

AUSTRALIAN CONFERENCE ON LUTHERAN EDUCATION

POSITION PAPER – Malcolm Bartsch

The old content for a new context: Lutheran theological perspectives for the future of Australian Lutheran school education.

1. Old wine in new bottles

In the gospels, Jesus advises (Mat 9:17): 'Don't put new wine into old wineskins because the skins will burst, the wine will run out, and the skins will be ruined'. Changing the image slightly, what we are considering in this paper is the opposite of what Jesus says – putting old wine into new wineskins – or rather in our era, putting old wine into new bottles. And that doesn't have the same dire consequences. In fact, taking a fine wine out of its cask and filling it into new bottles is necessary for the final stages of preparation of the wine for consumption.

Theology is like a fine vintage wine which slowly improves with age. But unlike the investor who buys a bottle of Grange Hermitage only to store it away in the hope that it will appreciate significantly in value, theology needs to be enjoyed and savored and worked with if it is to have its impact on its context. It's no good bottling up theology and preserving it for posterity. Theology must interact with its context. And theology must be lived.

An American Lutheran theologian, Carl Braaten, argues in this way (1983: ix-x);

Christian theology is always a human attempt to understand the Christian faith in light of our knowledge of its historical origins and the challenges of the contemporary period . . . The old *content* of faith – the same yesterday, today, and forevermore – is always received under the conditions of a new *context* of life; both content and context are taken up in the process of theological reflection.

What we will be considering in this paper is the interaction of content and context. The content will be the insights of Lutheran theology. The context will be Australian Lutheran school education. While the content depends on the revelation of God through God's word in the Bible and in that sense is determined by that revelation, the context demands that we reconsider the way in which that content is expressed so that a dialogue is established and maintained between theology and education. That dialogue can help to provide future directions for Australian Lutheran school education as the content of faith, based on Scripture, expresses itself in the new contexts of Lutheran schools in the ministry and mission of the church in the twenty first century.

2. A value base for Australian Lutheran school education

Education is a value-laden process. It cannot be value free. Ultimately a choice has to be made as to what set of beliefs and values will inform the particular educational enterprise. Since education in its fullest sense involves the whole person for the whole of life, some world-view or philosophy of life arising out of a belief and value system is

assumed, either implicitly or explicitly, in the education process. Even where the intention is to have a so-called 'value free' curriculum in government schools, 'values for life are propagated by default' (Hill 1991:3). Neutrality in education is a myth and there is a danger of inappropriate values being reinforced where values education is not planned for consciously.

For Lutheran schools, shared beliefs and values will not be provided simply by the examination of the current Australian social context and the attempt to distil some common vision for education and schools from values within that context. The values on which Lutheran schools are based find their origin and support in the revelation of God in Scripture. The starting point, then, for a Lutheran approach to schooling is theological.

3. The dialogue of theology and education

If theology is going to engage in dialogue with education, then theology needs to be expressed in such a way that it can be understood and accepted by educators. There are biblical insights and concepts which are fundamental to any approach to education which proceeds from a scriptural base. While from a Christian perspective these theological truths cannot change because they are based on the revelation of God through God's word in the Bible, the formulation of these theological expressions must communicate with the present educational scenario. This may mean taking well-used theological concepts, words and phrases, some of which may presently be little more than rhetoric, and expressing them in terminology and images which may be more immediately comprehensible to current students, parents and teachers. It may also require the abandoning of some of the classical language of theology and engaging in a potentially hazardous activity of restating theological truths in new forms of language and symbols which are more accessible to the educational community. Even if there may be a danger of being misunderstood in such an activity, language which is misunderstood will still promote dialogue whereas dialogue will soon grind to a halt if theological concepts are not understood at all.

The other side of this challenge of dialogue between theology and education is to ensure that education is sufficiently open to hearing the questions addressed to it by theology. Theology needs to be analysing, interpreting and responding to issues which arise in the current educational scene. Theology has critical questions to address to education, and in a pluralist society, this is also valid from within a particular theological tradition. This leads to the process of 'doing theology' as it relates to education, allowing people 'to reflect about their professional work in the light of their faith' (Hull 1977:19).

In engaging in this conversation, both theology and education need to ensure that they remain open to the other and do not become defensive or closed. Both the theologian and the educator will cooperate in an 'attitude of certain uncertainties, trusting to new truth by learning from each other, yet also gratefully remembering the trustworthy truth that he (sic) has already experienced' (Nipkow 1979:10).

In carrying on this dialogue with education, Lutheran theology creates space in which dialogue can occur by recognising the roles in the discussion of both human reason and God's revelation and also by discriminating between the responsibilities of the left and right hand 'kingdoms' in respect to education. Lutheran theology affirms the use of human reason and research in its discussion with education while at the same time maintaining the distinctive authority of particular insights which come to the dialogue

from revelation. As this dialogue proceeds, both theology and education are challenged to remain open to the questions raised by the other, and to evaluate the insights presented by the other, while seeking to retain what is significant from past dialogues.

4. The challenge to education from Lutheran theology

As education seeks to come to terms with its current context, theology provides important insights for educational issues such as understanding the human individual, epistemology, methodology, curriculum content and behavior management. Theology also attempts to show the limits of human reason so that reason remains true to God's revelation and is bound by that revelation while at the same time being free to explore fully and creatively within the freedom provided by that revelation. Thus theology 'shows up the limits of human reason, preserves it from idolatry and arrogance (*hybris*), but also from despair and resignation' (Sturm 1983:14).

While Lutheran theology sees education as the responsibility of parents and the state, education is also seen as one of the good gifts of God as creator. This means that in the dialogue of theology and education, agreement can be reached through that dialogue on many issues related to education. However, not all educational concepts are acceptable, for example those that originate from a secular humanist viewpoint which put human beings in the place of God. Theology has the responsibility to indicate boundaries for the dialogue with education consistent with its understanding of God's revelation. However, theology must be careful not to claim particular insights for education where they have not been given through God's revelation or are not consistent with that revelation. Theology also needs to examine the rhetoric of education and to challenge educational concepts and ideas to ensure that theological insights are included in educational discussion and that decisions in relation to education and schooling are therefore not made without adequate theological reflection. In doing this theology can also assist education to see itself as one of God's good gifts and as part of God's continuing creation in the world.

5. Some issues for dialogue in Australian Lutheran school education

- In contrast to secular humanist views, Lutheran theology proposes a realistic biblical anthropology which sees the individual as 'saint and sinner', taking seriously the nature of human beings as 'sinner', but also proclaiming the value of each individual person, created by God, redeemed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and sanctified through the work of the Holy Spirit. Lutheran schools need to reflect this anthropology clearly in their policies and practices, particularly, too, in their behavior management policies.
- In the face of an education system which promotes the success of the individual and the importance of self, Lutheran schools need to offer an approach motivated by theology of the cross which challenges the individual to develop God-given abilities to the fullest extent in order to serve church and society as effectively as possible. In this scenario, how does the Lutheran school define 'success'?
- How does the Lutheran school express the reality of sin in language which is relevant to and clearly understood by students? In what ways can the Lutheran school help students to accept responsibility for their own actions?

- In a post-modern scenario where values are seen as relative, absolute values based on God's revelation in Scripture present an alternate perspective which challenges the dominant culture, and which requires Lutheran schools to examine how they operate with absolutes. How does the Lutheran school provide a counter-cultural approach?
- What aspects of ecclesiology (the theology of the nature and function of the church) are critical in the consideration of the worship life of the Lutheran school? Can the school be regarded as a congregation? Are there forms and structures which are necessary for a local expression of the Body of Christ?
- What is the role of catechesis (the formal instruction of the committed Christian student in the content of faith) in the Lutheran school? How does this relate to faith formation?
- In providing a rationale in Lutheran schools for 'special education' and also education for the so-called 'gifted and talented', what theological insights are relevant?
- Education is viewed more and more in the language and concepts of business as a commodity to be traded between the school under its chief executive officer (who used to be called a headmaster or a headmistress) and its clients or customers (who used to be called students and parents). From an economic rationalist perspective, education is measured in terms of outcomes and performance indicators. What challenges does theology bring to these developments?
- How do Lutheran schools deal with the theology of reconciliation in the context of the current discussion of reconciliation as a social justice issue?
- In the present 'information age' which has impacted so heavily on schools and which places its emphasis on the almost indiscriminate gathering of undifferentiated data, also through electronic channels like the World Wide Web, how are students challenged to integrate that information into what the Bible calls 'wisdom'? Are we helping our students to develop a consistent world view into which they can incorporate their experiences and which recognises that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10)?

6. The challenge for Australian Lutheran school education

As Australian Lutheran educational institutions respond to various pressures and changes within society and to the expectations of students, parents, the state and the church, Lutheran educators must be certain of why they continue to promote and support a distinctive educational system within the Australian educational scene. They need to be able to articulate clearly their educational rationale and purpose. In doing this, Lutheran theology must remain an active participant in the dialogue with education so that a solid foundation can be maintained for a vibrant and effective ministry to the church and the world through Australian Lutheran educational institutions.

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