

The Role of Northwestern College in the Training of Future Candidates for a Call into the Public Ministry

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Even under ideal conditions the preparation of young men for a noble, sensitive, and demanding calling like the Christian ministry occasional problems and perplexities. It does so even for seminaries, where one might assume that a generally accepted curriculum and the students' sense of purpose would make such preparation easier. The typical Protestant seminary, for example, must contend with a spate of academic problems. With students enrolling from a number of colleges, coming with various backgrounds, the seminary must endeavor to assimilate this heterogeneous group. Some have had a foreign language, others have not; some know a little Greek, it is still Greek to others; some have had college courses in religion, others haven't graduated from Sunday school. There are liberal arts graduates and engineering students, commerce majors and bachelors in science. And then there are A students and B students and C students. There are students with a lack of a sense of responsibility and initiative, with low ability in self-expression with inadequate training in proper study habits, with inability to think logically or to organize their material. But the seminary must make theology majors of them all. Add to this, the seminaries' opinion that 80% of their own curriculum is obsolescent, and you have a massive academic headache in the average Protestant seminary.

As far as the grassroots needs of the church are concerned, the vocational problems of most Protestant seminaries are just as serious. Most Protestant seminarians would prefer not to become parish pastors. "In large interdenominational seminaries students consider it humiliating to have to go into the parish ministry."¹ It is small wonder that these attitudes toward the parish ministry prevail among many Protestant seminarians because many seminaries are more like graduate departments of theology than professional schools for the ministry, and they are confused about their function.

Most deplorable of all is the confessional plight of most Protestant seminaries. They are ridden by liberalism denatured by ecumenicism, tossed to and fro by the winds of every new theology, to which they are pathetically anxious to trim their sails. Their theology is not only insubstantial; it is also inconstant. The faith of the unfortunate student entering such a theological atmosphere may be starved for lack of spiritual oxygen.

As Bridston and Culver write in *Pre-Seminary Education*, "Today there is a fateful confluence of two developments: an increasing confusion on the part of students not only about their vocational aims in the ministry but about their own personal religious beliefs and, at the same time, an increasingly confusing pattern of theological training."²

In such a milieu the role of the liberal arts college supplying pre-seminary training is an unenviable one. The pre-seminary liberal arts college has already had a formidable assignment, no matter what seminary its graduates attend. To equip its graduates for the seminary means training them, to use Theodore M. Greene's categories for the liberal arts college,³ 1) to reason validly (logic, mathematics, and grammar), 2) to communicate clearly (language, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, art), 3) to inquire accurately (natural sciences, social sciences – economics, psychology – historical methods, analysis of literature), 4) to evaluate wisely (the humanities, literature and the fine arts, ethics, religion), 5) and to understand synoptically – to get an outlook on the whole, to interpret one's studies (history, philosophy, theology). To reason validly, to communicate

¹ Keith R. Bridston and Dwight W. Culver, *Pre-Seminary Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1965), p. 110.

² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

clearly, to inquire accurately, to evaluate wisely, to understand synoptically – a college faculty has a wry smile at the thought of achieving all this with its students. And yet the seminary would like to assume this “broad and comprehensive college education”⁴ in its enrollees.

This difficult assignment is made more difficult when there is confusion in the seminary’s conception of its role. If the seminary does not know what it wants to accomplish, it increases the burden resting on the pre-seminary educational institutions. If the liberal arts college could pursue its goals with singleness of purpose and clarity of vision, with its directives from the seminaries clearly defined, this difficult task of pre-seminary training would be greatly simplified.

This difficulty is very obvious in the uncertainty that attends the assignment of the role of religion in the liberal arts college. On the one hand, educators like Martin E. Marty feel strongly that pre-theological education is and should remain pre-theological, “both logically and chronologically.” “Premature theological tantalization,” he writes, “ordinarily leads to superficiality and... unteachability when the prodigy reaches the seminary.” “Ripeness is all,” he judges. “Premature ripeness is fatal. It produces a narcissism, a dilettantism or a fascination with religion at the expense of theological hard work.” He would have the liberal arts college “serve its students best by guiding them into the richness of a good liberal arts curriculum than by overripening them in the... religion department.”⁵

The president of the Southern California School of Theology, at Claremont, on the other hand, states that “the reasons that have led our faculty to require an undergraduate major in religion seemed overwhelming.”⁶ There should be, he holds, a general and elementary introduction to some of the major ideas of religious study. Furthermore, there should also be an opportunity for the major in religion to pursue his study beyond the elementary and general to the mastery of method and material in a selected discipline.

While the debate goes on, the liberal arts college must endeavor, as best it can, to satisfy the conflicting entrance requirements of the Association of American Theological Seminaries and of the individual seminaries which do not accept AATS requirements.

In several important respects our pre-seminary institution has had an easier assignment. At least it has been better defined and less ambivalent. Early in its history Northwestern College was given its *raison d’etre* and supplied with blueprints for its educational program. It was to supply pastors for the synod that established and maintained it; it was to make its graduate pastors-to-be proficient in languages, particularly in the Biblical languages; and its format was to be that of the German “Gymnasium.”

Northwestern’s pre-seminary training program has also been facilitated because it has been responsible to a seminary that was not and is not confused about its purpose, nor has it varied its requirements from year to year. Our Wisconsin Synod Seminary, unlike the average Protestant seminary, has been a stable institution both in its theology and in its curriculum. Northwestern College has not had to guess at our Seminary’s doctrine or its entrance requirements; it knows what kind of graduates the Seminary wants. Open channels of communication all through the years have also contributed to a mutual understanding of each other’s responsibilities in the training of pastors.

Having considered the relation of a pre-seminary training program to a seminary’s program and, in a summary way, the relation between Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, let us now direct our attention more specifically to the origin and development of our College in its pre-seminary role.

In a manner of speaking, Northwestern College came about in a natural way. This should not be understood in a sociological sense, however – as it is natural to build roads to connect new settlements, to organize fire departments when communities grow, to erect schools when there are children to be educated, to collect taxes when there is a government to maintain, to provide for doctors and nurses even if they are only witch doctors and midwives. Northwestern College did not come into being as a community high school or college might in response to local needs for secondary or higher education to provide the skills and professions

⁴ Keith R. Bridston and Dwight W. Culver, *The Making of Ministers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publ. House, 1964), p. 118.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123ff.

needed by the community, such as teaching, commerce, jurisprudence, medicine, engineering. Our school did not arise out of a normal social need.

In a spiritual sense it was quite natural that Northwestern College should be founded. When individuals who have become beneficiaries of the means of grace feel the need for the administration of these means of grace, when Christians, who have the ministry of the keys entrusted to them, are aware of their responsibility for practicing this ministry, they will be concerned about establishing the office of the public ministry, both in their midst and elsewhere. Knowing that God has established the office of the public ministry and that it is His will that qualified men perform the functions of this ministry, they will attend to the selection and training of such ministers, so that the Gospel may be preached effectively and the Sacraments administered.

Our German forefathers, who crossed the sea to settle in Wisconsin, also felt the need for establishing the public ministry in their midst. They wanted ministers to baptize and instruct their children, to perform Christian marriages, visit their sick, bury their dead, and, above all, to provide them with the preaching of the Gospel. They were not self-reliant or experienced in making provisions for such a ministry in their midst because they were accustomed to having the authorities of the German State Church supply pastors and teachers for them, yet they, like many other immigrants, did feel this need. Until they learned to take steps to help themselves, however, they relied upon the pastors and mission societies in Germany to secure pastors for them. Chief among these patron societies was the Langenberg Society, which had been organized for the specific purpose of serving the Germans in America. Our early congregations owed a great debt of gratitude for the benefactions of these Christians in Germany who sought to keep them with the faith. Whether they were Christians in Germany or in Wisconsin, they were, finally, concerned about the same need – the establishment and maintenance of the public ministry.

Northwestern College was not called into existence as soon as our forefathers began looking about for pastors to serve them. Since their fellow Christians back home were sending pastors to them through the agency of the Langenberg Society and, to a lesser extent, the Berlin Mission Society (not in adequate numbers, to be sure, yet a single pastor went a long way in those circuit-riding days), and since they could pick up a pastor here and there from other synods and denominations in our country, they were at first minded to continue to depend on charity for the needed men. They were counting on such charity and good will when they looked to the Pennsylvania Synod seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, for pastors. When this source of supply proved to be most inadequate, they moved a step nearer to establishing their own school for pastors when they considered cooperating with other Lutheran groups in the Midwest (except with the Missouri Synod, which had its own seminary at St. Louis) in establishing an ecumenical Lutheran seminary at Springfield, Illinois. At least the young synod was thinking in terms of pulling its own weight.

What put a spoke into the wheel of this plan in 1860 was the growing confessionalism of the Wisconsin Synod. This increasing confessional awareness and practice also alienated the unionistic German State Church mission societies that had been supplying our Synod with pastors. It was soon to result in a severance of relations with Lutheran groups in the East who were members of the General Council. Eventually it was to result in an accord with the strongly confessional Missouri Synod but not in time to influence the Synod's 1863 decision to establish its own seminary and college in Watertown, and the opening of the Seminary in September of that year.

In all this we see the operation of the Holy Spirit guiding the young synod into confessional paths in spite of its heritage, environment, and development, and at the same time moving our fathers to commit themselves to their own school before they might have been tempted to cast in their educational lot with the Missouri Synod, utilize its facilities for the training of their pastors, and become intimately involved in its synodical course. Northwestern College and Seminary came into being as a fruit of Spirit-endowed faith, Spirit-taught obedience, Spirit-fostered confessionalism, and at a Spirit-appointed historical moment.

Despite the fact that the establishment of the college in Watertown defined its role as that of a pre-seminary and directed it to apply itself to the training of pastors, and despite the fact that this assignment has not changed over the years, thus making its function easier than that of many pre-seminary liberal arts colleges today which have no such explicit and clearly defined objectives, it has encountered difficulties in fulfilling its

central purpose. There have been challenges to its sense of purpose, threats to its survival, attacks on its convictions.

In its infancy its primary character and aims were imperiled. Its first president, Adam Martin was seriously bent on broadening the purpose of the school. He wanted Wisconsin University, as it was briefly called, to become a school that offered “opportunities for a thorough and complete course of collegiate education equal to any in the land,” as Professor Kowalke points out in his *Centennial Story*.⁷ President Martin advertised that the course was like that of all the colleges. It was designed to prepare the student for any business station, or for entering any college in the country. What President Martin wanted was not only a quality college; he hoped it would become a great university. Watertown, in other words, was to become as well known nationally as Cambridge or New Haven, Palo Alto or Ann Arbor.

In his almost incredible aspiration President Martin was reflecting the enthusiastic vision of the great dreamers of an America unlimited. A century ago the poet Whitman sang of a glorious destiny for the young, energetic nation that was conscious of new frontiers and proud of new conquests. It was a day when men had grand thoughts about America and its future.

Had President Martin’s plans been followed, Northwestern might not have become a great university, but it might well have joined the ranks of other denominational colleges that now have only tenuous connections with the church bodies that founded them. There is little except tuition rates to differentiate them from state-supported schools. What effect such a dispersion and diversion of the educational program would have had on our pastor-training function and upon the confessional position of our Synod may readily be surmised by observing examples all about us. President Martin’s dream constituted a critical test of the fledgling school’s purpose and demanded an early reaffirmation of its function.

There were other crises in those first five uneasy years. The financial support given by the congregations was less than halfhearted. The plan to raise funds by endowment scholarships engendered more problems than it solved. Other financial schemes never got off the drawing boards. There were discipline problems that could have undermined the not yet stable confidence the Synod had in its new school. The parishes were apathetic about recruiting students for the ministry, and this was supposed to be the school’s primary purpose. A stiffening confessional attitude on the part of the Synod provoked President Martin’s resignation and caused offended overseas benefactors to withhold funds that had been collected for the nearly destitute school. Those precarious early years were hardly the rosy dawn of an unfolding dream; they were more nearly a nightmare. It was only by the grace of God that the school did not fade out of existence, as did a number of others in those postwar years.

The ties formally established with the Missouri Synod might also have been disastrous to the existence of Northwestern College, had they been formed some years prior to 1869. A joint school might have been established together with the Missouri Synod. The consequences of such an arrangement could conceivably have become as dangerous for us as they apparently are becoming for a sister synod that is presently in danger of being drawn into the vortex of what threatens to be a deepening ecumenical maelstrom.

By the time that Dr. A. F. Ernst assumed the presidency of the college in 1871, the school’s program was more nearly what the Synod had resolved eight years before that it should be, a college whose principal function was the training of pastors and whose German-oriented, “Gymnasium”-patterned curriculum was geared to that purpose.

Fortunately the most severe tests of the school’s survival and of its appointed function as a pastor-training institution were soon over and not to be repeated with the same intensity throughout the rest of the school’s history up to the present day. There were financial problems in later years – attempting to reduce the debt on the 1875 dormitory by selling a strip of campus property along Main Street, rebuilding the burned-out *Kaffeemuehle* in 1894, “making do and doing without” during the Depression years – but that was mere belt-tightening and not the omen of extinction that threatened the school in the late 1860s.

⁷ E. E. Kowalke, *Centennial Story* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publ. House, 1965), p. 36.

As far as confessional problems are concerned, they have only grazed the school. Some men have left the faculty for confessional reasons, but the basic stance of the school has not been altered thereby. With an unsettled and even hostile climate prevailing in the church world today, it is a unique blessing that we are still of one mind with each other and with our fathers.

Since President Martin's day, when an American curriculum was being imposed on the school, no major alteration of the curriculum has taken place, except for the *Übergang ins Englische*, an expression in vogue in our Synod a generation or two ago. This is not to say that the course of studies for the ministry would not have been affected if certain proposals made in the first and second decade of this century had been carried out. If the practical seminary advocated by some in 1907, 1909, and 1911 had been established by the Synod instead of being roundly rejected, this educational shortcut would have exerted constant pressure on the college to reduce its curriculum and lower its standards in order to compete for students. If the amalgamation of Doctor Martin Luther College and Northwestern College on the Watertown campus had been voted in 1919, other steps culminating in further amalgamations might have been taken by the Synod, thus tending to diffuse our curricular focus. If the modern classical curriculum voted by the Synod in 1919 had become a reality, it might have led to the establishment of other liberal arts departments for the benefit of the Synod's constituency, thus consigning the pre-seminary program to an increasingly minor role.

The college did not have to reckon with these possibilities; the proposals died aborning. Yet all through the years there have been unofficial pressures on Northwestern College to change its curriculum and its standards for the training of ministerial students. The curriculum was unpopular in the early days. Complaints against the demanding language program have been heard in every decade of the school's existence – we lose too many students for the ministry; there is no practical need for Latin and less and less for German; other subjects would be more profitable; our curriculum is a moss-covered monument to the days of Ernst and Notz, if not to the days of Melancthon and Erasmus.

Arguments in defense of the intensive language preparation for the ministry have not been acceptable or convincing to everyone – that a college year is gained if four years of Latin and two years of German are completed in high school; that competency in Greek is materially aided by previous language study; that there is increasing stress by seminaries on prior foreign language study; that the experience of the LCA and the ALC, which have relinquished their language study in the college, ought to be a deterrent to those who begin to de-emphasize the languages, eliminating first the Latin, then classical Greek, then German, then Hebrew – until only a minimal New Testament Greek course and a foreign language elective remain.

A pre-seminary college that is not taking the road of language study will of necessity be taking some other road. It behooves us to ask whether that will be a road to increased secularization, to adaptation to current educational theories, to a multipurpose college, or to a Bible college, for example. Before we discard what we have, we ought to be sure we know the nature and tendency of an alternate curriculum.

It imposes a special responsibility on a college to maintain a curriculum of the type we offer. Not only is it always on the defensive, but, like Avis, it must try harder to qualify for its curriculum and to teach it effectively. A popular subject will be accepted even with mediocre teaching.

The greatest responsibility resting on a pre-seminary college is a spiritual one. First of all, there is the responsibility that a professional school like Northwestern shares with every Christian college. It must keep the Word of God operative in the lives of its students and further their spiritual knowledge and sanctification. If this is essential in a general-purpose Christian college, it is even more essential in a college that trains men to become pastors. If ever a superior Christian knowledge and a superior sanctification should be the goal of a college, it is incumbent upon a college engaged in training young men who are to become examples to their flocks in these respects.

There is the responsibility toward the theological curriculum. It must teach valid theology in the courses it has assumed for the seminary and lay a good foundation for concentrated theological study later. If it fails to do this or deviates from the truth, the seminary may only with difficulty succeed in undoing the harm that has been wrought. There is the vocational responsibility that, all members of the staff at Northwestern College must feel. They must be willing to sacrifice the desire to lead their students into their own specialties in the interest of

a larger purpose, the directing of young men down the road to the ministry. Yet this must be done with restraint and moderation. The goal of a Christian teacher at our school must be, as the *Proceedings* of the 1919 Convention (p. 99) points out, “to assist his students in acquiring a Christian philosophy of life and to make the Gospel dear to them. And only thus, not by daily admonition and haranguing, does he make the preaching ministry important to them and does he win them for the study of theology.”

At the seminary the student has generally fully committed himself to his goal and to the ministry. The college, even though it is a pre-seminary college, does not have this advantage. The ministry is still an option at the college and needs to be made something eminently to be desired. The ministry is still in the distance, and zeal can flag, interest can fade, industry slacken.

The role of Northwestern College in the training of servants of the Word is an evident and a felt responsibility, but it is easier to accept and to meet when there are visible fruits. These fruits have not been lacking in the history of our school. Since 1872 when the first college class was graduated, there has been an uninterrupted procession of Northwestern College students into the Seminary and into the ministry. Sometimes the classes were small – one graduate in 1874 and again in 1887, two in 1875, 1884, and 1888. Since the 1950s, classes of 30 and more have been common; since the 1960s, there have been three that have exceeded 40. Before the decade is out we hope to graduate classes of 50 and more. The first graduating class had four members, three of whom entered the ministry. That was approximately the proportion during the first 75 years of the school’s history – three out of four graduates going into the ministry. Since 1940, the proportion is nearly nine out of ten, and we are striving to improve that. Northwestern College has kept faith with the Synod.

Numbers alone do not make a ministry. A synod is not profited if it has quantity without quality. The counsel of Pope Pius XI may be admitted here. “Bishops and religious superiors,” he stated, “should not be deterred from needful severity by fear of diminishing the number of priests....” He discountenanced being “wickedly kind” (*impie pios*) toward those who have “no aptitude for study and who will be unable to follow the prescribed courses with due satisfaction.”⁸ If, however, you prefer to hear such a caution from your fathers, we quote: “*Besser ein paar tüchtige Männer auszubilden als viele Pfuscher* (bunglers).” That is the way they expressed themselves on this point when there was a clamor for more graduates and for a practical seminary to produce them. Have we produced such “*tüchtige Männer*”?

There is no serious doubt that our graduates generally have the intellectual and academic capacity needed in the Seminary and in the ministry. The quality of the graduate work done by our students at other schools, the findings of the Educational Survey conducted several years ago, the demand for our graduates as teachers at other institutions of learning are proofs of their scholarly ability.

Not all of them are sure of their spelling, their commas, and semicolons; not all of them can compose paragraphs without flaws and essays without non sequiturs; not all of them can command good English, but by and large they meet the graduate requirements for liberal arts colleges. They can “think effectively, communicate thought, make relevant judgments, and discriminate among values,” to quote the Harvard Report on *General Education in a Free Society*, on the marks of an educated man.⁹

If numbers alone do not make a ministry, neither does scholarship alone accomplish this. The wisdom of the world and of the flesh has a way of beguiling especially the superior students. Everyone of us can recall instances where scholarship has resulted in disqualification for our ministry rather than qualifying for it. Attitudes are more essential than great intellectual endowments and achievements. We make the observation that there are attitudes among our graduates that we value for the ministry. A certain wholesome diffidence in place of an inflated sense of their own importance, a quiet reserve rather than pretension a sense of not yet having arrived in sanctification rather than a display of piety, sober moderation rather than an intemperate enthusiasm. They do not expect to be coddled but they know what concern means. They prefer to be independent, but they know what loyalty means. They have learned to detach themselves from life without callousness and to analyze it without cynicism. They know what it means to quit themselves like men, but they can show a warm sentiment too. They can work without honors, and serve without praise. They can criticize

⁸ Bridston and Culver, *Pre-Seminary Education*, op. cit., p. 117.

⁹ Bridston and Culver, *Pre-Seminary Education*, op. cit., p. 16.

their school for its shortcomings, but they will go out into our congregations to recruit others to enroll at their school.

To them the Bible is a book to be respected not to be assessed; revelation a fact to be believed not to be sifted; the parish ministry a goal rather than a stepping stone, an honor rather than a humiliation.

They are not without weaknesses and follies, but we are grateful for these qualities of moderation in them. Of those who do not profess great worthiness, the Holy Spirit can make worthy servants of the Word. Of men who can keep their heads steady in an age of movements in theology, the Holy Spirit can fashion a synod that does not quickly climb theological and ecclesiastical bandwagons. With men who do not set themselves up as arbiters over God's Word, the Holy Spirit can preserve a church that upholds God's Word in honor and truth.

The fruits have been encouraging. The church that founded this school and that has maintained it for a hundred years has been amply repaid. Our graduates man most of its parishes, form a large percentage of the staff of our Synodical schools and a goodly number on the faculties of our area high schools, and comprise the majority of our Synod's officials.

For these gifts of God we ought to be grateful; this is a ministry we ought to prize. For us at Northwestern it means that we must at all times value our students as potential ministers of the Word, endeavor to equip them ever more effectively for their future service, seek more earnestly to warm their hearts for the ministry, counsel them more wisely when they are inclined to settle for less than this high calling. In the chapel, in the classroom, in the dormitory, in our homes, on the playing field, in the rehearsal rooms – wherever we have the opportunity – it must ever be our purpose to produce more ministers for Christ and better ministers for Christ. To that task, to that trust we must ever rededicate ourselves.

You also have a part in this great ministry. Northwestern College looks to you for the facilities it lacks to do its work, for the men it must have to staff its faculty, for the substance it requires to meet each day's needs of body, mind, and spirit. It looks to you for the young people to make up its classes. It counts on you to believe in its purpose to understand its policies, to defend its principles. This does not mean that it is above criticism; not at all, but it asks you to love it as you correct it, and to respect it as you fault it.

Your concerns may, in the final analysis, be reduced to a single one – that of prayer. If you pray for your school, that God's purposes will be carried out there, that sound good men will be trained there for the Christian ministry, this college will lack nothing. You will take its needs to your heart and seek to provide for them as much as is in your power, you will correct its shortcomings with evangelical purpose, you will view its burdens with sympathy, you will note its successes with joy and thankfulness.

When you remember it in your prayers, this college will truly become your college, and as you do with all that is near and dear to you, you will commit this school of the prophets to Him who alone can keep it faithful and serviceable in its appointed role of preparing young men to exercise the Ministry of the Keys, and who alone can use its labors to build His kingdom well.