How do we know that we are orthodox Lutheran professors? At the kitchen table in our parsonage in Aberdeen, South Dakota: John and Darlene are expressing their joy at becoming members of our Lutheran congregation. They have been sharing stories of the hardships in their previous vocations as teachers of native American children on the impoverished Pine Ridge Reservation. The conversation reaches back a bit farther, to their college days at a Lutheran teachers’ college in the 1960’s. “Funny thing,” John says. “Quite a number of our teachers then were teaching us in class about the mistakes in the Bible, how it’s God’s Word, but merely human words ...” “Still,” Darlene concludes, “those professors were always concerned for each of us as individuals. They’d talk with us for hours after class or come to the dorm to see if everything was okay if we were missing from classes. But the rest of the professors, the ones who taught verbal inspiration and who denounced those other teachers, they came at the bell and left at the bell and wouldn’t give us the time of day when we saw them outside of class, which wasn’t often!”

Which group of professors at that Lutheran college were being orthodox? Neither one. Orthodoxy entails orthopraxy.

1. Toward a Lutheran Mood

In his article “Temptations that Especially Confront the Orthodox” Martin Galstad asks, “Is there not a danger that we have become quite satisfied with the definitive and the scholastic to the exclusion of the meditative and the mystical? May we not have become occupied mainly with clear mental processes and principles (doctrines), with an attendant carelessness as to the bringing of their fruits to the surface in our lives?”

(Galstad 1984)

This paper is a quasi-exegetical reflection from one Lutheran professor. The text: “We have become quite satisfied with the definitive and the scholastic to the exclusion of the meditative and the mystical.” What does this mean?

Galstad wants us to pay attention to the meditative and mystical, I think, as a remedy for our stoic, ostensibly Lutheran, dispassionate, “definitive and scholastic” mindset. Where is this scholastic mindset? Over the past two decades I have made a point of asking colleagues in faculty meetings and conferences, “Is our human nature essentially corrupt?” Almost without exception, Lutheran faculty members (grade school, high school, college – and more than a few pastors) answer “Yes, of course.”

When I go on to explain that “essential” means “in our very being and nature,” the response is, “Okay, so ...” I try to follow this with the explanation that the articles of creation and especially our Lutheran Christology explain that it is heterodox wrong to say that humans are essentially corrupt (see my third appendix). This is generally met with counter arguments drawn from liturgy snippets or sermon bytes.

Now, human persons are not essentially corrupt; the first article in our Formula of Concord and countless passages on Christology in the Confessions demonstrate this. When we were installed into our respective teaching calls we each promised to teach in line with the Lutheran Confessions. Had we read those Confessions prior to that promise? If we gave ourselves a mental “Incomplete” at the time of that promise, have we been reading them since then? Are we reading, marking, learning and incorporating the
Confessions into our professing? Are we of one confessional mind?

I do not intend for one minute that we live and teach as intellectual Amish. We are teaching students and serving one another in love after the Enlightenment, after Kant and Mills and Darwin and Einstein, in an age when we kill our own children by the millions and lobby to grant civil rights to monkeys. But what Galstad refers to as “the scholastic” is the deep structure of our Lutheran being. Prior to the questions of carrying Lutheran colleges into the twenty-first century technologically or programmatically we need to define and embody what it means to be Lutheran professors. Communion precedes communication.

A unique complication for church bodies and colleges such as ours which prize orthodoxy is that we are susceptible to the dogma “once orthodox, always orthodox.” This is not sound doctrine; this is an indicator of an illiteracy -- or, more precisely: an indicator of Lutheran a-literacy. Indicators of our current confessional a-literacy include not merely expressed misunderstandings regarding our own nature and regarding the two natures in Christ, and other instances of doctrinal misunderstandings in print and in conferences and conversations, but the unwillingness to address these misunderstandings in a confessional mode.

When the syntax of our work together in synods or in faculties starts to unravel, check the grammar. Is it scholastic, confessional, Lutheran?

We cannot be Lutheran professors with compassionate minds if we do not have a Lutheran mindset. The “affect” in my subtitle, “Becoming Affective Lutheran Professors,” is not simply an emotional dimension, a sine qua non for learner-centered teaching which we import from another source to revivify our teaching manners; affect is related to mood. In my understanding, emotions (significant though they are in themselves) are an ephemeral, on-the-surface aspect of our make-up whereas mood is long-term and soul-deep. When Soren Kierkegaard speaks of absurdity or Martin Heidegger writes about Angst or Jean-Paul Sartre portrays nausea they are referring to the human mood or disposition – to what we know, deep down, even before we start to think about it. To my way of thought, then, the biblical proclamation witnesses to our human mood (or, more technically, Word and Sacrament deliver the Gospel of Jesus, which is a perfect fit to the nostalgia of our mood, where “mood” is our "feeling of being away from home") and converts it. The Gospel is affective, making us affective professors. Perhaps you would prefer to speak of “attitude” rather than mood, but listening to my teenage children and my undergraduates over the past few years leads me to suggest that “attitude” may have equated with “mood” forty years ago, but today “attitude” is blowing the ballast tanks and floating up toward surface emotions. Now let me explain why I’m working to get a bead on these distinctions.

In our article Galstad cites Edmund Reim’s caution against resisting liberalism with rigorism and legalism. Reim explains, “Such a false attitude can exist only at the expense of the Gospel.” I’m assuming that Reim (and Galstad) are using “attitude” in essentially the same sense as my understanding of “mood.” I want to argue that a professor cannot have a false attitude. In other words, since our mood is what we know and hold to deep down, our mood (archaic: “attitude”) cannot be false or pseudo. Our mood is our mood. Those Lutheran professors who were unconcerned for John and Darlene and their other students were acting in concord with their (unregenerated) mood.

What mood are we in? Better: what mood is in us? Having a compassionate mind and becoming affective Lutheran professors – this goes beneath the level of behavior modification and the effervescence of personal style. It presupposes much more than our expertise within our respective disciplines or our commitment to the art of teaching. It goes beyond our formal theology, to the thought and feeling and volition that establish the synaptic pathways in our souls. In Philippians 2, the classical spot for our Christology, St. Paul begins by writing, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus ...” One translation (Wilson’s) renders the Greek word here, phroneo, as “disposition.” The admonition, I would submit, is not that we should use the example of Christ to become more humble people, or more exalted people. The admonition is to be in active communion with Christ.
Johann Kepler once wrote, “Science is thinking God’s thoughts after Him.” As human creatures we cannot avoid understanding the universe theologically (in the weakest sense of having a world view or having a metaphysic); that is, in terms of an organizing principle. As new Adams and Eves in Christ we cannot help understanding our roles in the universe Christ-ly; that is, in terms of Christ -- where Christ is even more than our efficient and final cause, where He is the ever-present ground of who we are and what we do, where Christ is the co-actor in our actions, spiritual and physical. In Him we live and move and have our vocation.

“It is not possible to have a vigorous, informed, and committed Christianity that is not born of knowledge of the naked Word, of struggle, of prayer, of agony and perhaps even despair at times – of decision, of surrender (those are good words!), of having come to grips individually with the facts and truths as they stand there in revelation” (Galstad)! The Philippian admonition is “Don’t be displaced from this disposition! Keep deepening the I-am-in-communion-with-Christ mood!”

2. Compassion in the Plural

There’s more. Paul’s apostolic admonition into this Christian disposition is in the plural. Since we have been inhaling autonomy in many parts-per-million, as it has been a constituent part of our intellectual and cultural atmosphere for the entire modern period, we tend to hear the “you’s” in God’s Word as singular when in fact most often the biblical you’s are “y’all’s.” Most of the biblical admonitions are college admonitions, admonitions to collect, to congregate around the means of grace with each other. This, according to our shared Confessions is how we know where Christ’s church is. The compassionate mind of the Lutheran professor is the disposition toward Christ, initiated and maintained through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. It follows from this that the compassionate mind of the Lutheran professor is a disposition or mood toward collegiality, a love for colleagues and students in, with and under Christ Himself. So, the compassionate mind is a mood, disposition or attitude created and maintained by the Gospel. How does the compassionate mind relate to students and fellow faculty in day-to-day ways? Galstad: “Method is not a thing of personal style and tact. It is a thing of deep understanding and insight.” I would prefer to say that our method, the way we live out our mood, is a thing of deep understanding and oversight. In his essay “The Weight of Glory” C.S. Lewis says that none of us have ever met a mortal human being. Institutions and cultures are mortal; human beings are not. Every person with whom we interact, including students and faculty and colleagues from other institutions, will one day be an everlasting horror or an eternal glory. This is not an inspirational fiction. Jesus Himself tells us that He will tell us, “Whatever you have done for the least of these you have done for Me.” This is the stuff of our eschatological final exam. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes about the “decent nudity” of the human face; but -- illumined by Jesus and His words -- we could meditate on the mystical “pious nudity” of every face we face. This is not theological fiction. None of us has ever met a person for whom Jesus did not become incarnate, suffer, die and rise from death.

When we become mindful that our mind is not being compassionate toward the immortals with whom we work, it is time to mind the Hauptartikel. Halfway through the twentieth century Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in The Cost of Discipleship that the great danger of our age is cheap grace. In Lutheranism after Luther, and notably in our century, as Bonhoeffer says, “The justification of the sinner degenerated into the justification of sin and the world. Costly grace was turned into cheap grace without discipleship.” Luther saw the Gospel de profundis, from the depths of despair and as one who knew that he was being called to leave everything and follow Jesus. He always looked upon grace as the answer to a sum, but an answer which had been arrived at by God, not by man. But then his followers changed the “answer” into the data for a calculation of their own. That was the root of the trouble. If grace is God’s answer, the gift of Christian life, then we cannot for a moment dispense with following Christ. But if grace is the data for my Christian life, it means that I set out to live the Christian life in the world with all my sins justified beforehand. I can go and sin as much as I like, and rely on this grace to forgive me, for after all, the
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world is justified in principle by grace. I can therefore cling to my bourgeois secular existence, and remain as I was before, but with the added assurance that the grace of God will cover me. It is under this kind of “grace” that the world has been made “Christian,” but at the cost of secularizing the Christian religion as never before. ... Grace as the data for our calculations means grace at the cheapest price, but grace as the answer to the sum means costly grace. It is terrifying to realize what use can be made of a genuine evangelical doctrine. In both cases we have the identical formula – “justification by grace alone.” Yet the misuse of the formula leads to the complete destruction of its very essence.

This means that, for Lutherans, we can commit this sin of omission: we can sin by referring to “justification by grace alone” while simultaneously omitting justification and Christ. Bonhoeffer’s analysis is, to my mind, the way to parse Galstad when he urges orthodox Lutherans above all to take heed lest they fall, and explains, “The grace of God suggests a way to abuse it.”

This leads me to amplify a quiet Galstadian point of particular import for us who serve Christ and church as Lutheran professors. We need to respect and to cultivate those among us with prophetic gifts, those with the deep theological maturity to be not only leaders, but prophetic voices in our midst. Martin Galstad served (and, through his writings, still serves) as a Lutheran gadfly, a pastor and observer who has wakened a number of us Lutheran professors from their dogmatic slumbers. It is the nature of gadflies to sting, just as it is the nature of prophets to afflict the comfortably orthodox. Colleges, just like church bodies, need gadflies so that they do not fall into a comfortable, complacent “orthodoxy,” lacking in orthopraxy and compassion.

Now clearly, we cannot be creating prophets by committee! But we can, on the Acts 14:22 principle, welcome God’s providence in turbulence. This may be a clue for the indispensable character of our discussions today and in the future that God grants our colleges and church bodies. In other churchly venues the time is short (60 minutes on Sunday, an hour in-