Reflections on a New Science Building

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Hosting a conference of independent colleges, Wisconsin Lutheran College enjoyed a visit by Dr. Howard Gardner. The Harvard psychologist, best known for his theory of multiple intelligences, gave his keynote in the Schwan Concert Hall. For his second presentation, he was escorted to the student union stage in the “Warrior Underground.” As the session opened, he looked around as if making a conscious effort to absorb and understand the young college with its thematic Romanesque red structures. The audience became aware of his temporary puzzlement. Then, he broke the silence with an adlibbed but serious question, “Are you still true to your founders?”

He did not wait for an answer and went into his presentation. What he referenced, of course, was that so many church-related colleges are no longer serving their initial purposes. The tension of being academically respectable while still true to doctrine is real. Gardner is probably especially familiar with the temptations that face the church-related college. Harvard, where he was educated and now teaches, is the model for totally losing sight of one’s original purpose. The original college seal of Harvard contained the word “Veritas” surrounded by “pro Christo et Ecclesia” which translates, “Truth for Christ and Church.” As time passed, the Latin motto became embarrassing and was reduced to “Veritas.” Worse yet, Harvard’s campus climate has become one with no agreement on what that Truth is.

What did Gardner think? Is it impossible to stay Christ-centered at the college level? Truly, many other colleges have followed the pathway of moving away from their original vision. Even Notre Dame worries about keeping its Catholic identity and wonders if having some protestant professors on its staff is wise. Still other colleges no longer concern themselves about their roots only allowing occasional or vague references to historical or ethnic connections apparently to run up a flag that encourages old timers to remain loyal. Articulation of the original goals is no longer on the agenda. When the forms remain but the function is absent, beginnings have been completely forgotten.

Our founders envisioned a liberal arts college of excellent quality that would be true to Scripture. No one would question that its growth has been amazing. As I look from my office window, I can monitor the daily progress one of the latest projects, a new science building. I remember years of planning, rezoning negotiations, and additional property purchases. God brought us through all these things to construction. Now seeing the increasing beauty of the building, knowing what it will contain, and anticipating what we will be able to do, stir the emotions. The four-layer, seventeen million dollar investment will cover approximately 80,000 square feet. It will have 18 classrooms, 10 research laboratories, 22 faculty offices, a greenhouse, and underground parking. Never has so much been put into a science structure within the WELS.

Will the sciences, especially biology, head us in a secular direction? Will we also end up selling our birthright for pottage? Will we embrace naturalism in science and practice pragmatism in
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philosophy? Mark Noll notes that gradual secularization has happened at so many church-related colleges. Would it be better to leave science alone?

Foremost, we need to recall that it is very Lutheran to hold that all legitimate academic subject areas are worthy of study by Christians. We also recognize that Christian influence is needed in every discipline. Faith informs all investigation and learning and makes that study greater than itself. It returns us to the study of nature Adam enjoyed before the Fall. Luther wrote:

We are beginning to regain a knowledge of the creation, a knowledge we had forfeited by the fall of Adam. Now we have a correct view of created reality, more so, I suppose, than they have in the papacy. Erasmus does not concern himself with this; it interests him little how the fetus is made, formed, and developed in the womb. Thus he also fails to prize the excellency of the state of marriage. But by God’s mercy we can begin to recognize His wonderful works and wonders also in the flowers when we ponder His might and His goodness. Therefore we laud, magnify, and thank Him. In His creation we recognize the power of His Word. By His Word everything came into being. The power is evident even in a peach stone. No matter how hard its shell, in due season it is forced open by a very soft kernel inside it. All this is ignored by Erasmus. He looks at the creation as a cow stares at a new gate.

The Lutheran University of Wittenberg followed those principles and with excitement reexamined nature. Valerius Cordus, one of the university’s biology instructors, traveled to Italy to learn how to preserve plants by mounting them on paper. On the journey he was kicked by his horse and was fatally injured. Nevertheless, Wittenberg’s spirit of investigation was not dampened by the loss. No voice called a halt to investigations of nature. Scholarship continued, and it is well established that the university professors played a key role in publishing Copernicus and also teaching his theory.

Of course, doing science at any time is subject to everything human. Its practice has to be done with humility. Assumptions and inferences may be mistaken, facts can be overlooked, and so science can take strange turns. When Philip Melanchthon promoted astrological predictions as a science, Luther’s reaction was to say that he found more comfort in a glass of beer. Nevertheless, Luther did not forbid this study at the new university. He saw all these things as ways to serve God in this life.

Gene Edward Veith, Jr., who has so aptly reminded Lutherans of the concept of Christian vocation, states:

Christians should use and develop their minds. The mental faculties of the human mind – the power to think, to discover, to wonder, and to imagine – are precious gifts of God. The Christian who pursues knowledge, seeks education, and explores even the most “secular” subjects is fulfilling a Christian vocation that is pleasing to God and of great importance to the Church. The Bible, by precept and example, affirms this and opens up the whole realm of human knowledge to the Christian.

The idea of secular callings is Martin Luther’s. Any legitimate vocation, from practical plumbing to pure science, can and ought to be done to the glory of God by the Christian. It then follows that Christians then need to be well educated to work, to serve, and to lead in the world.
John Isch, veteran educator, at Martin Luther College delivered a paper to a WELS district regarding the continuing educational work of the church which ranges from pre-school to college, “No one, to my knowledge, has ever questioned whether the church has any business doing these things. In fact, it is hard to imagine what the church would do if it didn’t do Christian education.” The church is always only one generation away from extinction. It must teach the young.11

Then Paul Kelm continued at the same conference reminding listeners of a critical Scriptural link. St. Paul follows the fact that we are saved by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) with the fact that we are created to do good works which God has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10). “We are saved to serve. To uncouple these two chief doctrines of Scripture is either to create saints on ice – passive emigrants for heaven that are no earthly good – or to foster legalistic behavior modification devoid of the Gospel’s power.” This service reaches out into the community so that others who may actually speak against you, see what you do and come to praise God (I Peter 2:12).12

Recently, President Tim Kriewall of Wisconsin Lutheran College stated it this way: “We want our students to be well equipped for the secular work world, whether as physicians, teachers, lawyers, financial advisors, artists, or graduate school students – to serve others. How? By working shoulder-to-shoulder with those who don’t yet know about Jesus. By serving as the only Bible to which some of their co-workers may ever be exposed.”13

For generations many members of our synod were somewhat insulated from the rest of America by language and culture. They maintained that isolation by establishing schools and churches that often tended to function as German-American cultural centers. Services and teaching were in German. On the north side of Milwaukee there were many in the neighborhoods who spoke German. As a child I was impressed that Grandmother Louise spoke German so often instead of English. Her favorite expression was, “Ach Kinda!”14 Clearly, if she needed to express herself quickly or deeply, German was preferred. I asked my grandmother if she thought in German. She pondered my question for an impressively long time. Then she firmly said with a smile, “Yes, I think in German.”

Once when I was studying my Lutheran catechism (no doubt with some frustration), my father took time to show me his older catechism and how one page was in English and the opposite covered the same material in German. He said that he had to recite everything in both languages at his Lutheran grade school in the 1920s. I was amazed at the effort that took. My father ended his formal education when he graduated from Lutheran High School in Milwaukee. He would have liked to have continued in mathematics, but he was expected to drive truck like his father. His father, who had only finished grade school, did not see further education to be of much value for the times. I was the first to attend college. There are still Christian students who are the first in their family to attend college. Slowly, with the passing of generations the German-Americans moved toward a more open and full participation in the larger society attaining higher levels of education allowing them more choices in vocation.15

With the rest of America they enrolled in schools of higher learning. However, while the synod had pastor and teacher training colleges, the establishment of a WELS liberal arts college did not take hold until 1973.16 Starting with a two-year degree, by 1985 the college was able to implement four-year programs. Today, somewhat late, we finally see the growth of Christian education at the college level in our church body. But will we still be true to our founders?
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Some insight can be gained from the goals of the WLC Life Science Department (which are linked to the goals of the college). The first goal states that students will be able to articulate a growing Christian philosophy and to develop an approach to all issues in biology which “reflect awe for the Creator, love for all humans, and respect for all creatures – leading to a life of dedication, continued learning, and service.” The other biology goals deal with understanding the assumptions, using the language, being able to use primary sources, understanding the history of biology, using scientific methodology, and knowing the basic language and content. Clearly, if the first goal is forgotten, the new science building will be empty and misleading… a well without water.

Certainly, an area of study that directly confronts faith is biology. Evolutionists claim that our origin is by natural causes. They also teach that we are a mere accident in a long chain of events and that it follows that we have no purpose in life.

But if the Life Science Department’s first goal is remembered and developed along with the others, then students will leave prepared to be servant-leaders. But our graduates will know the nature of science and the limits to its truth claims. They will know that God reminds us to be humble when searching out causes and mechanisms: For God has said, “Were you there when I created the heavens and the earth (Job. 38)?” Our graduates will recognize that nature was made by God, but science is constructed by mankind. They will praise the Creator for nature’s wonder, complexity, and beauty. They will know that good stewardship of nature actually requires understanding nature to the best of our ability. They will appreciate the damage done to nature by sin. They will know that we do have purpose. As they serve God through their vocation, people will see the differences in our graduates, and ask about what drives them. Christ drives them. Thus, by their vocational ministry, they will contribute to society and redeem the times.

Nevertheless, the college that calls itself Lutheran and advertises to students as such always needs to be watching what it is doing. It must be integrating the faith in every classroom and in every relationship. As John Isch warns, we need to have continuing faculty discussions on the how of teaching from a Christian viewpoint so that we do not violate the integrity of either Scripture or the secular content. So it follows that a Lutheran college must have Lutheran teachers that are well prepared, that know Scripture, that know their subject, and that are able to teach. David Lutz frankly states that if the label on a college is false, if time has faded the original purpose, or if a Christian viewpoint is implied in promotional materials when this is not true, the college is committing no less than fraud.

So are we still true to our founders? The first characteristic would be to see if all things are being done to the Glory of God and acknowledge Him. God is blessing the college, and He must be given the glory. When we reflect on the quality of the student body, the new buildings, or the active faculty, we need to see these things as God’s doing.

Secondly, as the college adds or replaces instructors, the prime qualification has to remain, as it has always been, that candidates for a call are active members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod or church bodies in fellowship with the WELS and that instructors take course work and become certified by the synod. The college has historically searched for (1) members of the synod, (2) good teachers, and (3) individuals with the terminal degree in their field of study. If the first qualification of these three were waved, the college would cease to be fully Lutheran.
Furthermore, with that in mind, John Isch warns that our Lutheran educators at all levels need to work hard at understanding how we can correctly make the teaching of all secular areas Christian. How do we integrate, correlate, and permeate secular thought? In the area of science we not only warn against the philosophy of reductionism and materialism, but we also especially need to guard against Reformed answers to evolution that elevate reason human and try to develop a true science. This is certainly challenging at the college level.

In the tension between doing legitimate academic work and being faithful, one has to be aware that there is a ditch on each side of the road. Avoiding error on one side could by overcorrection send a person into the ditch on the other. For example, one could set aside all earthly knowledge as useless; that would be foolish. On the other hand, one could set faith aside. That would be disastrous.

Martin Galstad pointed out the difficulty: We must be critical of the world, but for the right things. We do not want to be obscurantist. Moses was not less a child of God because he was skilled in all the knowledge and wisdom of the Egyptians. It was not his wisdom in things of the world that got Solomon into trouble. The problem always is to keep clear the distinction between the realm above us and the realm below us, and always to use the lower according to the guidance of higher.

This is something at which we have to constantly work. We must always ask why we are doing things. Once there were solid Christians that refused to look at an airplane with a claim that God never intended mankind to fly. We should not oppose all new science and technology with a general claim that humans are “playing God” by crossing some type of invisible line into any area not previously understood. Yet, of course, there are other situations in technology that call for a clear warning. At other times there are areas where we do not know. We cannot scientifically explain miracles. For example, the details of what the Flood did to the geology of Earth are beyond our understanding. In all things, our teaching, our scholarship, and our service, God calls us to be humble. This is how the Christian scholar is true. We must watch that Scripture is our guide, but also be careful that we do not add to it.

At a college that aims to be Christian, teaching will be ministry. We are servants who must be faithful ministers to the youth that are entrusted to us. We must always be concerned for both their academic abilities and their faith. Students need to be stirred up and concerned with why they are here. They need to know that God has plans for them. At the center will be the gospel of full forgiveness for all sins. We must always be watching that we have not wandered off the road. A Lutheran faculty will always be discussing these things.

With great care the workmen are putting a large cross on the peak above the main entrance of the science building today. I am told that they take great pride and care in working on a building like this. Gardner’s question comes to mind again. “Are you still true to your founders?”

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1 The conference was sponsored by The Wisconsin Foundation of Independent Colleges (WFIC) and Ameritech/SBC. It focused on “best practices” using technology on May 21, 2001.
3 Noll, Mark A. The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind. Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1994, 110ff..
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5 Noll, 113.
6 My notes from the History of Education course taught by Martin Galstad at Dr. Martin Luther College, 1958.
14 My brother and I translated Ach Kinda as “Oh Children.” Grandma used it very dramatically in the most general way whenever anything was not right.
16 The early years of Northwestern College included more than pre-seminary work. There was a business course and some used their B.A. to enter other fields. According to Continuing In His Word. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1951, only six out of sixty-eight in the first year were preparing for the ministry. This would seem to indicate a vision for Northwestern that included broad education for laypeople. Later the focus narrowed.
17 “Biology Department Plan,” drafted for the Assessment Committee at WLC, not dated.
18 Isch, 115.
19 Lutz, 40.
20 Isch, 115.
21 Isch, 116. Dr. Isch generally warns against Reformed educational materials that are not Scriptural.
24 Galstad, 1955, 16.