Staying Green: The Importance of Continued Scholarship in the Parish

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There is an old Southern proverb that states, “If you're green, you grow. If you're red, you rot.” The picture in the proverb is simple enough. As long as a plant remains green, it is a sign it still has things to do before it reaches full maturation. But once a plant turns red (a tomato, for instance), it should be plucked and eaten, or from then on it will begin to decay.

The proverb speaks against those who think they know it all. It offers an encouragement to keep growing as a person.

As a lifelong member of the Wisconsin Synod and a product of its parish schools, high schools, college, and seminary, I consider myself qualified to make the following two observations: 1) I have been well-prepared for the duties I now carry out as a pastor in the WELS, and 2) I have been ill-prepared for continued growth through parish scholarship.

How can these two statements stand side by side? A TV show in the early ‘80s called “The Greatest American Hero” told the story of a man given a suit of clothes that could grant him all sorts of superpowers. But the catch was that he lost the instruction manual. He was able to fly, dodge bullets, and show super-human strength, but he never mastered the use of his newfound skills.

The education I received in WELS schools was excellent. The vigorous academic demands kept us sharp, excited, and eager. There was a strength we drew not only from the Word of God but also from the effort we exerted as classmates in learning new things. Graduation from such an education may be compared to a mother eagle bumping the babies out of the nest. We flail for awhile, then begin pumping our wings, and after a time right ourselves and fly like eagles (in the parish) on our own.

A problem arises, however, when we attempt to put this model into practice. During those early flailing years in our ministries, we are susceptible to some of Satan’s most deadly temptations: laziness, inconsistency, indecisiveness, procrastination, politicking, and others. If we begin our ministries with these sins embedded in our words and actions, the sharp sword of the Spirit may grow dull and unfamiliar to us.

The past two years have convinced me that parish scholarship must include more than preparation for weekly Bible classes and the Sunday sermon. We must keep abreast of current theological trends in the Lutheran church and in Christianity at large. Ongoing parish study equips us not just to get through the day-to-day labors of our calls, but to understand and appreciate the labors of the call and the larger mission of the church.

Parish study is a Spirit-led, scholarly discipline that keeps the called worker sharp in his skills of directing, protecting, and guiding blood-bought souls entrusted to his care. Therefore, instead of the “mother eagle, baby bird” model, I offer the “green plant” paradigm for continuing scholarship in the parish. By avoiding rot and seeking ways to “stay green,” we not only grow more faithful in our calling, but we also become a greater blessing to those we serve. We build up the church militant as we wait for Christ’s return.
Three Signs of Rot

Where does rot start? It begins the moment a fruit or a vegetable reaches maturity. From then, it must be eaten before it spoils. With this in mind, there are three signs that rot is occurring in the parish—neglect of study time, decline in preaching and teaching proficiency, and lack of ongoing education in the parish.

The first sign of rot can be seen on a daily basis. August Pieper once wrote, "In the parsonage, in the pastor's study, in his little den are the sources of the church's strength. If his little den becomes cold and empty, or if it is dedicated to the Old Adam and the spirit of this world, the church's strength will evaporate, and the spirit of the world will overwhelm it. If, on the other hand, the Spirit's fire burns in the pastor's praying and studying, new streams of the Spirit will flow out daily to God's people."

Few in our Synod can match Prof. Pieper's eloquence. In a striking way he states the old axiom, "Education does not cease with a Seminary diploma." Pastors repeatedly tell their confirmation classes, "Your spiritual growth does not end with catechism class." Yet I fear too many pastors fail to take their own advice when it comes to their seminary training.

The Master of Divinity degree (or the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree for the teaching ministry) should be likened to a driver's education course. The four pastoral disciplines (Pastoral, Exegetical, Systematic, and Historical theologies) provide a balanced diet of theological study for the rest of our lives. I passed my driver's examination with a 70 percent proficiency score, but I certainly had much more to learn.

There are many examples of rot in this area. One pastor told me he had to get into his associate's office to remove the video games from his computer so his associate would actually get work done. More than one pastor or teacher has squandered his time with Internet chat rooms and e-mail. Ask yourself: When was the last time I wrote my own Bible class? What was the last complete theological book I read written in the past two years? When was the last time I reviewed my dogmatics notes or studied symbolic books of the Lutheran church?

Let me be clear: I am not advocating that pastors become graduate students. I do not advocate study at the expense of completing other pastoral obligations or recreation time with family; both are also important. I am saying that we must consciously devote a portion of our weekly schedules to professional study and scholarship. The word seminary, of course, means "seed bed." Now that we've sprouted, we need to keep growing.

The second sign of rot is closely related to the first: a decline in the quality of our teaching and preaching. A story has it that Prof. Adolph Hoennecke's harshest sermon critic was his wife. After a lesser effort from the pulpit one Sunday morning, Prof. Hoennecke was told by his wife (in private!), "Well, Papa, today was one of those times when it didn't come off well at all." Was she being too harsh? In fact, Dr. Hoennecke asked her to be honest in her opinion of his preaching so that the quality of his sermon work would improve.

Being the son of WELS teachers, I was well acquainted with the old "school visitor" program. My father, who sometimes served as the visitor to other schools, would regularly comment on the value of giving teachers a fresh perspective on their teaching. Such fresh perspectives improve the quality of teaching.

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1 August Pieper, “Anniversary Reflections,” The Wauwatosa Theology, Vol. III.
Quality is easy to lose in parish ministry. To save time, we might try cutting a corner or two on Bible class or sermon preparation. While we are all bound to feel the time crunch occasionally, we must be careful lest it become the rule rather than the exception. The signs of rot in our preaching and teaching are easy to spot. Go through a half dozen or so of your sermons. Do you see how repetitive your phrases and examples have become? Do your sermons capture the color, the grammatical nuances, and the vocabulary pictures of the original languages? Is your sermon based on your own exegesis of the text? Does your sermon connect to the life your members are living every day?

Rot in Bible class quality is even easier to spot. How often do you use NPH Bible curricula “as is,” putting in little or no preparation of your own into the class? Has preparation become little more than running the pages through the photocopier and carrying them to class? Would you ever dare to ask your own church members for an evaluation of your work?

The final sign of rot in parish scholarship can be seen in continuing education—or lack of it. When was the last time you attended a seminar or theological conference? How many theological periodicals do you subscribe to? Have you considered taking a class or pursuing a degree beyond your current one? If you are doing no new scholarship discussing or thinking about what is out there, it may be a telltale sign that rot has already begun to set in.

Something else needs to be said at this point. We have distinguished professors of arts and letters serving in our high schools, colleges, seminary, and even many of our parishes, yet the number is too low. Various reasons may be advanced for this, but one of the greatest is a fear that graduate study will erode our sound doctrinal position. Such fears have their historical bases, but we must balance these fears with the awareness of the great blessings sound scholarship may bring us.

The best defense has always been a good offense. Do we too often wait for God to raise up judges for us, as he did in the Old Testament, to defend us from the latest onslaught of liberal theology? The only time a graduate program is to be feared is if we are not firm in our own doctrinal position and confession of faith due to our lack of parish study. Jesus told Peter the truth when he assured him that the gates of hell would not prove stronger than his confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Three Ways to “Stay Green”

Let's return to the plant analogy. There are three things we need to do to keep a plant growing and healthy: water, sunlight, and fertilizer.

The “water” of any type of scholarship is reading. While I have assembled an impressive-looking library over the last ten years, only now am I beginning to appreciate the investment I made. When I once asked a retiring professor what he planned to do in his retirement, he answered, “I’ll finally get around to reading all my books.” There can be no appreciation, no critical thought, and no analysis without source material. One of the greatest blessings of the Wisconsin Synod’s educational system has been the sheer amount of material to which we are exposed.

How much time should we spend reading? Mark Steege writes, “The example of true teachers of all times should also inspire us to study as they did. Peter knew the contents of all the epistles of Paul. Paul himself, though well advanced in years, had men bring him books and parchments. David busied himself with the Law of God night and day, as he tells us in Psalm 119. If, then, these divinely inspired writers, upon whom the Holy Ghost poured out his richest gifts, nevertheless made diligent
use of books, how we must blush with shame if we do not with all our power apply ourselves to reading.”

Time spent in the study has served our synod well throughout its history. One cannot pick up Hoenecke's dogmatics, the Wauwatosa Theology series, or the volumes of Our Great Heritage without seeing how well-read our predecessors were in biblical, systematic, and historical theology, as well as the current theological opinions of their day.

It was not by accident that Hoenecke came down on the right side of the election controversy, E.C. Fredrich on the right side of the Scouting and church fellowship debates, Siegbert Becker on the inspiration of Scripture, and so on. Their stands came from a systematic, critical reading of Scripture, together with a thorough knowledge of the Lutheran Confessions. Because of such sound scholarship, these men were able to see in new disguises the old heresies Satan uses to attack the church in every age.

Almost as important as water for a growing plant is light. The light of parish scholarship is writing. The light of the sun allows the plant to produce its food. Writing articles, sermons, books, or essays is fundamental to scholarship in the parish.

One of the great pleasures of pastors' conference (as it is, I'm sure, for teachers' conferences too) is the study papers presented to those in attendance. Not only do they stretch our academic "legs," but they also provoke discussion and further study. As any professor of first-year English will tell you, you never learn a subject well until you must write a paper on it. Writing develops the skills of recognition and recall.

Papers are but one example. Others are essays, devotional articles, exegetical briefs, Bible studies, Bible curricula, catechism lessons, and many more. One of the most vital parts of staying green is continued reading and writing after our college years are over. What we breathe in during our study, we breathe out in our writings.

Plants need fertilizer to stay green. Purchasing and reading new books, as well as subscriptions to scholarly periodicals, is fundamental to the work of a parish scholar. Note the emphasis on "scholar." Forward in Christ and Meditations are great for devotional and popular reading, but they frequently lack the depth necessary for professional growth.

A short list of scholarly periodicals used within our own circles would be the following: CHARIS, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, WELS Historical Institute Journal, the Lutheran Synod Quarterly (ELS), and Preach the Word and Come, Worship Christ monthly newsletters. Pan-Lutheran periodicals would include Lutheran Forum, Bride of Christ, Logia, Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, Concordia Journal, and Concordia Theological Quarterly. Many more could be named in Lutheranism and beyond.

Another major source of nutrients for a pastor is continued professional education while in the parish. The mindset that graduate school is only for those who teach at a college or seminary needs to be changed. While the structures do exits within our synod to take advantage of such opportunities, I pray wholeheartedly that more congregations will encourage their pastors to pursue personal and professional growth.

Admittedly, there are practical impediments that may prevent attending a graduate program for an advanced degree: time, money, and family/ congregational obligations. But there are also various ways one can grow professionally without going away for a month or more at a time. Our seminary offers

a symposium every fall. Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary has offered its Reformation Lectures for more than 30 years. There are satellite pastors’ institutes offered in various districts of our synod.

If our congregations are willing to provide financial support and a break in our schedules, pastors, teachers, and staff ministers should seriously consider studying for an advanced degree. Most master’s programs require 18 to 21 credits, and so it may only take as little as four summer sessions to complete. The fruit it would produce would make it time and money well spent.

I’m Still Green!

I’ll admit that it might seem a little strange for a person as green as I am to be encouraging others to “stay green,” but that’s exactly why I am writing. I’ll never forget Prof. Dan Balge telling our class about his vicar year. Of all the things he remembered, one picture that stayed with him was the scholarly acumen of his supervising pastor. He was impressed by his bishop’s dedication to know all that he could for the proper exercise of his office as a called servant of the Word.

The blessing of being a green pastor in Iron Mountain, Michigan, has been the opportunity to discover sound parish scholarship. My preaching has improved. My teaching has improved. I am no longer fearful of saying the wrong thing, for my study has given me the confidence of “Thus saith the Lord!”

It has also made me alert to the dangers that face the church. Solid historical study has shown me that there were no glory days when everything ran right, when the books were always balanced, or when true doctrine was never attacked. It has shown me that battles are not limited to the past. I must now take my place in the ongoing battle against the forces of evil. My prayer is the same as that of St. John, Luther, Pieper and others—“Come quickly, Lord Jesus!” It has given me the courage to stand boldly in the office to which I am called and to preach the Word in and out of season. It is my prayer that I stay green throughout the years God blesses me in the ministry.

Sound parish scholarship is a means to that end. It keeps what I know fresh in my mind and gives me a method of working on those subjects I do not yet fully grasp. It is a lifelong study that will not be completed until God calls us home or Christ returns in glory. But between the planting and the harvest of the Lord, I encourage you to stay green.
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