

Why a Lutheran School?

Education and Theology in Dialogue

Malcolm I Bartsch

[Excerpt p118-122]

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD - ASPECTS OF THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Viewed from the perspective of theology of the cross, the Lutheran school aims to prepare its students for service in the world, and, for those who are Christians, in the church - for service in both the left and right hand 'kingdoms'. However, this attitude of service, appropriate for all students in Lutheran schools, and consistent with the Lutheran understanding of theology of the cross, is not easy to develop and maintain in the current social climate.

1. **Fostering an attitude in Lutheran schools consistent with theology of the cross**

For many Australians today, St Paul's description in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:21-25) is accurate: God's wisdom does seem to be 'foolishness' and a 'stumbling block', particularly the message of theology of the cross. The message of 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:2) is not one which many people are ready to hear.

And this holds true, too, for the educational scene. The very well developed 'success' mentality which seems to motivate so much of what happens in schools, does not fit at all comfortably with a God who reveals himself through suffering and death. How can a school which sees itself based on Christian teachings reconcile demands for popularity and success for its program with a God whose 'power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12:9) and whose greatest victory was through crucifixion?

Thomas Groome (1996: 116) comments on the Catholic perspective in the following way:

Catholic education is often counter-cultural to the mores of rugged individualism, self-

sufficiency, and social indifference that permeate western society. It will socialize its students to care about and contribute to the common good through its own ethos of 'right relationship' and social consciousness, through its operative values of peace and justice, and by credible concern for the marginalized and suffering of society. Its explicit curriculum will teach for such 'right relationship' and 'common good' by allowing this ethic to permeate its formal content, and more effectively, perhaps, by its very style of teaching.

The challenge Groome presents, also for Lutheran schools, is how to develop within the school the ethos which will promote the attitudes of service he describes, and which Lutheran schools would see as consistent with theology of the cross. Some specific aspects of this will now be considered.

The role of the teacher in promoting an attitude of service

Janetzki points out the vital factor of the example of teachers in developing an attitude of service within the school. He writes (1985: 48), 'If we teachers intend to inspire our students toward servanthood, we must assume the role of servant to our students'. Janetzki (1985: 49) emphasises the importance of 'incarnational teaching – doing on the level of reality what we are saying in words'.

If teachers are to play this role in Lutheran schools, care needs to be taken in appointing teachers and in their professional development. As argued earlier, teachers in Lutheran schools need to be able to integrate their own personal faith with their teaching and other activities within the school. They provide an important role model for their students.

Promotion of Lutheran schools on the basis of 'success'

The promotion of an attitude of service, consistent with the Lutheran understanding of theology of the cross, challenges the way in which some Lutheran schools promote themselves on the basis of their 'success'. This is particularly so as Lutheran schools compete with other private schools for enrolments. Lutheran schools are promoted on the basis of perceived 'success' in their academic results, as well as various programs, including the sport program, music program, extracurricular program, technology program, and even the pastoral care program. Some schools do mention the development of an attitude of service as an important aspect of their curriculum. However, promotional materials for some Lutheran schools, particularly at the secondary level, seem to reflect a theology of glory, rather than theology of the cross.

Related to this promotion of schools through a 'success' mentality is the recognition of 'success' within the school program. For example, what does the Lutheran school celebrate? In school assemblies, school publications, end of year functions and other public occasions, which students are singled out for special recognition and what does this say about the values of the school? If the school gives awards or prizes to students, for what are they given? Often it may appear that it is students who are particularly gifted in the academic, sporting and artistic fields who receive affirmation while the somewhat less gifted are overlooked even though they may be making greater efforts to use the gifts which they do have. Schools often do provide some recognition for service to the school and the community, but often there is an interesting difference between those chosen by the school for recognition in this way and those who would be chosen by the students themselves. It may also be relevant in this context to observe what impression is given of the Lutheran school to the visitor sitting in the school reception area. The position of trophy cupboards or honour rolls and the information they contain may be significant in giving an indication of what the Lutheran school values in its community.

Another issue for consideration in respect to a 'success' orientation is the student's report. This is a significant communication with parents and students, and reflects what the Lutheran school sees as important for the student. What things are reported, and the manner in which they are reported, need to be consistent with theology of the cross, rather than promote a theology of glory. For example, do student reports show that the student is appreciated as an individual in the school community, and that examples of care and service are recognised in the Lutheran school?

As Lutheran schools continue to wrestle with ways to promote themselves and attract enrolments while helping students develop an attitude of service, an understanding of theology of the cross provides a critical lens through which to evaluate the school and its programs. Guarding against a theology of glory and its emphasis on 'success' is crucial for Lutheran schools if they are to function in a way which is consistent with Lutheran confessional theology.

An enrolment policy and practice which is inclusive

For a Lutheran school to be operating on the basis of theology of the cross, its enrolment policy and practice need to be, and be seen to be, inclusive. This means that Lutheran schools are open for groups such as the educationally disadvantaged,

the socially marginalised, and the financially poor. How this relates to practices such as the awarding of academic, sporting, music, and other types of scholarships to attract the so-called 'gifted' students, needs careful justification. Unless students perceive that the Lutheran school operates from a servant mentality, they will be quick to regard as hypocritical any rhetoric relating to the importance of service in the community. Perhaps the Australian Lutheran school system should be challenged to provide educational services in disadvantaged areas, rather than to try to appeal to parents who are financially secure enough to afford the school fees. However, Green (1995: 25), responding to similar concerns in Australian Catholic schools, raises the practical issue of how schools can 'afford to make a 'preferential option for the poor' without jeopardising their own survival as educational institutions'. While most Lutheran schools have some policy of fee reduction for 'needy' families, such families will often not even apply to the schools because of financial concerns. These concerns apply not only to the school fees themselves, but the additional costs for uniforms, excursions, extra curricular activities and the like.

Using appropriate methodologies to foster cooperation and service

In order to promote attitudes consistent with the Lutheran understanding of theology of the cross, Lutheran schools need to be aware of the role played by teaching methodologies in the formation of a school ethos. Dealing with a similar concern for Catholic schools, Thomas Groome (1996: 116) sees as critical,

a pedagogy grounded in relationship, and marked by participation, by conversation, and by cooperation. Teaching styles that reflect domination, passivity, monologue, and competition would seem antithetical to this communal commitment. And formation in social consciousness calls for teaching styles that encourage critical reflection and questioning of the social/political context, that nurture creative imagination about what can and should be done in the public arena. Stated negatively, if a school does not challenge and encourage its students to oppose racism, sexism, militarism, ageism, and all other such 'isms' that bedevil our society and world, its education is not Catholic.

Groome's concerns need to be examined by Lutheran schools, as they evaluate their methods and processes on the basis of theology of the cross, to ensure that an appropriate school climate is being developed. Instructive here, too, is the

vision of interaction given by St Paul to the Colossian Christians. While the Lutheran school classroom contains students who are members of the body of Christ and those who are not, in how far can the classroom reflect St Paul's vision (Col 3: 12-17)?

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Developing an awareness of suffering in the world and identifying with the weak and vulnerable

As already pointed out earlier, an attempt to operate a Lutheran school on the basis of theology of the cross leads the school into a position which can often be seen as counter-cultural. One aspect of this is the attempt to develop within the Lutheran school an awareness of suffering within the school community and beyond. Braaten (1983: 137) suggests that 'the church must establish in its schools centers of research in order to pioneer social sensitivity to new forms of oppression and to put the spotlight of compassion on the invisible victims'.

From the perspective of theology of the cross, the poor, the hurt, the broken, whether through their own actions, or as a result of other individuals, or because of the political and economic systems under which they live, are the people with whom Christ suffers and with whom he calls his followers to suffer. Lutheran confessional theology knows of no easy solutions for this suffering, and care will be necessary when dealing with situations of suffering, not to 'minimize or even trivialize the actuality of human suffering, and so end up with religious 'answers' which are premature and shallow' (Strelan 1988: 7). While in the Lutheran school itself there will be numerous examples of hurt and suffering which will need to be supported carefully and empathetically, the school also needs to explore avenues which take students and staff out of their own particular environment and

make them more conscious of the plight of others in various parts of Australia and the world. Of particular current concern in Australia is also the need for reconciliation with aboriginal Australians.

2. Striving for 'excellence' in education on the basis of theology of the cross

Striving for excellence in education could well become an exercise in theology of glory if the emphasis is placed incorrectly on the success of the individuals involved. However, theology of the cross means that a Lutheran school will strive for excellence in all that it does. As Strelan argues (1988: 6-7):

It will want the best academic program it can offer with the resources at its disposal; the best teaching staff: fully competent, dedicated, and committed to excellence in the classroom; it will want the facilities necessary to offer a quality education; the best co-curricular and extra-curricular programs; it will want to be innovative, creative, a leader in education. Why? Why the striving for excellence in all things? Because Jesus is Lord. This is his world, despite all the attempts to demonize it, and we want to prepare men and women to take a responsible place in this world, and so to magnify and glorify the Name of their Lord.

The reason why the Lutheran school strives for excellence is crucial here. If the school is doing it for 'selfish, self-glorifying reasons', producing 'selfish, self-centred self-glorifying graduates' (Strelan 1988: 7), then it is working from a wrong perspective - a theology of glory. However, if the Lutheran school is helping students to develop as fully as possible the gifts and abilities which God has given them with the purpose of serving Christ through serving the people whom God has created and for whom Christ has died, then the school is engendering a spirit of love and service from the perspective of theology of the cross.

It is also crucial to recognise that while the Lutheran school will strive for excellence, this will mean different things for different people. The varying abilities of students in the school community are critical. Excellence will therefore be seen in terms of 'the best of which an individual is capable'. Individual differences are to be respected and all students affirmed within the Lutheran school community. In this regard, aspects of theology of the cross such as identifying with the strugglers, showing compassion for the suffering, supporting the weak, are all vital. Lutheran schools need to be

concerned not only for the 'average' student, not only for the 'gifted and talented', but particularly also for the disadvantaged and the 'battler'.

Excerpt from Why a Lutheran School, Bartsch, M p 119-122

Explore the mystery!

The way of the cross that flows from this mystery is often hard to follow. Share your experiences of trying to walk this way and the subtle temptation in educational contexts to walk the way of glory instead. How is the way of the cross connected with having a conscience about social justice?