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EMBODYING THE TRADITION: THE CASE OF WITTENBERG UNIVERSITY

Baird Tipson

Wittenberg University represents a strain within American Lutheranism that has been out of fashion among Lutherans almost since the moment of our founding. I see that we've now become out of fashion in the broader Christian academic community, too, at least among those academics like George Marsden who call for a resurgence of the Christian university. But I will assert in this presentation that we represent an important and viable model of a college of the church, albeit not the only important and viable model. I will suggest further that we face two particular challenges in the near and longer terms. Our success or failure in meeting these challenges will bode well or ill for the future of all the colleges of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Wittenberg was founded in 1845 by the "American" faction of Ohio Lutherans. The decades before the Civil War saw colleges spring up in little towns all across the Midwest. If only because purely "secular" education was unthinkable to most Americans, almost every one of these new colleges was related to some Christian denomination. The very name "denomination" raised questions in the minds of some Lutherans; it suggested that every Christian group, or at least every Protestant Christian group, was expressing the same essential Christian truth in its particular fashion. The names "Presbyterian," "Congregational," "Methodist," or "Lutheran" *denominated, named* the ecclesiastical tradition in which that truth was embodied, but all preached a similar -- and presumably authentic -- Gospel. Not a few Ohio Lutherans looked beyond the walls of their churches and saw more Law than Gospel: a strange mixture of moralism and revivalistic fervor. But Wittenberg's founders saw their future *in, not apart from*, this strange American culture. Though German in origin, they had been agitating for preaching in the English language and for at least some instruction in English rather than German in the newly founded Lutheran seminary at Columbus. They called as Wittenberg's first president the Rev. Ezra Keller, a Pennsylvania College and Seminary at Gettysburg graduate and a disciple of Samuel Simon Schmucker. Keller emphasized personal piety; avoided elaborate ritual, and placed far more importance on an experience of conversion in adolescence or adulthood than on whatever new birth might have occurred to infants in baptism. He led a revival

on campus in 1847, eight students were converted.

In practice as well as in spirit, Wittenberg was ecumenical. The new college accepted financial support from the New England Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education in the West, a pan-Protestant agency which had been organized to support any denominational college so long as it maintained the sort of classical curriculum found at older institutions like Yale and Brown. Non-Lutherans were welcome as students, even as seminary students. There were Presbyterians on the Board of Directors, and an Episcopalian taught Latin. Wittenberg's founders were already exchanging pulpits and sharing communion with members of other Protestant denominations.

I would argue that from its founding, Wittenberg's brand of Lutheran higher education stemmed from two complementary sets of convictions. The first set was *theological*: that the Gospel preached on Wittenberg's campus should emphasize personal piety, the need to demonstrate a living faith through good works, preferably done in service to the community, and the importance of extending the right hand of fellowship to like-minded Christians in other denominations. The second set we would call *cultural*: the men and women who founded and supported Wittenberg believed that they and their children would take their place in a generally Christian but denominationally pluralistic "American" society, rather than in an ethnically-defined subculture within that society. Wittenberg aimed to provide a broad, liberal education that would produce not only pastors but leaders in the secular world: in the government, in commerce, and in the other learned professions of the larger American society.

This presentation is not a history of Wittenberg, so I will not follow the twists and turns of these two sets of convictions for the next 150 years. Doctrines developed, as John Henry Newman would say. There was change, and there was compromise. But as a newcomer to Wittenberg, I would make two observations.

First, we retain a theological commitment not entirely different from that of our founders. A large percentage of

our students, probably most, do not arrive on campus firm in the conviction that they were born again in baptism. For those students, the college years represent an opportunity to question the values of their childhood and to develop a set of values that will shape their adult lives. To a degree that is deeply upsetting to any disciple of Karl Barth, they see themselves as religious consumers, ready to choose that set of convictions that "feels right" to them. This is a personal rather than a liturgical quest; a minority of our students will be at Weaver Chapel or at one of the congregations in town on an average Sunday morning. Like Ezra Keller, when I address the student body I look out not at a worshipping community but at a group of seekers still largely ignorant of the power of the Gospel. [I must add that while I have preached a few times, no one appears to have been converted. But I did witness a bona fide revival in our chapel last fall, at a concert by our gospel choir, where two of our students did respond to the altar call. Ezra Keller must have smiled!]

If the original student body was diverse by contemporary standards, so is our present student body, both religiously and ethnically. Just under a quarter are Lutheran. Before those of you from deeper in the Midwest chortle at that small number, I hasten to add that the percentage of Lutherans in the population of our primary service area is about 5%. Affirmative action for Lutheran applicants is alive and well at Wittenberg, but we also recruit Lutheran students aggressively!

The founders' conviction that authentic faith spills over into service to the larger community is also alive and well today. By faculty action, each of our students spends a minimum of thirty hours doing community service in Springfield in order to receive a diploma. We intend to make service a habit for our students and to impress upon them that personal convictions cannot be divorced from commitments to others.

We still share Luther's conviction that a broad general education in the liberal arts is the best intellectual preparation for leadership in church and community. We recruit faculty members with the strongest possible credentials in their disciplines and welcome teacher/scholars of all religious persuasions -- and of none -- so long as they are committed to our liberal arts mission and respect our relationship to the ELCA. Ninety years ago, in June 1906, the Board of Directors adopted the following statement:

In the Collegiate and Academic departments of Wittenberg College, the following is and has been the policy of Wittenberg College: no denominational test is imposed in the choice of trustees, officers, or teachers, or in the

admission of students, nor are distinctly denominational tenets or doctrines taught to the students.

We require our faculty members not only to be effective classroom teachers but also to be actively engaged in the pursuit of knowledge in their academic disciplines. Faculty control the curriculum. They require every graduate to gain an understanding of how central questions of reality, knowledge, and value are pursued, and they make effort to explore in every course the ethical dimensions of their subject matter.

Finally, we are still ecumenical in the sense that, all other things being equal, we would rather have a student or faculty member who is a committed Methodist than a lukewarm Lutheran, and we feel we have succeeded, not failed, if a Muslim or Jewish student leaves here even more firmly committed to her tradition. We want there to be no mistake about where we stand: worship in Weaver Chapel uses the Lutheran Book of Worship, our campus pastors are ordained Lutherans, and, at least in my poor judgment, they preach the Gospel rather than the Law. But though the Lutheran tradition is privileged; other traditions are encouraged and given a sympathetic hearing. We Lutherans need constant exposure to other expressions of the Gospel and to those traditions that challenge our claims to final truth.

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To continue to be an institution of higher education authentically related to the ELCA, we face two critical challenges. . . how to remain authentically Lutheran while respecting and welcoming a pluralistic student body. . . [and] making our tradition clear and compelling to the large majority of our students who are non-Lutheran or lukewarm Lutherans. . .

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Let me be clear about what this means in practice. We do not have first- and second-class citizens, religiously speaking, on this campus. We assume that Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, and members of other Christian denominations are "us," not "them"; that their expressions of the Gospel, like ours, are legitimate if incomplete. We do not wish they were Lutheran; we celebrate their contributions as fellow-Christians from whom we Lutherans have much to learn. Like Ezra Keller, we believe that the Gospel transcends denominational boundaries and that Christians of all persuasions need to work in concert to leaven the world with Gospel yeast.

Second, we retain what I termed our founders' *cultural*

convictions: we remain committed to help our graduates succeed in the larger culture rather than a committed Christian subculture. I am not particularly proud of it, but it is probably the case that our Lutheran students are no more enthusiastic about organized religion than our non-Lutheran students. On the other hand, we want all our students to understand a Christian's obligation to live out her faith in the larger society as well as in the community of committed Christians.

So much for what we have been and what we are. What of the future challenges I spoke of? To continue to be an institution of higher education authentically related to the ELCA, we face two critical challenges. The first is one Wittenberg has faced from the outset: how to remain authentically Lutheran while respecting and welcoming a pluralistic student body and preparing that student body to succeed in a pluralistic world?

As a liberal arts college, we could argue that we are authentically "Lutheran" by striving to offer the best possible liberal education. But then we would be no different from Kenyon or Grinnell or many other fine liberal arts colleges. Still, it has not always been obvious how we should go beyond excellence in the liberal arts to define ourselves as Lutheran. Our President and University Pastor must be Lutheran. A majority of our Board members must be Lutheran, including at least six active pastors. We state forthrightly and proudly on all our publications that we are a university related to the ELCA.

More important than these, to my way of thinking, our organized worship is authentically Lutheran. There is a visible ministry of Word and Sacrament in the center of our campus. We maintain a continuing relationship with the bishops of the six synods in our region and wherever possible with pastors in those synods. I should add, though, that none of the bishops I have talked to has a clear sense of how Wittenberg can best serve the ELCA in the late twentieth century. I am convinced that the burden lies upon us to propose viable models of church relationship for the twenty-first century.

That brings me to the second challenge, which I find absolutely critical: making our tradition clear and compelling to the large majority of our students who are non-Lutheran or lukewarm Lutherans. I am not necessarily talking about evangelism here, but neither am I talking simply about objective, accurate, understanding of what we Lutherans are about. To me, this is where the truth claims of the academy and the truth claims of the Gospel legitimately meet. Our deepest commitments reflect themselves in the goals we set

for ourselves as a university. I believe that if we can articulate those goals in clear, understandable -- and that means non-theological -- language, our students will not only come to share them but can be drawn through them to the source of their vitality, the Gospel itself. I have been engaged throughout this past year with a group of faculty members, members of our Board, and other administrators to revise Wittenberg's strategic plan. We determined that there are five fundamental things that every Wittenberg student should be able to do upon graduation. All five stem, in my judgment, from our Lutheran roots.

The first two reflect our, and Luther's, commitment to the liberal arts. We want every graduate to *respond with understanding to the depth and complexity of the human condition*, and we want every graduate to be able to *recognize, define, and solve problems* from a number of different intellectual perspectives. Future leaders need to be able to define issues, put them in context, take appropriate steps to develop responses and solutions, and persuade others of the validity of those responses and solutions. As I suggested above, these are authentically Lutheran but held in common with many fine non-Lutheran institutions.

The final three are all given their force by our relationship to the church; without our grounding in the Gospel, we would express them differently and carry them out differently. We intend that our graduates *develop a sense of vocation*. We mean to help them see their professional lives as opportunities to serve their neighbors and their communities rather than simply as a means to a comfortable life-style. We urge them to accept the responsibility of giving back some of what they have been privileged to receive.

We expect our graduates to be prepared to *assume leadership* when opportunity arises. Leadership is a slippery word; too often our students associate it with respect, status, power. But Jesus speaks of a different kind of leadership than that of the Gentiles who "lord it over" their followers; Wittenberg means to produce leaders who are "servants in society." [Statement of Mission, 1977]

Finally, we expect our graduates to be ready to *take moral responsibility* in their personal relationships, within their various communities, and toward the natural environment. We will not impose our moral standards on our students, but we will make it clear what those standards are, and we challenge our students to confront those standards as they firm up their own convictions.

Developing a sense of vocation, preparing for the kind of leadership that serves rather than lords over, taking moral

responsibility, these are all authentic expressions, I would argue, of the Gospel as well as of our specifically Lutheran convictions. Together with our academic expectations, they create a compelling mission in which faculty members of every religious persuasion will be able to share. If they lack a certain theological clarity, we hope they make up for it in casting a wider net for the serious enquirer. They sound and resound the chords of service, constructive social change,

cooperation, and self-sacrifice. They are not the cross, but I would argue that they are a valid preparation for the cross, and an authentic embodiment of our relationship to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

Baird Tipson is the President of Wittenberg University.
