

# **Helping Our Students Grow To Christian Maturity While They Are With Us And After They Leave**

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Assignments like the one that your program committee has laid on me are not made in a vacuum. The question is not: "What if some of our young people should fall away? Then what should we do?" It is rather: "Since this seems to be happening, what can we do?" What seems to be happening, or what the assigned topic suggested is happening, is that the ranks of our young people — including our Lutheran High School graduates are suffering attrition. Not only graduates who enter secular colleges and universities, but other graduates as well. Not only graduates but even students before they graduate.

## **I.**

What are some of the evidences that a problem exists or is perceived? A congregational survey of post-confirmation and pre-marriage young people shows that there is a great void where a good number of communicants ought to be. It shows that this is happening to LHS graduates as well as to others. Parish pastors voice criticisms such as: "It seems LHS graduates are the first into divorce court, the first to abandon the faith at the university." Others say: "We have a Commission on Youth, a Student Services Committee, campus ministries, area high schools. It all costs money and what are the results?" Experienced campus pastors speak of students who once aspired to the public ministry who have become outspoken critics of our church (or all churches) and deniers of the Word. A Lutheran High School valedictorian is active for four years in a campus congregation, brings the intended spouse to instruction class, but then converts to Mormonism and by word and deed repudiates all religious training received in Christian day school and Lutheran high school. Other alumni complain that they weren't equipped to cope spiritually, that they were not as well prepared in their religion classes as in other areas. Disillusioned parents say: "We thought if we sent them to that high school things would be different." And then they recount the sorry tale of drug and alcohol abuse that is destroying a young body and an immortal soul, the premarital pregnancy, the misdemeanors and the felonies. And there are disappointed high school teachers, too. Not just disappointed in the hard cases who were rebellious or indifferent from 9<sup>th</sup> grade onward, but the solid performers who find a home in the cults, the students who got A's in religion and join heterodox churches, the quiet and conscientious pupil who becomes a charismatic, the student body leaders who become indifferent to Word and Sacrament.

All of these observations, of course, overlook the graduates who do continue faithful and even teach in Lutheran High Schools. It ignores the fact that many return after a lapse. It does not mention the fact that the final returns and results of our work won't be apparent until the Great Day of our Lord's appearing. Nevertheless, there is a problem and we are all concerned.

## **II.**

What are the causes? You have heard the dreary recital and you can repeat the weary refrain if you have been teaching for any length of time. There is the breakdown of families, the confused values of parents, the false goals, the double-mindedness of fathers and mothers as to what is really important in life. There is the intellectual questioning and doubt. Early or late there is youthful rebellion. For those who go off to university or simply move to an apartment of their own, there is the freedom from parental control and from the standards of the high school. Small faith, ill-informed faith, immature faith and sometimes unbelief manifest themselves and take their toll and break our hearts.

There is probably more truth than beauty in the analysis of a former campus pastor who wrote: "While the Church has been mightily fighting against the evils of secular humanism, sectarian subjectivism, evolutionary science and psychology, and liberal theology, its posture has become defensive and impersonal in the eyes of many young people. They sense a shallow spirituality in the church: Bible study that is only proof-texting; evangelism that is only high-sounding words; underdeveloped Christian fellowship that lacks

commitment. They feel shut out by a hierarchical structure that does everything for them, but not with them. They want to make Christianity their own, a positive, life encompassing force. And quietly they are withdrawing into small religious cell groups and non-denominational Christian organizations. It is probably not a large-scale exodus, but it is often the most mature, gifted, dedicated, and spiritually minded young people who are lost. It may not become apparent until the post-high school years, but its roots lie in the period of the Church's youth ministry." (Paul Kelm, in "Confront" in *YOUTHINK*)

In our analyses and descriptions and diagnoses of what is wrong and why, it is easy to overlook the obvious. These things occur because the devil, the world, and the flesh deceive Christians and lead them into misbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice.

The devil can concentrate his efforts on denying the gospel and frustrating the church and seeking to devour Christians because he already has the rest. He is the great divider, who works to separate Christian parents and their children, Christian teachers and their students, the Christian church and its members. He is the slanderer who calls God a liar by denying his Word and by calling his Gospel foolishness. He is the tempter who suggests: "Take the cash and let the credit go." He is the murderer of souls, who points out the tension between what *is* in the life of the believer and the life of the church and what *ought to be* — and exploits it by sowing doubt and cynicism in young minds and hearts. To say "The devil did it" is not a cop-out but a simple recognition of fact. "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." (1 Timothy 4:11) Consider how it was with Judas and the greatest Teacher. "Have I not chosen you the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" (John 6:70). "He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me." (John 13:18). "Satan entered into him" (John 13:27).

When the term "peer pressure" is used in a negative sense today, we recognize it as one aspect of the world's deceitful appeal. We recognize the "otherdirected" student who finds out what the others are eating and eats it, finds out what the others are drinking and drinks it, finds out what the others are smoking and smokes it, finds out what the others are thinking and thinks it. The New Man in such a person is easily shouted down, crowded out, left limping. Romantic interests outside the faith are not a new phenomenon, but there do seem to be more parents today who don't care. And the "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8) permeates not only secular institutions of higher learning but also the print media and the airwaves and the air we breathe. We can sympathize with the greatest of missionaries who had to write: Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." (2 Timothy 4:10).

And there are the flesh's sinful drives. Covetousness, under the more respectable name of ambition. Lust which parades as love. The desire for more thrills, novelty, excitement — not only in dating and partying but also in religious life. Self righteous complacency toward the law and the accompanying boredom with the gospel are diseases of the soul which seem to especially afflict those who have had a rich diet of God's Word through most of their young lives. The craving for attention and recognition causes some young people to do whatever needs to be done — however sinful, illegal, or bizarre — to become, even for a while, the center of the universe. Ananias and Sapphira were taught in the school of the apostles, they were served by able men carrying on a vital ministry, they were members of a most vibrant congregation. Devil, world and flesh overcame them and claimed them. (Acts 5:1-3).

### III.

We recognize the problems of youth because we have been there; we have been young. We do not only observe these temptations in the lives of students. We still struggle with them (or others) ourselves. But Lutheran high school teachers are called by the church to help a particular group of people in the struggle so that by God's grace they may finally overcome and obtain the victory.

How can we stem the tide of defections? How can we help them overcome? How can we be effective instruments in helping them grow to Christian maturity? The answer certainly does not lie in changing our philosophy of Christian education, either formally or by default or neglect. The presuppositions of original sin,

of God's grace in Christ, of the authority of his Word, of life as a time of grace and of service to him who loved us and gave himself for us, of the goal of eternal bliss with him; these are and must remain our reason for being. If these presuppositions do not motivate us we ought to apprehend them more fully. If we do not make them clear to our students, we should try harder. If some of our students do not comprehend them or do not live in a way that is congruent with them, or reject them, we are sorry. But we do not give them up. If we did not believe and strive to impart these things, we would do better to close our schools.

Although we might offer more and require more in the way of biblical and doctrinal knowledge and teach more skills in Bible study and apologetic, that will not in itself prevent some attrition. By itself, offering more opportunities for students to apply Christianity in student life and Christian service outside the school will provide only a partial solution.

It is sometimes proposed that there ought to be a little more law and a little less gospel in discipline in our high schools. The law will certainly not effect what the gospel has not effected. Misapplied, it can only create more Pharisees or cause more students to despair and decide to be hanged for goats. Again, one hears that there ought to be more gospel and less law in the teaching and disciplining (or discipling, which is really the same thing) of students. This seems a little more acceptable for evangelical Lutheran teachers, but it also seems to suggest that God's Word is some kind of chemical mixture and that rightly dividing the word of truth means adjusting the chemical proportions.

Although religion teachers try to anticipate the questions which will confront young Christians as they live in the world and especially when they leave the classroom to live in the world, even answering every question would not be the complete or perfect solution. The Old Evil Foe knows all the answers to all the questions, and he is still a devil.

Solving every difficulty that the evolutionary theories of biologists and geologists present (even if we could do it) would not provide the total answer. There was unbelief in the world long before there was evolutionary theory. And we would not want to forget or have our students forget that "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." (Hebrews 11:3).

While apologetic has its place in a good high school religion curriculum, we must not expect too great results from it. And we must always be wary of the philosopher's ground, even for awhile and for the argument's sake. One thing the efforts and failures of the medieval scholastic theologians ought to teach us is that Christians who stand on the philosopher's ground are on territory that is always shifting, never dependable. The apologist today, like the scholastics, then retreats from the necessity of certain propositions to their probability to their possibility to silence.

Problems are not solved by pretending they don't exist. It would be a tragic error if, in the interest of recruiting or public relations, we denied that we have a problem. But what we are, perhaps, tempted to do is to harp on the problem, pick at it, dwell on it. That is not a solution but only an aggravation. There is the danger that we become demoralized as Christian teachers, become cynical, forget the power of the gospel and the joy of God's salvation and our privileged calling as teaching ministers in Christ's church.

One thing a Christian learns from God's Word and from life as a struggling, weak Christian is to look to himself as a possible contributing cause to the problems which arise and exist. The Christian high school teacher (or seminary professor) might ask himself, herself: "Do I contribute to the problem of attrition and defection through a lack of preparation? Have I neglected continuing education and professional growth or been slack in my day-by-day preparation? Is there a lack of commitment to excellence that turns off the best and brightest of my students?"

"Do I assume a pose of omniscience which has a pat answer for everything, acknowledges no doubts or difficulties, reduces the Word of God to a blueprint which any intelligent person ought to be able to read and follow? Are there emphases in my teaching of religion which do not meet students where they are, which are not relevant and do I thus call the relevancy of Scripture into question?"

“Do I nurture and express prejudices which are clearly prejudices and nothing more, and do I realize that these things do not edify and that they call the genuineness of the gospel into question for young people who can not distinguish between my follies and what the Bible teaches? Is there in me a self righteousness with regard to other educators, other people, other Christians, my students which belies my faith in Christ’s righteousness and undercuts the central message of my school and church? Do I find it impossible to admit to an error in presentation of material, the interpretation of facts, or in dealing with a student? Can I say “I’m sorry; I was mistaken; I was wrong”? Does my life outside the school environment in any way belie my confession or discredit my call to the public ministry or betray misplaced priorities? Do I ever display a boorish arrogance that belittles other disciplines, other schools, my co-workers in the church, my students? Do I harbor or express disagreement with the doctrine and practice of the larger fellowship in the Synod? In short, do I place stumbling blocks, obstacles, death-traps in the way of young people’s growing up to Christian maturity?

“Is there in me a tendency to depend on law and moralizing and threats and appeals to pride as I try to motivate students, when I know that only the gospel can motivate them and empower them to do what is pleasing to God? Is my discipline erratic, arbitrary, unduly harsh — or non-existent — so that some of my students are embittered by it — not only against me but against what my school has to offer? Do I lack that concern, understanding and compassion which are hardest to give to those very students who need it the most?”

The disciple is not above his master, and we I cannot help young people to maturity if we ourselves are not growing up in Christ, if we ourselves are bogged down in and satisfied with our childish attitudes and actions. To put it more negatively: “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” Matthew 18:6).

But what can we do, in a practical way, to help our students grow to Christian maturity, to stop this attrition which is not only the church’s loss, but is first and foremost so harmful and sometimes fatal to the youngsters involved? Let us not be afraid of the obvious, to try again to do the things we are all supposed to be doing anyway. Let us improve our knowledge of the subject matter, our teaching skills, our understanding of students. Let us acknowledge our errors when we make them and apologize for any inconsiderateness we have displayed or trespass of which we have been guilty — lest the gospel be discredited. Let us be quick to forgive for Christ’s sake, as people who have been forgiven much. Let us communicate our sense of privilege and responsibility — not in a grave and pietistic and heavy-handed way, but in the way we come into the classroom, greet the class, carry on our work, express our attitudes toward the calling in which God has placed us. Should our teaching be thought of as a cross we find difficult to carry? Should we give anyone the impression that the ministry is a terrible burden that we can hardly bear up under? Let us communicate our sense of caring for those under our tutelage in the classroom. “... Love is patient, love is kind ... it is not rude ... , it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” (1 Cor. 13). Let us communicate our respect for what our students are as God’s people and what they can become as mature Christians.

Let us be willing to share with our colleagues, across departmental lines and lines of special interest: sharing common concerns, useful knowledge, evangelical insights. “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” (Mark 9:50b). Share the positive things that happen in school, in the lives of students, among alumni, the evidences that the gospel has made a difference.

I know that your religion departments met in 1979 to discuss curricular and other concerns. As I read the reports of that meeting, I gained the impression that what you try to do and hope to do better is teach the facts (biblical, historical, doctrinal), discuss the implication of those facts, provide students with the opportunity to deepen the impression through expression, to exercise their spiritual muscles, to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. I have nothing to add to what you have set out to do – no improved methodology, no more refined aims, no area of knowledge which you left out of your considerations at that time. I would simply say, “God bless your efforts.” However, permit me to reinforce your resolve with what a former campus pastor had to say about youth work generally. It can probably be adapted to the teaching of religion in Lutheran high schools: “What our Youth want,” he writes, “is an active, responsible role. In Bible study that means less lecturing and

more discussion-study. It means teaching and using Bible study methods that dig into Scripture, rather than topical presentations exclusively. In our activities for youth, this means expressing an unembarrassed commitment and love we have in Christ, a fellowship that is shared. It means developing spontaneous prayer and worship life, frank and open problem-sharing and problem-solving. In our program of youth ministry, this means providing the challenge of responsible, mature service for their Lord and others.” (Paul Kelm in “Confront” in *YOUTHINK*). Meanwhile, keep on listening to what they are asking and saying. Keep in mind the injunction of Jude 22: “Be merciful to those who doubt.” Give attention to the sources of theology and methodology that you use. Beware the poisoned well, the evil tree which cannot be expected to bring forth good fruit, the piety which comes from the law and not the gospel, the theology that comes from reason and not revelation, the methodology which is not rooted in the principles of the gospel. Like Paul, rely on the power of God’s Word to do His work — nothing else can, as you well know. Be able to say as he did: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but in God’s power.” (1 Corinthians 2:4.5).

One of the assumptions and principles of Christian education that we try to live in all of our schools is that Christian education, spiritual instruction, evangelical example and counsel are not limited to religion classes. In every course, every team activity, every musical or drama or career organization teachers do have opportunities to let their students know what their hopes and expectations for them as God’s men and women are. Not simply in terms of church membership, church contribution, church leadership and church loyalty; but in terms of joyful living, using their talents, living up to their God-given potential. Encourage them to be faithful stewards of the gifts that equip them for further academic training, vocational schooling, honest work, family responsibility. Follow them out of the school and into the world with your kindly interest and prayers.

#### IV.

Now, these are really pretty obvious things. I don’t expect that anything stunningly new has been offered. But who of us can say: “All this have I done.”? It is true of teachers, too, that “the whole life of a Christian is to be one of daily repentance.” (The First Thesis of Luther’s 95 Theses). Not doing penance, not trying to produce some feelings of remorse for the past and resolve for the future, but a turning. Repentance is turning from whatever false gods we as teachers worship to the living God. Turning from our false works (our sins) to spiritual living. Turning from our false righteousness (every vestige of Pharisaism) to the righteousness of Christ. It means turning from the theology of glory which wants heaven now, no conflict, no disappointments, no failures but only positive and evident and happy results. It means turning from that to the theology of the cross which knows that God’s glory was hidden at Golgotha and will often remain hidden in our schools, but remembering that it is just when people can’t see or aren’t looking that God does his most wonderful saving works. Remembering that even in the work of the church — especially in the work of the church, we walk by faith and not by sight, that we must through much tribulation enter the kingdom, that we cannot always see what our God is doing but we must always believe that He is doing His gracious good thing.

Daily repentance means turning from our natural, inherent Greek philosopher’s stance which wants to ask *why* God doesn’t do things our way and on our schedule and *how* we can ever get results with the tools he has given us. Turning and becoming Israelites indeed, without guile, taking God at his Word and trusting the power of His Word.

Paul wrote to the Philippians and for us: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.” (Philippians 2:5-7). What was it we assumed when we accepted the call to the public service of the Gospel? The very nature of a servant. Again Paul wrote to the Philippians and for us: “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation whether well fed or hungry, whether I living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13).

#### V.

What is success in this work of helping our students grow to Christian maturity while they are with us and after they leave? To do what God has given us to do, and keep trying to do it better. To use the gospel he has given us to use, and the talents he has given us to communicate the gospel, and to improve those talents by faithful use. To expect his blessing and acknowledge it when it is clear that he has blessed our work with young people.

What is failure? Did Jesus fail with Judas? Did Paul fail with Demas? Did the Jerusalem apostles and congregation fail with Ananias and Sapphira? What more should they have done? Was the failure theirs? Must we assume always that we have failed? Sometimes it might be healthier for us to simply say: The devil did it, the world got 'em, they succumbed to the flesh.

How is it that some remain faithful when the gate to destruction is so wide and the road to perdition is so broad? How do even the few find the small gate and the narrow road? (Matthew 7:13f). Who called *us* to faith and salvation and why? “(God) has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.” (2 Timothy 1:9). “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.” (Titus 3:5). Who has *kept* us in the fellowship of the faithful and why? “Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:3-5). *Who* has equipped us and called us to be teachers in the church? “Our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant ...” (2 Corinthians 3:5,6). Who has brought us this far in this ministry and how? “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.” (John 1:16). Who has added *his blessing* to make us somewhat effective? “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this allsurpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Pots of clay, rude and humble vessels with many flaws and lacking polish. God uses us to effect his miracles of grace in others. It is a miracle of grace if we turn out one student who, after he or she has left our direct influence, will say in the face of temptation: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:66). How is it that some remain faithful? “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8). Praise God for the miracles of grace who graduate from our high schools, for alumni who remain faithful church members, workers in the church, Christian parents, effective witnesses to Christ, co-workers in the ministry.

To those who are faithful and to those who stray, proclaim the grace of God who forgave before we asked, who invites all men to draw by faith on the forgiveness which is already there.

Fellow ministers in Christ, I have gone where your topic and God's Word led me. There is no quick fix. If I offered one, you ought to be very suspicious. I have not proposed any radical solutions, except that one which God provides in the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. The Gospel is radical in the sense that it goes to the root of the problem which is the sinful nature of our students and ourselves; and it leads to the source of life who is Christ Crucified. Use it. Trust its power. Leave the results to God. He will nurture His own to maturity, while they are with us and after they leave.