to maintain a substantive, public theological confession that informs academic life across the entire curriculum. In fact, it is precisely because the influence of Christianity in our culture at large is declining that Christian students need to hear humble, thoughtful, Christian faculty reflect on the

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<sup>59</sup> For a helpful account of humility, see Martin Franzmann and F. Dean Lueking, *Grace Under Pressure: Meekness in Ecumenical Relations* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 4.



relevance of the Christian faith for their disciplines and professions—and for the pressing questions that our nation and world face. This can happen only if the faculty members themselves maintain a clear confession of the Christian faith. A Lutheran faculty that maintains a substantive theological confession helps ensure that the church has people who are prepared to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ accurately for the salvation of God’s people, and it helps to ensure that Christians are prepared to live out their faith wisely, intelligently, and humbly in a complex and fallen world.<sup>60</sup>

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