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Response to Jean Stairs

Lawrence W. Denef

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I am not an academic; I am neither on the faculty or staff of a seminary or university nor in the administration. I am a church bureaucrat, one who attempts to create a relationship between the church and its theological institutions that will enable the church to carry out its ministry in the contemporary world, provided with capable, courageous and faithful leaders. I also happen to be a Lutheran. Perhaps that is why what triggered me in Dr. Stairs' presentation was the reference to Luther. In speaking of "A Shifting Epistemology", Dr. Stairs said:

Whether one wishes to borrow the slogan of the young Marx, "the relentless criticism of everything that exists", or use the more explicitly theological one of the young Luther, "crux probat omnia" ("the cross probes all things"), the outcome is the same. In this decade and beyond, it is essential to supply adequate tools for racial, cultural and economic analysis, and for women to do analysis of the social and political reality in which they live.

"The cross probes all things." We Lutherans love our "theology of the cross". We proclaim it all the time, but we seldom turn it on ourselves; we seldom let it probe all things, particularly our systems and approaches to theological education. But if we are ever to make good on the promise of a new image of theological education, which, if Dr. Stairs is right, we have here and there begun to grasp, we must engage in an assessment of the old image of theological education, the image which is still very much in vogue.

"The superiority of Christianity," says Tillich, "lies in its witnessing against itself..in the name of the Christ." Self-criticism is not the end in itself; but it is a necessary means to

the end, namely, that the church might really become what it is to be, might really approximate what it announces, might really pursue what is possible. God, in the words of Paul Lehmann, is "at work in the world, making and keeping human life human". And therefore God will not leave intact anything that dehumanizes humanity, especially its own outmoded world views. And surely this holds true for our restrictive attachments, antiquarian longings, and confining relationships within theological education. "The cross probes all things!"

The major culprit inhibiting the quest for a new, more inclusive vision of theological education has begun to be identified. In his recent publication, *Texts Under Negotiation*, Walter Brueggemann indicts Descartes and calls in evidence the feminist critique of Susan Bordo and the equally provocative study by Stephen Toulmin.

Susan Bordo maintains that Descartes developed his philosophical reflections in an attempt to compensate for the collapse of the medieval world. Over and against the loss of his familiar home—his "mother" if you will—he fashioned a new "interiority" which permitted the self to generate a new certitude, and thus the self became the absolute point of reference. As a consequence, the outcomes of the work of Descartes include:

* "A new model of knowledge grounded in objectivity, and capable of providing a new epistemological security to replace that which was lost in the dissolution of the Medieval world-view."

* The pursuit of "pure reason", free from every contingency, revolved around "the image of purity", which meant escaping from all forms of body and earth into the purity of the mind.

* The body and earth as the producers of life thus were seen as peculiarly feminine and material. So Bordo can speak of the "Cartesian masculinization of thought and flight from the feminine".¹

Stephen Toulmin proceeds to identify the kinds of knowledge that emerged as real knowledge based on Descartes' concentration on "objectivity". He says there are four moves that need to be reversed:

* a move from oral to *written*, so that what is reliable is what is written;

* a move from the particular to the *universal*, so that the real truth is what is true everywhere;

* a move from local to *general*, so that real truth had to be the same from locale to locale; and

* a move from the timely to the *timeless*, so that the real is the unchanging.²

There is little doubt that these Cartesian influences—the superiority of mind over body, objectivity, purity and certitude—along with the concomitant shifts to the written, the universal, the general, and the timeless—have had a massive and lasting impact on the church. “I submit,” says Brueggemann, “that this project that began in anxiety in the seventeenth century is still very much with us. It has very much determined the church’s mode of certitude and its collusion in domination in this most masculine world offered by science.”³

The church can no longer afford to speak in the mode of those who, like Descartes, reverse the incarnational current of the biblical gospel—a gospel that immerses God deep in the flesh and blood of being human. Luther’s words are as appropriate today as they ever were: “God does not allow us to find him in our own thoughts. If we could do this we would not need God. But because we need God, he has designated a place and a person—showing us where and in what way he ought to be found.”⁴ For Luther, the cross becomes the framework for our understanding; the crucified one becomes the foundation for epistemology.

Taking Brueggemann’s lead, I suggest there are at least two broader areas of theological education itself that call for our scrutiny, or, to use Luther’s phrase, that need to be “probed by the cross”.

First is the widespread separation of the “professional” from the personal, accompanied by the propensity for management, organization, and specialization. The basic model for theological education hasn’t changed much since the early 19th century. Organized around a curriculum of core courses, each with its specialized language and methodology, seminaries have adopted the university model of education which emphasizes scholarship. The only significant modification in the mould came early in this century with the introduction of a few so-called “practical” courses, but the three “academic” areas—scripture, theology and church history—continue to maintain

their prominence and the separation between the practical and academic remains in force.

In this model, there is little recognition of the resources students bring to the process. The perspectives of racial minorities, the poor, and of women are seen as peripheral or totally excluded. And, to the consternation of persons like myself, more and more students choose to continue the cycle of professionalism by entering graduate school rather than face the challenges of congregational ministry. Has professionalism become a quasi-religion? Could it be that in our quest for professionalism we have lost "the connection between knowledge and the zest for life" (Whitehead)? between theological education and the church's mission in the real world?

Second is the tendency to maintain "purity" at the expense of poetry. The concept of purity is stronger than most realize. Lutherans know it well. We have always had among us those who emphasized purity over poetry, conformity in doctrine and practice over the vitality, purpose, and reality of the universe directly lived. But Lutherans are not alone in drawing divisions and making distinctions. Nor are doctrinal distinctions the only ones drawn. Most insidious of all are distinctions that involve the description of one's understanding of self and others, particularly when these distinctions involve the exclusion or inclusion of "others" because of race, class or sexuality.

I prefer contrasting purity with poetry for the same reason Brueggemann contrasts the "knowing of settled certitudes" with the "actual work of imagination".⁵ Poetry always moves beyond settled reality, where even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos. Poetry adds perspective; it allows us to see and say things in new and different ways. And theological education desperately needs the influx of new perspectives. In this regard, I find Dr. Stairs' analysis particularly salient. But again I would underscore the significance of the cross. To share in the death of Christ is not to be party to a paper transaction, but to live in a "new creation" in which the "egalitarian ethos of oneness in Christ" is affirmed.⁶

"*Crux probat omnia.*" Dr. Stairs, thank you for your intriguing analysis of the Canadian context for theological education, for the compelling hope that we can achieve a new more inclusive paradigm for theological education. And, of course, thank you for the Luther quote.

Notes

- ¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 4.
- ² Ibid. 5.
- ³ Ibid. 6.
- ⁴ Cited in Carl E. Braaten, *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 6.
- ⁵ Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 13.
- ⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 218.