

Faculty, Theology, and Educational Theory: No Neutrality

By Thomas Korcok

In the early days of the Missouri Synod, it was common for the faculties at our teachers colleges to critically examine secular pedagogues from a theological perspective. It was considered an important part of their calling. They understood that, in order to properly evaluate a pedagogue's methods or philosophy, it was necessary to ask the question, "What do they teach, believe, and confess?" For the Missourians, there was no such thing as an "atheological" or theologically neutral pedagogy. A person's theological views shaped his or her educational philosophy, methods, and curricular choices. If the theology was contrary to sound Christian doctrine, then the resulting pedagogy would reflect that. If such a pedagogy was uncritically imported into a Lutheran classroom, the theological opinions underpinning it would inevitably accompany it, and children would be taught to think in a way that was contradictory to the faith. This understanding was not unique to the Missourian educators. From the earliest days of the church, Christian educators understood this principle: theology shapes pedagogy and pedagogy shapes theology. Thus in early LCMS journals such as *Evangelisches Schulblatt*, the forerunner of *Lutheran Education Journal*, readers were warned against uncritically adopting philosophies and methods espoused by secular educators because their theology was contrary to that of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. An introduction of their methods and theories would inevitably change the very purpose and nature of Lutheran education.

After World War I, many Missouri Synod professors and pedagogues, scarred by the persecution that Lutherans endured for their German heritage and motivated by a desire to blend into American society, began to neglect this task. They slowly stopped asking the all-important question, "What do the people who are shaping American public education teach, believe, and confess?" As a result, the mistaken opinion arose that these secular methods and their philosophies were theologically neutral. The 20th century American pedagogues were treated as though their theories and methods were purely scientific and research-based. As such, it was believed that there was nothing preventing them from being used in a Lutheran classroom.

In reality, most of the leading American educational thinkers of the early 20th century were anything but atheological. They had deeply held theological beliefs that were contrary to the Christian faith; namely, that American society would be well served if the Christian church was marginalized and eventually eliminated. For example, John Dewey, who is regarded as one of the foremost American educators of the 20th century, wrote extensively on religion. He believed that the Christian church was a power-driven, anti-democratic institution that was lost in myths and outdated dogmas. He postulated that if schools adopted his progressive model of education, America could throw off the shackles of this oppressive Christian religion in favor of a new religion based on the goodness and power of man. As offensive as this should have been to the Lutheran mind, by the mid-20th century there were few Missourian educators that raised their voices against Dewey's theology. As early as the 1930s, there were professors calling for the wholesale introduction of progressive educational principles in the Synod's teachers colleges.

As we approach the third decade of the 21st century, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Lutheran educators cannot continue down this path. The educational establishment of modern America, with its fascination with gender politics and its neo-Marxist agenda, has never been so opposed to the fundamental principles of Lutheran education. For example, one of our chief goals is to prepare students to give a clear testimony to the world of the singular unchanging truth of Christ Jesus. Modern secular pedagogy does not support this goal. Its fundamental goal is the inculcation that all beliefs are societally based and should be treated as equally valid. If Lutherans uncritically import such a pedagogy, it can only hinder our work as Lutheran educators and, ultimately, the work of the Holy Spirit in creating and nurturing a strong sustaining confession of faith in the lives of the students.

The good news is that we do not have to look to these anti-Christian pedagogues. The Christian church has, over two thousand years of thought, produced some of the world's most brilliant educational thinkers. Their unanimous opinion is that proper Christian pedagogy always begins with sound theology. Jerome, Augustine, Rhabanus Mauris, Alcuin, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and C.F. W. Walther, to name but a few, all held this opinion and all provided good solid pedagogical direction to the church. As the church moves forward we must teach teachers to critically assess the theological foundations of the pedagogy and curricula that they use in the classroom. We need to cultivate the *habitus* of critically assessing the theology of the influential pedagogues and pedagogical trends of our time: to look behind the curtain of the methods and the models and ask how they understand the confession of Christ.

As it was in the 20th century, so it is today. There is no such thing as a theologically neutral pedagogy. As Lutheran educators go forward, it is not enough for them to know the latest educational trends; they must know our theology well enough to properly assess educational philosophies and methods in light of the confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. They must begin with that quintessential Lutheran question, "What do they teach, believe and confess?"

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