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A Rhetorical Approach to Theological Education: Assessing an Attempt to Re-Vision a Curriculum

Donald Juel and Patrick Keifert

Over the superbowl weekend in January of 1991, the two of us co-authored a paper for the faculty of Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota) entitled "A Rhetorical Approach to Theological Education." The paper served as the basis of a grant proposal submitted to the Lilly Endowment in the spring of the same year requesting funding for a three-year curriculum revisioning process. The energy for the project was not generated solely by the grant. Widespread restiveness with the existing curriculum, and with the strategy for training clergy that it implied, had led to preliminary conversations among faculty groups during the previous year and a half. A committee and a director had been appointed to oversee a thorough revision of the curriculum. Our proposal represented an argument for a particular direction we were commending to the faculty. The grant provided an additional incentive for generating the tremendous energy the conversations required over the next three years.

The substance of the proposal arose from three sources: more than a decade of experience in a co-taught course, entitled "Meaning and Truth: The Uses of Scripture in Pastoral Ministry"; participation in the last stages of the ATS study of theological education;¹ and research done in mainline

¹See the work of David Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1993); and *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School?* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

congregations. We became convinced that the difficulties encountered in training pastors for contemporary congregations that we had experienced in our own setting were not simply local; these difficulties arise from major cultural shifts and deep intellectual traditions. Re-imagining theological education requires attention to the changes. Proposals must be faithful to normative traditions but appropriate to the new setting.

We chose to cast our proposal in terms of classical “rhetorical” categories. We did so fully aware that “rhetoric” is regarded with at least as much suspicion today as it was in ancient philosophical circles. Colleagues advised us to find a category with less baggage in a culture where “rhetorical” connotes ornament and disregard for truth. Exploring that suspicion, however, has proved to be one of the more fruitful aspects of our conversations; the essence of the present volume reinforces this discovery. The desire for something more substantial and grounded than “persuasion” reveals what Richard Bernstein calls the “Cartesian Anxiety,” a yearning for a clear and distinct idea or experientially based foundation that will serve as an “Archimedean point.”² That desire, articulated by Descartes in his *Meditations*, has driven a culture into imagining that truth is either available to us in objective fashion or that we are “awash in a sea of relativity.” With Bernstein, we wanted to propose an alternative to such a view in a way that is more appropriate to the Christian tradition and offers more promise of shaping effective pastoral practice.

Rhetoric has a noble history in the educational traditions of Western culture. It was the last of the three subjects (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) necessary in the training of public *leaders*. “Leadership” had become an important term in the curricular project before we had made our proposal; at this point in our history, mainline churches seem to lack leadership that can help the church reconfigure itself for mission in a culture that is no longer favorably disposed to the public presence of the church. We proposed that rhetorical categories are precisely suited to the task of leadership preparation. “Christian rhetor” is a concept worth developing as an image for pastoral ministry.

Another reason for our choice of rhetorical categories was that rhetoric aims at persuasion, the goal of which is decision and action. A legitimate

²See Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 16–20.

criticism of research-based models of education is that they do not foster the ability to decide and to act. (We will return to this matter below.)

We were further disposed toward rhetorical categories because of their usefulness in contemporary biblical studies. While much of “rhetorical criticism” is enlisted in the task of locating the literature of the Bible in some distant past, study of biblical works as “persuasive” and attention to the various genres in which that persuasion is carried out have greater possibilities. That becomes clearer when the goal of biblical studies is the use of the scriptures in the practice of ministry. Attending to Aristotle’s “author/speech/audience” has proved an effective way to help pastors and teachers reflect on their own use of the scriptures with actual audiences.

The use of Scripture has provided an important entrée to the curricular discussion. The function of normative tradition within the wide variety of rhetorical activities in pastoral ministry, from preaching and teaching to pastoral care and moral deliberation, has always been a major feature within the curriculum at denominational seminaries. Not only for strategic reasons, but also out of fidelity to the tradition, “beginning with Scripture” has been an important way of initiating discussion. What is the Bible good for, and how will the scriptures be used? Dealing with *ēthos*, *logos*, and *pathos* is appropriate in regard to the canonical setting of the biblical works, in regard to the history of their interpretation in the church, and in regard to their present deployment in ministry. Teaching at a theological seminary with a high view of the scriptures, whose main interest is preparing pastors, we view our task as identifying and engendering those habits conducive to public leadership in which the Bible is a norm of conversations.

The initial grant proposal argued for a rhetorical approach to theological instruction. Reacting to the detailed findings of the ten-year study of theological education by the ATS and to a sense that fundamental assumptions could no longer be taken for granted, we argued that the category of persuasion would be best suited to our present situation. Appropriate to the proposal, we also argued that a rhetorical process involving the whole community was the best strategy for proceeding. Thus we began a conversation among a faculty of fifty-five with the intent of re-envisioning the curriculum and producing a new approach to pastoral education.

Learning through Failure

One of the first strategic matters was how to communicate our views to the faculty. Most of our colleagues were unaware that Lilly had funded

a proposal we had composed. Communicating the proposal to the faculty for discussion, evaluation, and possible action was made more difficult by our lack of any official status and the absence of a mandate from the faculty. We were, in effect, intruding into the process; colleagues had good reasons to be uncertain and even suspicious. Though some faculty members had expressed opinions, and lists had been drawn up, the faculty had come to no agreement about what the problems were to which our revisioning was directed — much less a way of addressing those problems. Such matters had to be argued and agreed upon. Finally, the variety of audiences within the faculty of fifty-five had to be taken seriously. In the process, the character of the presenters, of the presentation, and of the audience were all very much involved.

We decided to introduce our views to the faculty by way of a short essay and a presentation/demonstration. We constructed an exercise that began with a Bible study. We had previously led the faculty in a Bible study as a way into basic hermeneutical issues. The success of that endeavor, coupled with the privileged status of Scripture in the tradition, encouraged us to use the Bible study as a way into our curricular reflections. We chose the ending of Mark's Gospel as our text — for several reasons. Engagement with the ending had consistently energized interesting and productive theological discussions in the class that we had co-taught. And most important for the argument we wanted to make, the group would have to choose what to read as "the Bible." Modern translations do not make the decision about what to read as the ending of Mark's Gospel, even though the text-critical evidence is unequivocal. That we must participate in the decision about what we will read as scripture seemed a useful way into a proposal that takes seriously the erosion of so-called foundational elements in the tradition and faces squarely the inescapable need to make arguments to one another on the basis of which we must decide and act.

The faculty was divided into groups of six persons and given a list of four questions to be answered in 30 minutes, the first of which was, "What shall we read as the ending of Mark's Gospel?" We planned to gather the groups and move into our proposal on the tide of the conversation generated in the small groups. However, we had not anticipated what occurred.

As we moved from group to group, we noted a reticence on the part of non-biblical "experts" to discuss the text-critical issues involved in answering the first question. Shame was an important factor; people did not

want colleagues to know how little they recalled of the intricacies of textual criticism, so faculty were willing to leave such matters to the biblical experts. Bible professors, meanwhile, tended to rehearse all the textual evidence rather than make a quick decision for the group. This took far more time than anticipated. And when groups did begin to move toward answering the first question, someone would halt the process with a question like, "But hasn't the church traditionally read a Gospel of Mark with 20 verses in chapter 16? Doesn't tradition have some weight?" Further conversations were generated. They were interesting and enlightened, but they prevented groups from making any decisions. By the end of the thirty minutes, not one group had decided what to read as the ending of Mark's Gospel. There was no tide on which to launch the discussion of our paper and our rhetorical approach. We were unable to rescue the plenary conversation which foundered on the question of how to decide on an ending — or even the *need* to decide! The session ended with irritated faculty, confusion, and no clarity about what a "rhetorical approach" might entail.

We now recognize that our experience of that session highlights a major problem in seminary education. While pastors must have the courage to make decisions and act based on limited evidence, scholarship of the sort practiced among faculty operates under no such constraints. Text-critics amass evidence and make tentative arguments. Decisions must always be made in terms of probability. There will never be complete agreement even about how to read the evidence regarding the ending of Mark, despite the fact that it is a reasonably straightforward problem. The constraints come only with the need to publish Bibles, when deadlines are imposed by publishers and must be met.

Scholarship, in other words, operates within a radically different context from that of pastoral ministry. Pastors cannot afford the luxury of lengthy reviews of text-critical theories. Preparing Easter sermons allows only a few moments in which to evaluate alternative endings and make a decision about the most reasonable that will serve as the basis for a sermon. Seldom do they learn from their professors how to be courageous and wise in such a setting. More likely, they have learned to feel shame for not knowing enough. Rather than developing the capacity to learn from mistakes and to recuperate quickly, they may well learn to avoid making mistakes by avoiding decisions — or to rely on another authority or whim. In an environment that increasingly requires leadership and innovation

from clergy, we can no longer tolerate an educational system that regularly encourages the best students to move into doctoral programs — or to live with the sense that they are second-class theologians.

We might have anticipated such results from our process with the faculty and saved everyone much grief. Had we skipped the Bible study and moved into a discussion of a traditional academic paper, we might have gotten a hearing and critique of our proposal — for which there never was another opportunity. That we did not anticipate what occurred is an indication of how little sense we had of the distance between the kind of reflection appropriate to the practice of ministry and the scholarship in which theological faculty are trained in graduate programs. The experience suggests, in technical terms, how unrealistic it is to imagine a meeting of theory and practice — and how useful it may be to understand what Aristotle called practical reasoning (*phronēsis*) and its relationship to the formation of the imagination (*poiēsis*) in a theological context.

This inauspicious beginning gave way to a lively conversation that took place over the next three years. The mind of the faculty was formed largely through task forces and reports to the faculty, with occasional plenary sessions. We participated in some of the groups and did the rest of our work behind the scenes, serving as a “research team” with the project director. The topics of these specialized studies included such matters as the utility of narrative as a way of conceiving the first year (“story”) and what we mean by “mission,” the theme of the last year in the curriculum.

The most difficult phase of the project was the actual laying out of a program of study, including the design of specific courses. Departure from departmental structures was difficult, and many of the imaginative moments in the discussion gave way to hard bargaining. The movement of the faculty was nevertheless impressive, particularly given the size of the group and the scope of the project.

Aristotle’s Triad Revisited

Looking back on the three-year conversation, Aristotle’s triad of *ēthos*, *logos*, and *pathos* provide a useful way to organize some reflection on what occurred. In this section, we offer a brief examination of each.

Pathos: The Character of the Audience

Most striking, perhaps, is what we learned about the various audiences involved in the conversation. While our seminary has a particular character,

that will be true of any community. Though there will be considerable differences in other institutions, we trust that some sense of the context is necessary for any project that intends to imagine an appropriate curriculum.

Faculty Colleagues. We began the process with some assumptions about the colleagues with whom we would be working and whose minds we presumed had to be changed. We recognized that there is both a remarkable coherence within the Luther Seminary faculty and remarkable diversity. Distrust and suspicion, while not paralyzing, were real features of community life that had to be attended to. Our own character as presenters was always an issue — even if not faced squarely. Most of the faculty had been educated within feeder institutions and had been well schooled in the Lutheran tradition, though there is an increasing distance between older and younger faculty; the latter are not as clearly part of the “family” (an image regularly employed twenty years ago to speak of the Luther faculty). The faculty’s deep respect for the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions is reflected in assigning pride of place to the scriptures and the confessions in the school’s program, though the question of precisely how those primary documents are to be interpreted elicits a wide range of opinion. On matters such as worship, ecumenical relations, and relationship to the culture, considerable differences of opinion could be expected.

Almost all of the faculty had been educated in similar graduate programs which, if not run by universities, reflected the current construction of the theological encyclopedia — based as it is on the assumptions of a university setting. We expect from one another a high level of expertise in particular fields. We anticipated there would be considerable anxiety within the faculty regarding turf matters, and we were not incorrect; all the same, making progress toward a new vision required a willingness to compromise and take risks beyond what many might have expected.

There were a number of surprises. We had imagined that colleagues would be more susceptible to “rational” persuasion.³ In fact, colleagues *felt* their way to conclusions as much or more often than they *thought* their way to them. Appeals to “reason” (in the more restrictive sense of that term) seldom moved the community. What moved the group were *fears* and *desires*. The anxiety on the part of the director of the project about such matters was probably justified; shame and fear are real forces. The notion that speech must attend to matters

³See Janet Weathers’ remarks on the nature of rationality in chapter two of the present volume.

of the affects in order to be effective is hardly new in the history of rhetoric; but we had imagined that ideas had more power. We were naïve about the faculty *pathos*.

A significant experience of this naïveté relates to the faculty's willingness to confront major issues. Our conversations were successful in identifying issues foundational to various disciplines. It became clear, for example, how completely our respective disciplines had embraced historical strategies and how serious a critique of those strategies has developed across the whole disciplinary spectrum, from biblical studies to church history to liturgics. A major faculty seminar on the topic, "What is 'History' and What Is It Good For?" was planned — then canceled, for fear that we would discover deep disagreements that would bring the whole curriculum revisioning process to a halt. Thus, while our conversations succeeded in identifying major hermeneutical issues requiring concentrated intellectual work, in many cases we experienced a failure of nerve that was never publicly confronted.

Students. We all had assumptions about the nature of our students, but those assumptions were seldom tested. The old curriculum had been structured for young people whose most pressing need was to get some *critical distance* from the tradition in which they had been raised. We presumed, in Ricoeur's terms, a first naïveté, and sought to move quickly to a critical moment. Over a period of time the faculty began to discover how poor a job the church has done in basic catechization. Students do not know the basic story of the scriptures or of the church. We cannot presume, for example, that they know Luther's *Small Catechism*. Courses that moved quickly into critical methodology (so as to achieve some distance from the tradition) had the unintended consequences of protecting students from a tradition they did not know.

Once again, the problem is hardly new; nevertheless, experiencing its extent and depth is still a surprise. In a course introducing Old and New Testament, two professors asked students to read Potok's *The Chosen* during the first week. The book serves as an introduction to Judaism for students who have known few Jews and know little about Judaism, and it nicely highlights the tensions that exist between traditional communities and the contemporary world. As students discussed the book, a consistent pattern would develop. After a few probes to see what was safe to say, students would begin speaking negatively, even in hostile terms, about hasidic Jews: they hide from the real world behind their tradition. They spoke positively about the more liberal and worldly Jews who were willing to accommodate the real world. When this tendency was called to the attention of the class, they were genuinely surprised at their bias.

They simply took cultural values for granted and viewed with suspicion religious communities who were different.

Perhaps even more striking was our experience of recognizing that, in such a situation, most of the courses in the curriculum still presumed students who had been formed by the Lutheran tradition. One group of 36 Lutheran students, when pressed gently about their own religious background, confessed that religious rituals like regular church attendance, even grace at meals, were not part of their family life. Only two of the 36 had been raised in families that two generations ago would be recognized as religiously “traditional.”

Church, Society, and Congregations. Our reflections on the faculty and student audiences opened onto the larger questions of the diversity of audiences within our present culture. We agreed that what is true of our students is increasingly true of the church. An ever-smaller group of people have been well formed in their own traditions. Congregations that thrive and grow are filled with people who were not raised in the Lutheran church — and in fact have little “church” background of the sort one might have expected two generations ago. The same is true of congregations in other mainline denominations. And as the church continues to lose the support of the dominant culture, congregations can no longer count on members to reproduce themselves. While we had some difficulty agreeing on what “mission” entails, we did agree that preparing pastors to maintain congregations in the present environment is insufficient for the needs of the church. We agreed that to prepare pastors for the changed situation, we would have to give them better skills at understanding the circumstances of the people to whom they would be sent.

Ethos: Leadership

Among the terms that describe aspects of the pastoral office, “leadership” came to occupy a central place — though not without occasioning disquiet. The reason for its prominence was a sense that the various images that had shaped pastoral identity over the last decades had focused too much on personal gifts and interpersonal skills. The privatization of religion and its concomitant elevation of various models of intimacy had made a strong impression on our seminary, with pastoral care and counseling becoming perhaps the major feature of pastoral training. Even the term “pastoral” has come to connote intimate as opposed to public settings.

Given the conviction that the church no longer enjoys the support of the culture, the ability of pastors to make public arguments for the faith and the

tradition becomes increasingly important.⁴ The need for new visions in a pluralistic context require precisely the sorts of gifts and training the rhetorical tradition was designed to foster to prepare people for public life.

Some were sensitive to possible abuse by strong leaders. It was important for us to spell out precisely what we do and do not mean by “leadership.” Persuasion and manipulation by means of cunning and violence are inappropriate, particularly in congregational settings. Alternative patterns and models, however, are not readily available.

Our curriculum project, in short, tried to describe what we mean by “leadership in mission” and how such a pastoral identity could be shaped. Most striking, to us, was the willingness of the members of the pastoral theology department to reimagine their vocation in the new context. They seemed most clearly aware that preparing “pastoral counselors” was not the main business in which the seminary must be engaged at this point in our history.

Logos: The Received Tradition

As a denominational seminary with a confessional identity that includes a high regard for the Bible, we affirm the normative role exercised by the tradition as a central feature of the pastoral enterprise. Given our sense that students who come to the seminary have been far less thoroughly catechized than previous generations and do not know the scriptures well, a major task in the curriculum is to teach the tradition. Of particular concern is the Bible, to which considerable time is devoted, including the study of biblical languages. We became aware, however, how easily biblical courses can become captive to alienating methodologies and how difficult it can be to avoid encouraging the kind of research interests appropriate primarily in Ph.D. programs. (Of course, even drawing a sharp distinction between M.Div. and Ph.D. programs can be a problem — particularly if the seminaries hope to continue to draw their M.Div. instructors from these same Ph.D. programs.) While recognizing the importance of *critical* appropriation of the scriptures and tradition of the church, the faculty adopted a curricular strategy that seems more appropriate to the actual situation of our students. The next section of this chapter provides a broad outline of that strategy.

⁴See Don Compier’s remarks on Public Theology, chapter 7 of the present volume.

The Construct: Story, Interpreting/Confessing, Mission

Given the nature of our students and our present situation in American culture, we determined that there would be three major moments in the educational process. We entitled them, "Story," "Interpreting and Confessing," and "Mission." We imagined the curriculum as a movement from story to mission. The narrative category "story" was chosen particularly with respect to the tradition into which most students needed to be introduced. There is a concentration of courses in biblical studies and church history in the first year of study. The abandonment of introductory courses in Old and New Testament reflects growing disenchantment with survey and methods courses and a desire to move students deeply into biblical material as soon as possible. While introductory matters cannot be avoided, the challenge is to raise such questions as they become relevant in the study of biblical literature.

The goal of the curriculum is to help form pastors who are capable of creative leadership. The last movement in the formation of a pastoral imagination focuses on practical reasoning (*phronēsis*), which presumes the ability to decide and act. As we imagined the curriculum, this is the point when students must practice making arguments shaped by the tradition for the various audiences they will encounter. Their own pastoral identity (*ēthos*) in the various activities of ministry is understood in terms of the habits they are to practice.

The considerable energy invested in clarifying what "mission" entails in the present contexts of ministry revealed both a new awareness of audience and an older cultural bias. Suspicion of those who persuade by using cunning and violence, combined with the strong sense (in the wider culture) that religion is a private matter, made it difficult for some colleagues to use such categories as "mission" and "evangelism" — and even to appreciate the use of the rhetorical paradigm itself.

If the goal of the curriculum is to move students from an appreciation of the tradition to an ability to make use of it in mission, the transition between the two becomes crucial. The scriptures and tradition must be *interpreted*; this requires a critical moment. Clearly, however, critical interpretation does not automatically lead to mission; more often, it leads to disagreement. One might argue that a major factor in the development of the dominant historical paradigm for reading the Bible is a recognition that, since people will never agree in their interpretations, one should simply avoid questions of truth and settle for assessments of meaning. Our belief that this approach was inadequate became the basis for part of the agenda for our course, "Truth and Meaning: Uses of the Biblical Narrative."

The faculty agreed that the second year of study would be the appropriate place to raise the significant hermeneutical questions. At a confessional seminary, a central issue is the significance and function of the normative tradition. Initially, the faculty spoke of the need for critical interpretation of the story as the “natural” modern answer to that question. A colleague wrote a short paper at this juncture adding a key insight into bridging story and mission: confessing.

To oversimplify his argument, he rightly observed that modern consciousness can interpret the story without ever leading to mission. Indeed, the process of interpreting scripture, for example, while an essential and delightful task, can become a cul-de-sac. Recent research on the role of the Bible in moral conversations in Lutheran congregations — initially in Southwestern Minnesota, and now in southern California and Texas — shows that pastors are not likely to use scripture in moral conversation. Indeed, if they do so, they are likely to interpret it so as to show that, due to cultural and historical differences, particular texts are irrelevant to the moral topic at hand. Interpreting does not necessarily lead to mission.

Interpreting must therefore be supplemented by *confessing*; and providing attention to this element is a key role of the leader of a Christian community. “Confessing” is a “saying together” that is, however, different from uniformity. Unless the interpreter confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, mission is not likely to result. Unless the confessing is integrated with interpreting the story, the confessing is not likely to be faithful; unless the interpreting is related to the critical insight of the gospel, not just as an idea but as an experience of witness, the interpreting will not likely serve the unique mission of the church in the Divine Economy: the world will not be changed.

Needless to say, many of the controversies of the new curriculum arose precisely on this bridge question. On some matters the faculty was able to develop the requisite consensus and political will to resolve the issues; on others it was not. Perhaps the most neuralgic aspect of this conversation concerned the role of the “critical moment” in theological education. Perdurant and profound differences arise here between those who believe the “critical” moment of theological education is primarily lodged in sources external to scripture and the confessing tradition and those who — while recognizing diverse sources for reflection and criticism in interpreting and confessing — believe that the scripture and the confessing tradition themselves provide the “critical moment” of theological education.

A closely related issue is reflected in David Kelsey's most helpful books⁵ on theological education, when he asks, "How theological is theological education?" His answer is, "Not very." For example, the result of the theory/practice split has been a growing dominance of social sciences in the understanding of the so-called "practical" disciplines. Depending upon where one places the discipline of history, the social sciences have also come to dominate the subdisciplines of Biblical Studies and History of Christianity. In some ways, theology has become the specialty of the systematic theologians, while the other disciplines of the theological encyclopedia arrange themselves without much attention to God. The result: theological education is not very theological.

A case in point that profoundly cripples our preparation of leaders for Christian communities is in the area of *worship*. Worship within the modern encyclopedia has too often been reduced to a practical discipline. Worship courses focus on providing a certain kind of practical competence that, indeed, no public leader of worship should be without. In Lutheran seminaries, courses teach how to lead the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. If any theory is offered in such a practical course, it is drawn from ritual theory, thus from the social sciences or history. This is not bad; but it can be profoundly truncated (and often atheological).

Problems arise when graduates are sent to congregations that have overwhelmingly voted to follow diverse forms of worship in relationship to the diverse communities they are serving. The *Lutheran Book of Worship*, as it is printed, is clearly designed for a much narrower audience. Graduates are expected to innovate alternative worship; but, being grossly unprepared for such ritual resourcefulness and innovation, they get caught in worship wars. Worship wars tend to reduce these questions to choosing between tradition and novelty. Too often, liturgical scholars lose themselves in elaborate studies of historical liturgies, presuming to find the norm of worship in some supposed *ordo* (Platonic or Archetypal) that lies behind, above, beneath the amazing diversity of Christian worship in all times and places. Practical (and often desperate) pastors grasp for the most effective resources for creating a new audience — or just holding their present audiences.

Paul Holmer, in an article published in the early 1970s, had already pointed to this flaw in the contemporary reigning models of teaching worship, including at his own institution (Yale Divinity School). He argued that the logic

⁵See the two books cited in note 1 of the present chapter, above.

of worship is neither in the tradition, nor in novelty, but in God. The modern encyclopedia does not typically allow for the teaching of worship in such a manner. Once “thinking God” forms the logic of a course, it becomes “systematic theology.” So students learn a theological theory of worship in a “doctrine of the Church” course, and a hands-on practical introduction to denominational worship texts in a “worship” course. These various components frequently fail to cohere, and only serve to aid and abet the combatants in the worship wars.

Such neuralgic issues as these could not be fully resolved prior to the implementation of the new curriculum; but neither could the curriculum move forward pretending that these issues would go away. Somehow, the ongoing debates surrounding matters of “interpreting and confessing” needed a place within the curriculum without presuming their resolution. The traditional Enlightenment encyclopedia did not account for these topics and disciplines, so we created a new category of courses: Interpreting and Confessing.

The Interpreting and Confessing portion of the new curriculum was created precisely as a place to carry on these conversations among faculty and students, so that complex and controversial issues could be attended to in a careful and systematic manner. Courses within this portion of the curriculum include: Reading the Audience, The Lutheran Confessional Writings, and a number of required core electives. All courses in this portion of the new curriculum are team-taught by persons drawn from the traditional divisions of the seminary faculty. They place at the center of the course the challenging and perduring issues of our postmodern, post-Christendom context.

Perhaps the most important decision in the process was to commit ourselves as a faculty to tasks for which we have not been trained in our various disciplines. We tended to locate these most creative — and risky — ventures in the “Interpreting and Confessing” area. The course entitled “Reading the Audience” is taught in the first year. It seeks to raise crucial questions about the relatedness of all theological formulations to their contexts; about the particularity of audiences; and about strategies for coming to terms with the structure and assumptions of particular audiences, such as congregations. In this class, the social sciences and systems theory have been high on the list of priorities. So has been the desire to show the importance of theological assumptions about the nature of human beings and human society. That the course was the least successful in the first few years of the new curriculum only indicates how difficult is the task of re-imagining theological education. The tendency is to attempt too much; the drive to “master” disciplines must give

way to “befriending” them. The collegial commitment to teach the course is one of the most promising signs that the world of theological education at Luther has changed.

The presence in the second year of courses like “Truth and Meaning” is an expression of the commitment to introduce a critical moment without abandoning questions of truth — and without paralyzing students who must finally decide and act (and persuade others to do the same).

In the third year, the challenge of such courses as “Biblical Theology” is to teach (with the use of case studies drawn from students’ ministry experience) in such a way as to develop habits of pastoral reflection. In such a course, the tradition has a crucial role; at the same time, the situational character of all speech is taken seriously.

A Preliminary Assessment: Suggestions and Questions

1. One reason for the utility of the rhetorical paradigm is its focus on the three “characters” in any speech-act. It is a helpful way of thinking about pastoral identity that takes the substance of the theological heritage seriously and is at the same time aware of and respectful toward the diversity and particularly of audiences.

2. A rhetorical orientation takes seriously the importance of persuasion at every level of the tradition and life of the church. Perhaps most significantly, it prepares students for life in a pluralistic society, where first principles are open to debate, and where there are no absolute and universally agreed-upon foundations for pastoral theological reflection.

3. The rhetorical tradition has in view the practical: the value of persuasion has to do largely with argumentation that leads to action. Scholarship is important not for its own sake, but for the sake of the practices it engenders. Theory and practice must be dialogically related.

4. It remains to be seen whether Christians, and particularly those responsible for shaping the future of theology and theological education, can be persuaded that the image of pastor as “rhetor” is a promising one. The suspicion that rhetoric and the rhetorical tradition tend to provoke suggests not only a yearning for secure fundamentals — the Cartesian Anxiety once again — but also a lack of trust in the ability of conversation to change people. The alternatives, however, are no more appealing. Some form of absolutism — whether based on the Bible, the tradition, or a charismatic personality — obviously appeals to many in the present context, but it is an unlikely future for mainline Christianity. Withdrawing into a view of truth which suggests that

the most one can hope for is consensus within minority communities can fail to take with sufficient seriousness both our obligation to the neighbor whom God has given us, and the public nature of theological discourse. The obstacles to conversation are real, however, and the tendency to rely on cunning and violence in persuading one another is also real.

5. The success of a rhetorical approach to theological education depends in part on convincing colleagues of the depth of the problems facing the Church. The ability of academic communities to safeguard their way of life is impressive. Perhaps the continuing decline in the membership within mainline churches, and the consequent economic pressure, will finally be the most compelling motivation for change. But many church leaders are also aware that the assumptions and practices of the modern era, and of Christendom, are no longer serviceable. Perhaps this deficit will produce positive energy for change.

Looking back on our experience with the faculty of Luther Seminary, we have concluded that, while the process of conversation was arduous, our overall experience was very promising. After a process of almost nine years, the new curricular goals have certainly not been "achieved," if this is meant to suggest an arrival at a new plateau. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that the future will be a time of continuous innovation. On the other hand, this result is very much in line with most current proposals for curricular revision, recognizing (as they must) that the rate of cultural change is currently so great that no "leveling-off" period is likely. At the same time, an expectation of continuous change is also highly appropriate to the rhetorical model. Rhetoric recognizes the need to bring the tradition to bear on the contingencies of particular contexts, by a wide variety of speakers, for a wide variety of audiences. And such detailed attention to the specificity of context will be absolutely essential, if Christian theological education is to continue to be able to produce clergy and lay leaders for the Church who are able to teach, to delight, and to move.