

NURTURING THE NEW REALITY

WHAT PRESBYTERIAN SEMINARIES CAN DO TO REVITALIZE REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY

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In a paper created for this group in November 2005,¹ I tried to suggest that we could revitalize the ecclesiological identity of the presbytery by focusing on three themes:

- The notion, expressed in *The Book of Order*, that “the Church is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity... the sign in and for the world of the new reality...” (G-3.0200). I tried to suggest that this description lends a decidedly eschatological cast to our ecclesiology, especially as it nurtures the three “eschatological virtues”, humility, reconciliation, and trust.
- That the Reformation “Notes of the True Kirk” (*Book of Confession, 3.18; the Scots Confession*) – the “true preaching of the Word”, the “right administration of the sacraments”, and “ecclesiastical discipline, uprightly ministered” – describe the basic program of the mission of the middle governing body, provided that we understand these notes to be lived out in humility, reconciliation, and trust.
- That the Book of Numbers teaches us the need for “critical and creative reflection on tradition”² as a methodological principle in constructing the work of the church in the world.

In the present piece, I have been asked to address how these ideas might influence the way seminary faculty construct curricula and think more broadly about the task of theological education. My efforts at executing that assignment carry some caveats: It should go without saying that the comments below are of a personal nature; that is, they are uninformed by research other than that done for the original paper. It should also be clear that they are not intended as exhaustive or prescriptive; they are, rather, particular and suggestive. Finally, it should be noted that they come not from one who is a practitioner of professional theology, but from one whose primary concern is with the life of churches and of the middle governing body.

In what follows, it seems clearest to group my thoughts in three sections, reflecting the three major elements of the first paper. First, I want to think about what it means for the seminary to nurture an “anticipatory theology” that expects the coming of God’s new reality and prepares communities of believers to live out of the strength of its promise. Second, I want to ask how that anticipatory theology affects the way we teach the cluster of disciplines that contribute to the “notes of the true Kirk.” Finally, I want to suggest a methodological spirit or inclination that might characterize all the instruction offered in seminary education, and perhaps to provide an example in support of it.

¹ P. Hooker, “Identity – Polity - Praxis: What the *Book of Confessions*, the *Book of Order*, and the Book of Numbers Have to Say about Ecclesiology and the Presbytery,” unpublished paper submitted to the Re-Forming Ministry Faculty Initiative Cluster, December 11, 2005.

² The language is that of Dennis Olson, in his commentary, *Numbers. Interpretation*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996, p. 166.

ANTICIPATING GOD'S NEW REALITY

Theology matters.

That is to say, theology makes a difference in the way we live our lives. As such, it is more than the study of positions taken in controversies, either ancient or modern. It is more than the compendium of the history of arguments about the faith, carried on throughout the life of the church. Theology is, at its simplest level, the language we use to speak about God and what God appears to be up to in the world.

What we can discern about the activity of God in the world is largely a function of what we know of the ways God has already functioned in the world. The language we use to describe that function is the language of the historic community of faith, expressed confessionally and in the writings of particular theologians. Since these are matters of historical record, it is both inevitable and necessary that theology will have an anamnetic quality; it will always involve the recovery, reconstruction, and remembering of the past.

Seminaries should be careful, however, that they do not communicate to students that mastery of the anamnetic aspect of theology is sufficient preparation for service to the church. Such theology will invariably remain antiquarian in nature, and will encourage the church to cling to the formulations of the past, in the vain illusion that those formulations are eternally adequate and in need of no revision. As a careful study of the history of theology shows, precisely the opposite is the case. The language of theology is constantly in need of revision and revisitation, as the language and cultural experience of the faith community changes.

In addition to its anamnetic quality, however, theology is also anticipatory. That is to say, it looks ahead and seeks to construct a description of what God is doing in the world, and then to guide the church to respond to the divine activity. In its constructions of the models of God's activity, it is careful to value a consistency and congruency between what is remembered and what is expected. At the same time, however, it is willing to step beyond the language and concepts of anamnetic theology to press toward new language and new constructions.

Theological faculties, it seems to me, have not accomplished the goal of teaching theology until both anamnesis and anticipation have been taught as a theological *modus operandi*. No anamnetic discussion should be considered complete until it draws anticipatory conclusions, and no anticipatory description should be considered acceptable that is not grounded in and explicitly consistent with its anamnetic foundations. To put the matter less technically, students of theology who seek ordination need to know how to mine our confessional and theological past for the language and imagery that can serve as a foundation for constructive theology in the present context. But they also need to know how to extrapolate from those foundations to articulate new theological formulations that address the changing contexts of their ministry.

A key to this anticipatory way of thinking about theology is the development of an eschatological perspective. By eschatology, I do not mean a millennialist interpretation of

theology or a dispensationalist reading of scripture. For that matter, I am not particularly concerned with “last things” in the sense that this is commonly understood – a fixation on when and where the “second coming” will occur, or what the nature of the Parousia will be. Rather, I use the term more broadly to capture a sense of the Christian hope: a commitment in faith to trust that God is moving in and through history to achieve the divine purpose and to bring into being a new reality that conforms to the creative intent of God for human life and the life of the cosmos. An eschatological reading of theology – as I understand the term - is entirely consistent with what we have been calling “anticipatory” in the sense that it seeks to construct a theology that describes the new reality God is creating.

Thirty years ago, my seminary alma mater paid little attention to eschatology. Rather, the faculty understood its primary task to teach the anamnetic aspect of theology. Thus the first and basic course was “Reformed Theology” and was taught historically. There was almost no mention in the Reformed Theology course of eschatology, and when it was mentioned it was with the clear implication that we didn’t need to worry about the “sweet bye and bye.” There was almost no consideration in that basic course of the church as an eschatological community, seeking to order its life and values according to the values of God’s new reality. There was little to no awareness in ethics instruction of how the vision of God’s coming kingdom might transform our ethical categories and remake our moral values, either individually or corporately. There was no discussion in seminars on exegesis on how the Bible shapes the faith community’s vision of God’s emerging new reality.

Things have changed, to at least some extent. In several seminaries, the practices and methods of constructive theology are taught as a first and basic course, so that students begin their exposure to theology with the presumption that theology is first and foremost a constructive and anticipatory task. In others, more attention is being paid to eschatology, particularly in an effort to counteract the influence of popular millennialist and dispensationalist constructions, but also in an effort to articulate an alternative to both social gospel optimism and cultural assimilation.

I am convinced, however, that eschatology has a positive vision to offer, one that it is timely and even crucial for the church. It seeks to answer such questions as: what does it mean to be the “body of Christ,” if Jesus Christ is God’s eschatological reality, revealed proleptically? How does God’s revelation of the human future in Christ alter and reshape our present lives and the life of the church in the world, if the church is truly “the sign in and for the world of the new reality?” Such questions are simultaneously anamnetic and anticipatory; they seek to understand the power and pattern of God’s intended future by learning from the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, the revelation of that future. Without doubt, the study of the history of doctrine is the study of the way in which the community of faith has understood (and misunderstood) that apostolic witness. But an eschatological, anticipatory approach to theology is not satisfied with answering the question, what *did* it mean? Rather, it always also asks: what *does* it mean, and what difference will it make?

The *Book of Order* of the PC(USA) has, in my judgment, pointed the way to an answer to this question in its Chapter Three, “The Church and It’s Mission.” While the entire chapter provides food for considerable ecclesiological thought, I want to lift out in particular G-3.0200:

- 3.0200: The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity.
- a. The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.
 - b. The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world:
 - (1) Sin is forgiven.
 - (2) Reconciliation is accomplished.
 - (3) The dividing walls of hostility are torn down.
 - c. The Church is the body of Christ, both in its corporate life and in the lives of its individual members, and is called to give shape and substance to this truth.

Note the strong anticipatory character of the language: the church is called to demonstrate the “intent” of God, to be the “sign... of the new reality.” The imagery is deliberately eschatological: “new creation” and “new humanity.” And the *Book of Order* makes an explicit connection between Jesus Christ as the embodied new reality of God and the church as the “provisional demonstration” and “sign” of this new reality, to which it is called to give shape and substance.

This new reality is characterized by three virtues that identify it wherever it occurs: *humility, reconciliation, and trust*. *Humility* is the acknowledgment that the church’s identity is grounded in the forgiveness of its sinfulness. This acknowledgment implies a prior awareness and confession of sin. That is to say, the church cannot meaningfully sustain a prideful insistence on its own ultimacy. To the contrary, any examination of its history quickly establishes the many examples of our impurity and failure. Indeed, any ultimacy visible in the church inheres in the lordship of Christ, and any righteousness we have is due to our participation in Christ’s righteousness. To the extent that we can claim any ultimacy at all, it is as we strive to embody the new reality God is creating. In this sense, our humility about ourselves is eschatological and hopeful: it recognizes that we are not yet what we will be as God continues to create the new reality in us.

Reconciliation is the commitment that none of God’s people shall be “left behind” as God accomplishes that reality, and so none should be omitted or excluded in the church’s efforts to demonstrate that reality. The work of reconciliation is the centerpiece of Paul’s language in 2 Cor 5:16-21; Paul makes it clear that, through Christ, we are both ourselves reconciled to God and charged with the ministry of reconciling the world to God. The work of reconciliation thus lies at the heart of ecclesiology; it is part of the identity of the church at all levels and in all its entities and institutions. It is significant to note, however, that reconciliation – in either 2 Corinthians or G-3.0200 – is not a matter of commonality of experience, agreement in doctrine, or concurrence on questions of polity. Rather, it is a common recognition that we are made being made one with God through the reconciling work of Christ, and we are called to oneness with others whom Christ has similarly reconciled. Our reconciliation is with God, and only as that is true are we reconciled with others. The common life of the church is characterized by this calling: we are brothers and sisters in Christ and are called to live as such. Simultaneously, we betray this calling by our all too often warfare with each other within the church. Yet we do not and cannot allow our betrayal to obscure God’s intent or defeat our commitment to embodying it. In this latter

sense the ecclesiastical work of reconciliation is eschatological and hopeful, in that it calls us to live out a virtue that is not yet fully realized but is ongoing through Christ.

Trust is the result of the reconciling work of God in Christ. The description of the new reality of God in G-3.0200 concludes with the image from Eph 2:14 in which Christ has “torn down the dividing wall”, which the writer of the letter goes on then to define as *echthran* – “the enmity” between Jew and Gentile. Some have argued that this image is drawn from the balustrade, or wall, that divided Jew from Gentile convert in the Temple in Jerusalem.³ As the formerly antipathetic communities of Jew and Gentile are drawn together by “one Lord” into “one faith” through “one baptism” to be reconciled to the “one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:5), they are called (metaphorically) to tear down the balustrade, to put aside the “enmity” that has separated them, and in its place to live in new relationship with one another:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1-3).

Trust, like love, is not earned; it can only be given. Nothing one can do can induce another to trust him or her. No matter how “trustworthy” one’s actions, the one who trusts may always choose not to trust, rendering the trustworthiness of the other’s behavior moot. Conversely, no matter how untrustworthy are the actions of another, the one who trusts may always choose to grant the trust. Trust is thus not reactive but proactive; it grows not out of what the trustee has done in the past, but out of the sense of identity the one who trusts has of him or herself.

For the reconciled community of the church, our identity is grounded in the call to embody God’s new reality. To the extent that this new reality is reconciled to God and to others, it is the foundation of trust. God in Christ has called us into new relationship, and has entrusted the ministry of that new relationship to us. As we live out the eschatological call to demonstrate that new reality, we must “tear down the dividing wall ... of enmity” and replace it with trust in one another.

In their efforts to prepare students for the tasks of ministry in a church that seeks to be the “provisional demonstration” of God’s new reality, theological faculties would do well to keep this section of the *Book of Order* before them, and to ask how the aspects of instruction embody or address these eschatological virtues. It is to this matter that we now turn our attention.

NOTES OF THE COMING CHURCH

What does this church that is the “provisional demonstration” of God’s new reality look like? How do we go about preparing students for ministry in such a church? Classically, when the church has sought to define itself, it has turned either to descriptions of its being or of its functions. Both are readily available in the confessional tradition. The Nicene

³ See, for instance, Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Interpretation*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991, pp.34-35.

“Marks” of the church – one, holy, catholic, and apostolic – have typically been the focus of ecclesiological study; these “Marks” describe the *being* of the church. For Reformed communions, the “Notes” of church have captured the function of the church, what the church that is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” is called to *do*.

In the previous paper, I tried to suggest, using the work of Jurgen Moltmann as a guide, that the classic description of the “true Kirk” contained in the Scots Confession (*Book of Confessions*, 3.18) might best be understood and appropriated from an eschatological point of view. I suggested there that,

- The Word of God is “truly preached” to the extent that preaching articulates the invitation of God to believers into the new reality God is constructing in Christ and to shape their lives according to its norms and values;
- The sacraments are “rightly administered” to the extent that they become not merely remembrances of past sacred actions or rites of inclusion, but “the means of grace”; that is, they become the portals through which it is possible to enter and participate in the new reality that God is constructing in Jesus Christ; and
- Ecclesiastical discipline is “uprightly ministered” to the extent that it shapes and forms the community of believers called into God’s new reality according to the norms of that reality.

In what follows, I want to explore what it might look like to ground theological education in the “Notes”, understood eschatologically. In each case, I will try to suggest what such an eschatological or anticipatory understanding might offer, and how it might be characterized by the eschatological virtues of humility, reconciliation and/or trust.

“True” preaching as open-ended preaching. Preaching has been the source of most of the major revivals of Christian communities throughout history. Indeed, preaching itself has undergone something of a revival since the conclusions of pundits in the late 1960s that preaching was dead and *passé*, and that modern people had moved beyond their willingness to listen to lecturers ensconced in elevated pulpits. Beginning in the early 1970s, Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, Charles Steimle, and other homiletical luminaries led the way to a new form of preaching, one that incorporated narrative not merely as anecdotal exemplification of a propositional point, but as the centerpiece of the sermon itself. Preaching on the parables of Jesus or on any of the multitude of biblical narratives became the norm in mainstream Protestant pulpits, and congregations found that they were engaged as much by the story as by any “moral” or lesson deduced therefrom.

More recently, however, homileticians like Campbell, Buttrick, and Long⁴ have argued that the real function of preaching is not to “tell stories” but to invite, encourage, and urge the hearer to see his or her own story as part of the larger meta-narrative of the new reality of God, and shape his or her own life according to its norms and values. While not devaluing the importance of “stories” as part of preaching, Campbell *et al.*, would have us remember that it is finally the greater “story” of God’s new reality anticipated and revealed

⁴ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987; Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Post-Liberal Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997; Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*. Second edition. Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox, 2006.

in Jesus Christ that matters. This newer approach to homiletics does not, as far as I can determine, have a convenient label by which it can be readily signified in conversation. For want of a better term, I am increasingly coming to rely on the term “open-ended” as a descriptor for this sort of preaching, because it implies that the story of faith does not yet have an end but is rather ongoing and oriented toward the continuing creativity of God. The task of preaching is to pull the gathered community into a future that is still being written, even if its outlines are already clear to us in Christ.

It seems to me that this open-ended view of preaching accords precisely with the eschatological and anticipatory theology I have sought to describe in the previous section. Grounded in the revelation of God’s intent in Jesus Christ, this sort of preaching nonetheless impels the hearer forward into the constantly-forming new reality. Far from seeing salvation as a *fait accompli*, those nurtured in open-ended proclamation understand themselves to be part of what Buttrick calls the “being-saved” community, emphasizing the ongoing, unfolding, living aspect of God’s work in Jesus Christ.⁵ Far from conveying the impression that all the great theological and ethical questions are definitively settled by one or another scriptural proof-text, open-ended preaching calls on the hearer to struggle with the intersection of his or her own individual and corporate ethical dilemmas and the progress of the whole story of God’s engagement with humankind. Far from reducing preaching either to entertainment or to emotionalism, open-ended preaching engages the intellect as well as the emotions of the listener as he or she discovers the places of congruence and confluence between his or her own personal narrative and the greater narrative of the gospel.

Instruction in open-ended preaching is more self-consciously theological and exegetical, and less technical and rhetorical. At the heart, this open-ended preaching is funded by knowledge of and reflection on the revelation of God’s gracious involvement with humanity as witnessed in scripture. It is not greatly reliant on the study of classical rhetorical styles and the techniques of oral communication or literary plot development. It is not finally dependent on the preacher’s facility with electronics and visual imagery. This is not to say that these disciplines are irrelevant or unimportant, but it is to say that they are secondary and auxiliary. Open-ended preaching grows best in the fertile soil of high-quality reflection on the Old and New Testaments and theology.

Open-ended preaching has implications not only for homiletics classes but also for biblical studies, and especially for the teaching of exegesis.

Traditionally, exegesis has focused on exploring meaning “behind” the text; that is, in the circumstances – historical and theological – that led to the creation of the text and its placement in the canon. The questions asked by such exegetical efforts were such questions as: What was the historical circumstance out of which this text (or book) arose? What do we know of its source history or redactional life? Are we able to discern earlier, perhaps oral forms or genres that define or limit the field of meaning for the text? What was the intent of the author in creating this text?

⁵ Buttrick, *op.cit.* pp.277-278.

Seeking meaning “behind the text” is not without value, but it is also not finally the most productive of value for the proclamation that is the desired end result of exegesis. Such questions as those in the previous paragraph continue to have meaning, not merely for historical study but for exegesis and preaching as well. At the very least, they remind us that there is a historical, cultural, and philosophical distance between the world of the text and the situation of those who hear and read it in the present context. They also remind us that, whatever the meanings have been attached to the text by subsequent generations of interpreters, there was an original context in which these words had a particular meaning and value. But this fact also points to the limitation of historical-critical methods: by asking exclusively what the text *meant* in its original context, these methods largely avoid the question of what the text *means* in its present context.

An exegetical process that is tuned to open-ended preaching, while it does not ignore historical categories, focuses to a greater extent on the literary and theological aspects of the text, seeking meaning “in front of” the text, or in the realm of the text’s interaction with the reader. Such exploration starts with linguistic analysis – how the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the text function to shape meaning. It explores literary issues from the simple assignment of boundaries and attention to literary context to the more complex assessment of internal structure. It assesses the contents of the text as a whole, exploring the value of metaphor, allusion, and theology. It invites interpretation and comment from subsequent texts, from the liturgy and kerygma of the church, and from voices in ancient or modern culture.

A central part of this more literary approach to the text is the sensitivity of the exegete to the contents and theological worldview of the text. The exegete should spend his or her largest commitment of time in this endeavor, exploring and engaging the whole pericope carefully and systematically, looking for the themes, metaphors, images, and symbols that the text uses to communicate. It is particularly concerned to identify the places of congruence and connection between the theological worldview of the text and the cultural and philosophical worldview of its present-day audience.

The last stage of exegesis is crucial. Unlike other exegetical processes that see the end of exegetical work as a place for summarizing results, this process encourages the exegete into an act of imagination. It asks the exegete to articulate the invitation of the text to the hearer to enter the new reality God is creating, as that reality is expressed through the text, so that the identity of the reader/hearer is formed and ultimately transformed by the world of the text. This is not a summary of exegetical results, reported in brief fashion; it is not a restatement of the “message” of the text (as if a text has but one “message”). Rather, it is an effort, informed by the language and imagery of the text, to speak to the world on behalf of the text, to call the hearer into engagement with the movement of God to construct a new heaven and a new earth. It will, of necessity, be metaphorical in nature, and it will be profoundly eschatological, in that it articulates the hope of the believing community for God’s redemptive and recreative work.

This open-ended vision of both preaching and exegesis is thus eschatological, in that its fundamental orientation is toward the call of God to the hearer into a new reality that God continues to shape and form. It is a reality consistent with the revelation of God’s work in the world expressed in scripture, but it is also and simultaneously new and engaging,

because each individual hearer and each community of faith is being called to find itself and its mission in that being-formed reality. Far from being antiquarian or archaeological in nature, exegesis and preaching shaped by this notion of open-endedness is oriented toward the future, always seeking to engage the community in imagining its place and purpose in light of that future.

Open-ended preaching is also characterized by a sense of humility, in that it understands that the Bible and the narrative of God's gracious intent for human life sets the agenda for preaching. It thus recognizes that, in preaching, God's eternal actions have primacy of place, rather than permitting the transient needs or passing curiosities of the community in the moment to make the determination of the word to be heard. Open-ended preaching appreciates the fact that the function of preaching is to summon the hearer into the new reality, and so expects more of its listeners than that they get a "fix" for whatever ails presently ails them.

On my way between home and office, I routinely pass a Protestant congregation whose pastor advertises the sermon for the next service on the church's marquee. Recent titles have included: "Ten Bible Principles for Investing Your Money," "Five Bible Rules for Raising Your Children," and "How to Affair Proof Your Marriage." I am sure that the congregants appreciated the advice, but I cannot help wondering if, finally, such preaching lacks the sort of humility I am seeking to describe. It seems to assume that *my* concerns – about money, child-rearing, or marriage enrichment – are *God's* concerns, rather than transforming the world of my concerns to conform to the new reality God is creating. I therefore wonder if a congregation fed on this homiletical diet is in any meaningful way shaped into the new community of faith, called out of the world and into the sacred reality of the reign of God.

Sacraments as portals into the new reality. For many years, especially in the wake of calls for "social relevance" arising amid the upheavals of the mid-twentieth century, but also as a result of the kerygmatically-grounded theology of Karl Barth, sacramental theology suffered a serious decline among the priorities of seminary curricula. Not coincidentally, emphasis on the use of liturgy and the rites of the church suffered as well, since these aspects of the church's life were regarded (again, quite wrongly, as it turned out) as being of less consequence than the act of proclamation. Such curricula were wrong on at least two counts: 1) they failed to recognize the kerygmatic value of the sacraments, and 2) they assumed, implicitly or explicitly, that the sacraments were mere "rites" or "memorials", thereby undervaluing them as means of God's grace.

More recently, the liturgical renewal movement has helped to remind clergy and academia alike of the integral connection between liturgy, sacraments, and preaching, and has led to a revival of interest in sacramental theology in both church and academy. Seminaries now frequently offer – and even require – courses that connect theological discussion of the sacraments with various aspects of the church's mission.

As emerging pastors in the life of the church, students in Reformed seminaries need to develop a revitalized sense of the importance of the sacraments in the life of the faith community. The church they will serve exists in a culture caught in the tension between two competing visions of sacramental life and practice. The first is fundamentalism, which

understands the sacraments (if at all) as memorial rites commemorating sacred moments from the distant past. In such a context, the Reformed church offers an alternative view: that, as the church participates in the sacraments, it is not merely remembering, but also participating in the eschatological and anticipated reality of Christ. Students need to have a deep appreciation of our faith that, as the community gathers around the table, Christ is truly and powerfully present in the gathering. Students need to appreciate that it is nothing less than the Spirit of God that acts through the waters of baptism to unite new believers and their children to the family of faith, shaping us into the community of God's new reality.

At the other end of the cultural sacramental spectrum is the second vision; for want of a better term we shall call this view "ritualism." This view regards ritual as existing for its own sake, or for the sake of fostering an enthusiastic or even ecstatic state on the part of the participant. The emphasis is on the individual and his or her experience, rather than on the community. By contrast, a Reformed view of the sacraments has held that the sacraments are not a private act, even one done "within the heart" of the believer otherwise gathered with the community. Rather, baptism is a public act, in which the believer or the believing parents of a baptized infant publicly announce their faith, and in which the congregation publicly claims responsibility for the nurture of the infant's faith and/or welcomes the baptized into the community. Similarly, the Eucharist is not primarily an internal experience of Christ's presence, but the occasion in which the believer sees Christ's presence in the gathered community and visible to the eyes of faith.

Reflection on, administration of, and participation in the sacraments is an eschatological act, insofar as we are conscious of the fact that the sacraments anticipate a new reality, even in the midst of the old. To celebrate baptism is to claim that the baptized belong together to a community of believers called out of the world and into relationship with God, even if the dimensions of that relationship are not altogether clear. In baptism, we receive and claim for others the promise that the community of faith will nurture and surround us, modeling for us (and, by extension, to the world) the look and character of God's new reality, in which all are included and none left out. In the Lord's Supper, we gather at table in anticipation and partial fulfillment of the heavenly banquet, "showing forth the Lord's death until he comes again."

As an eschatological act, the sacraments exemplify eschatological virtues. The sacraments are acts of humility and trust, precisely because they remind us that our lives and our salvation depend not on our worth or moral purity, but on God's grace, of which the sacraments are (along with preaching and prayer) the ordinary means. The sacraments thus teach us to be circumspect about our own loveliness and the salvific significance of our efforts, and they encourage us to entrust ourselves to a power over which we have no control or influence. We rely for the most important aspect of our spiritual lives not on our own abilities but upon the graciousness and favor of a sovereign God into whose loving care we entrust ourselves and our salvation. To appreciate this is to come to the table accompanied by a deep sense of humility: we receive there the blessings of a grace far beyond our ability to imagine, let alone command, and yet a grace that is "given for you" in the most profound and intimate sense. Calvin understood this notion of God's *condescension* to us in the Eucharist:

An, indeed, we must carefully observe that the very powerful and almost entire force of the Sacrament lies in these words: “which is given for you,” “which is shed for you.” The present distribution of the body and blood of the Lord would not greatly benefit us unless they had once for all been given for our redemption and salvation (*Institutes*. 4.17.3)

And the sacraments are also reconciliatory acts. The sacraments stand at the juncture between emotion and reason, between tradition and contemporaneity. They are a bridge that unites the present with the ancient practice of the church, as well as being the place in the life of the faith community where all persons – regardless of their spiritual or intellectual type – can find access to the grace that is the source of the community’s life. At font and table, all differences of race or wealth or conviction are laid aside, and we share in the oneness that the unity of Christ. Perhaps even more importantly, the sacraments force us out of the private experience of spiritual formation and into the world in which God’s new reality is being built and the reconciliation of God’s people is being accomplished.

In his discussion of baptism, Gordon Lathrop has captured the eschatological reality and reconciliatory power of the sacraments well. Lathrop points to the wide variety of interpretations of baptism to be found in the New Testament, all of them rooted in the eschatological vision of invitation into the community grounded in God’s new reality:

Most of them can be traced to varying ways of asserting that the *eschaton* is occurring in Jesus Christ and is encountered in the washing which is into him and the assembly which that washing establishes. Thus baptism is preparing the community for marrying God (Eph.5:26; *cf.* Ezek16;1-4). Baptism is the making of a new people of priests (1 Pet 1:22 – 2:10). Baptism was prefigured by the flood and in it a community stands with the resurrection of Christ in appeal to God (1 Pet 3:21). Baptism is the coming of the eschatological promise and the forgiveness of sins to those who are being added to the assembly (Acts 2:38-41). Baptism is the rescue from the darkness and transfer to the dominion of Christ, in whom is forgiveness of sins (Col 1:13-14) Baptism is rebirth and renewal for the unrighteous through the outpoured Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5-6). It is enlightenment, tasting the heavenly gift and sharing in the Spirit (Heb 6:2-4). It is entering through Jesus into the new sanctuary, bodies washed with pure water(Heb 10:22). Baptism is all people, men and women, Jew and Gentile, being clothed in Christ (Gal 3:27-28). Baptism is being plunged into Jesus’ death; it is being buried with Christ in order to be raised with him in newness of life (Rom 6:1-11; Col 2:12).⁶

Lathrop cautions against reading the ritual of baptism in exclusionary or separationist terms; baptism is not about purity and isolation from the world. Rather, baptism begins in the recognition of the solidarity of the baptized community with the world of sin and need:

Baptism constitutes the “holy people,” who are naked and needy, being forgiven, being drawn from death. Baptism gathers an assembly into Christ and so into identification with the situation of all humanity, not into distinction and differentiation. Paradoxically, Baptism is the washing that makes us unclean, with all

⁶ Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, pp. 178.

the unclean and profane ones of the world. In Christ, Baptism makes us part of humanity, witnesses to the grace of the triune God for us all.⁷

An appreciation of the sacrament as portals into God's new reality goes further than definitions of the sacraments themselves. Rather, the sacrament is rightly administered when it is a regular part of the liturgy of the church and in that context understood as the place where we touch and are nourished by the means of grace. In current usage, however, liturgical practice varies widely and often swings wildly between loosely organized contemporary and rigidly adhered-to traditional models (and every permutation in between). Yet is it not true that a lively liturgy that emphasizes the importance of the sacraments even on those occasions when they are not being actively observed is both engaging and nurturing of a congregation's theological and spiritual sophistication?⁸

While sacramental life finally is a property of the congregation, there is still a significant role seminaries can play in preparing students to participate in and lead that life. Seminary faculties can make a significant difference in the liturgical awareness of students in preparation for ministry in several ways. First, they can continue to encourage reflection and discussion of the relationship between theology and the sacraments, requiring that students think, talk, and write about both the grounding of sacramental practice in theology and the impact of sacramental practice on faith formation and development. This is particularly important in educational ministry among children and young people, but is increasingly relevant to an adult population that comes to church membership and worship participation without prior exposure to models of sacramental theology other than memorialist or ritualist views. In a society as avowedly eager for experiences of the in-breaking of the divine into everyday reality, the sacraments and reflection on their meaning point the way to a powerful spirituality.

Second, seminary faculty can encourage exploration and innovation in sacramental practice, especially in the context of teaching and learning about the phenomenon of emergent worship. As an increasing portion of the church grows weary with the "worship wars" of the last two decades, more and more are exploring what it means to worship God in ways that capture traditional spiritual and liturgical practice in new format. Students entering ministry in this context need preparation in interpreting the meaning of these ancient rites to a new generation that has little experience with them.

Third, seminary faculty – and particularly those charged with teaching sacramental theology – serve the church well by their careful critique of both sacramental theology and sacramental practice to be sure that the church's celebration of the means of grace do not mask the presence of Christ more than they reveal it. In past eras, portions of the church believed it appropriate to segregate the distribution of the elements of bread and cup so that white slave owners on the ground floor of church sanctuaries received communion before

⁷ Lathrop, *Holy People*, p. 182

⁸ Reemphasizing the centrality of the sacraments can be as simple as rethinking the locations from which worship is led. For instance, offering the prayer of confession from the baptismal font and announcing the assurance of pardon while pouring or splashing the water therein brings into visible conjunction the sacrament of baptism and the acts of confession and forgiveness of sins. Or offering the prayers of the people from the Lord's Table visibly reminds the congregation that our "sacrifice" of praise, thanksgiving, and intercession are met at the Table by the one whose sacrifice we celebrate there.

and in different vessels than their African American slaves in the balcony. Such distinctions of practice belied the unity proclaimed in the liturgy. While the particulars may differ, the tendency to use the sacraments to reinforce our prejudices rather than to break down the dividing walls of hostility is no less virulent in the practices of the twenty-first century church.

Finally, seminary faculty should model liturgical leadership and sacramental administration both within and beyond the seminary community. While seminaries are not congregations, they are periodically worshiping communities, led by ministers of Word and Sacrament. Faculty who are ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament well serve the not only the seminary but also the church when they seek opportunities both to preach and to administer the sacraments, and do so with the same vigor as they engage in critical reflection on the disciplines of theology. Amid the intense environment of study, reflection, examination, and growth that is a seminary education, there is a need for students and faculty alike to be mindful that the church they both serve seeks an encounter with, and not merely secondary reflection on, the Christ accessible to us in the sacraments. And abroad in the church there is a need for seminary faculty to be seen and understood as connecting the reflective work they do with the regular preaching and sacramental practice of the covenant life. My own experience – as a seminarian, as a minister, and as a governing body executive – leads me to believe that these moments of worship and sacramental life within the shared faith community can be transformative.

Ecclesiastical Discipline as the Nurture of the Common Life. *Discipline* is a word with a tainted history in the church. It summons up images of stern, frowning divines handing out punishments for such sins as dancing or playing cards to innocents too young to restrain their enthusiasms, or worse, of inquisitorial condemnations of perceived heresy followed by burnings at the stake. In more recent years and in Presbyterian context, ecclesiastical discipline has come to signify the process by which one part of the church seeks to enforce its will and standards on those who defy that will and those standards. By “discipline” we have come to mean, at least partly consciously, the “Rules of Discipline” of the *Book of Order*, that carefully detailed document, written in watered-down “legalese”, that sets out the definitions, rules, process, and procedures for church trials. Most ministers and elders seek to avoid the use of discipline at all costs, simply because the end results contribute not to the reconciliation and restorations sought by the Preamble to the “Rules” , (*Book of Order* D-1.0101), but to dissention, discord, and ultimately dissolution.

If we are to be true to the vision of the church as the provisional demonstration of the new reality of God, this situation simply has to change. If it does not change, we will lose altogether the distinction between an ecclesiastical discipline motivated by the eschatological virtue of reconciliation and a secular judicial system dedicated to the adjudication of guilt and the assessment of punishment.

Ironically, this emphasis on legal action is almost precisely the opposite of what “discipline” is supposed to mean. As the term implies, “discipline” should really be about that process that shapes and forms us into the community of “disciples” – those who seek to follow the way of their Master, Jesus Christ.

Can “discipline” come to mean more than “judicial process?” Can we come also to understand by this term the norms and practices of our common ecclesiastical life that bind us together as a people covenanted to share faith and life? Can it come to mean the traditioning process whereby people in churches grow into and accept as second nature the Reformed ethos? Can it become the fertile field from which springs the self-understanding of faithful disciples and in which is nurtured the call to faithful service?

In this vein, I was struck by the comments of Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, in a 2003 article about recruiting candidates from among the young people of the church for lives devoted to service to Jesus Christ in ministry. Wardlaw speaks poignantly about his own experience of being nurtured by an “ecosystem” – a common ecclesiastical life that included his local congregation, its presbytery, and the church-related college (Presbyterian College) and seminary (Union-PSCE) he attended, all under the broad umbrella of the denomination (The Presbyterian Church in the United States) in whose bosom he was nurtured in faith and vocation. He calls for a “remembering” (i.e. a recalling) and a “re-membering” (i.e., a reconstituting) of the ecosystem of that common life, which he calls a “splendid chorus of voices”:

One of the great challenges of our time is that of reviving this splendid chorus once again for the sake of the church. At regional and national levels, such a vision requires that much energy and attention be given to inventing new models of denominational life and relationships. It calls for new infrastructures and peer-groups programs that can more effectively nurture and mentor would-be pastors, and pastor themselves, through many of the predictable critical junctures of ministry. It certainly demands that we rethink such persistent problems as inadequate salary levels for servants of the church. It compels us to find more effective ways of responding to the dispiriting levels of toxicity and conflict frequently apparent in congregations and judicatories that distract members and leaders from the church’s mission and often promote their premature departure. It suggests that, for the sake of the church both local and universal, sufficient attention be paid to removing obstacles that so often discourage talented men and women – young, middle-aged, and older – from even considering a church vocation.

But, above all other needs, the vision of a re-membered ecosystem depends, for God’s sake and for the church’s, upon new voices – in Sunday School classrooms, in college classes, over lunch, on a weekend retreat, or almost anywhere – assisting in someone’s discernment process by articulating a call that is hardly ever heard apart from a “caller.”⁹

Wardlaw is calling here for more than a renewed emphasis on clergy recruitment. He is imagining the renewal of the common life of the church, to be sure, in a way that nurtures and enables pastoral vocations, but also that nurtures and enables a revitalized sense of the church itself. In its broadest sense, this revitalized sense of the church is what we mean – or what we *ought* to mean – by “ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered.”

Seminaries, I would argue, can play a key role in “re-membering” this ecclesiastical ecosystem in at least two ways. First, seminaries must continue doing all they can do to nurture and support the pastoral calling. Such nurture and support includes recruitment on college campuses and in presbytery youth gatherings, as well as in local congregations; it also includes active support of continuing education and life-long learning on the part of pastors beyond graduation. Most of our seminaries already place a high value on both recruitment

⁹ Theodore J. Wardlaw, “A Chorus of Voices: Remembering and Re-Membering an Essential Ecosystem,” *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*. Spring 2003. p. 8.

and continuing education. But could more be done? Could seminaries have a more prominent place in presbytery meetings (the model of the Board of Pensions, whose regional consultants regularly make the rounds to presbytery meetings, suggests itself)? Could they be partners in planning “career day” events in presbytery youth ministries? Could seminaries and presbyteries work together to develop mandatory and accountable programs of continuing education for clergy?

Second, and equally significantly, seminaries can help reclaim the ecclesiastical ecosystem through redefining what the church means by “discipline”, by helping the church re-understand ecclesiastical discipline as something that takes place outside of polity class and permanent judicial committee hearings. At its simplest level, such a re-understanding can start with both faculty and administration being clear at every opportunity that the building of trusting and mutually accountable relationships that is part of the experience of seminary life also lies at the very heart of ecclesiastical discipline. Seminary communities are not congregations, but the skills and traits of trust, mutual compassion, and openness to learning that characterize the seminary experience are also desperately needed if we are to restore the ecosystem of the church.

Seminaries face a great threat to their capacity to teach and model the nurture of the common life in the increasing pressure to offer more and more courses and even entire degree programs on-line and in other distance-learning modes. While such electronic media offer the promise of convenience and reduced expenses to prospective students who don’t want to leave homes and jobs to pursue theological education, they also run the risk of depriving those same students of the experience in the nurture of the common life that only the closely-knit community of theological learning can create. Such media may be able to pass along the *information* that constitutes the body of knowledge of the faith, but they cannot substitute for the *formation* that takes place when disciples are gathered together for learning. They may be able to pass along the *magisterium* of the faith community, but they cannot replicate the *collegium* that is the faith community. A key to the future of the nurture of the common life of the church may be the seminary’s capacity to use electronic and distance media as aids to learning without permitting such aids to destroy the fabric of the faithful and scholarly community that nurtures collegial relationships among pastors.

I would argue that striking such a balance between individualized learning on the one hand and communal growth and common life on the other is a deeply reconciliatory act. It overcomes the isolation and alienation our society seems too ready to accept as a result of the explosion of individual electronic media. It is also an act of trust, in that it insists that learning – about theology, the bible, church history, preaching, etc – is at its heart relational. It reminds students that learning is incomplete and finally useless if it benefits only the learner; that knowledge and growth are communal in nature and belong to the realm of the common life.

CRITICAL AND CREATIVE REFLECTION ON TRADITION

In the previous paper, I offered the book of Numbers as a model for the situation of the present-day church, suggesting that Numbers is a book about transition: Israel in Numbers has left Sinai and but has not yet arrived in Canaan; it has witnessed the passing of the generation that witnessed the deliverance at the Red Sea and is now a generation that has

yet to witness the deliverance of God’s promise of a land; it is between the past in Egypt and the future in the promised land, between longing for what was and striving toward what will be.

It is precisely that “transitional” character, I would suggest, that makes it an important biblical metaphor for a church that finds itself in transition in many of the same ways. Generational transition is perhaps more pronounced in the 21st century American church than at any other moment in our history. Churches are caught in struggles over traditional versus contemporary styles of worship, “emerging” polities, and questions about purpose and practice that go to the very core of ecclesiastical identity. Speaking of this similarity of situation between Numbers and the church, Dennis Olson observes that Israel in Numbers is

... faced with many competing interests, groups, and issues associated with a tradition in some disarray struggling to define itself and its mission in the world. The church today faces a similar predicament in many contexts in the world. As has often been true throughout its history, the church struggles to discern its way forward in a cultural wilderness filled with competing temptations, conflicts over authority, and both the potential promise and problems involved in encountering the “other” in our society – people of other cultures, other faiths, and other concerns.¹⁰

How shall seminaries go about the task of preparing students in such a context?

I would begin to answer that question in a somewhat counter-intuitive direction: I believe one of the two most important things seminaries can teach emerging pastors are the *classical disciplines of theology*: historical and constructive theology (or, as we have spoken of them above, anamnestic and anticipatory), biblical studies (including the original languages), hermeneutics and homiletics, ecclesiastical history, and pastoral care.

The pressure to replace classical studies with “practical” courses is enormous. Churches want young pastors who emerge from the seminary cocoon fully ready to prepare budgets and build youth programs, equipped with mastery of the absolute latest evangelistic techniques guaranteed to grow a congregation. Why bother with ancient and classical disciplines like Hebrew or Greek, when BibleWorks 7.0 has already done the translation *and* the concordance work? Why spend time with Augustine and Calvin, or even Tillich and Barth, when the church to which they spoke is rapidly fading into the past?

The years spent in theological education are, for the great majority of ministers, the only years given over to the intense study and acquisition of mastery of these disciplines. It might even be said that the role of the seminary in equipping pastors with the mastery of classical theological knowledge amounts to a form of apostolic succession, in which the pastor is nurtured, trained, and guided in the *magisterium* of the faith and its proper use in the life of the church. If seminaries cave in to the pressure to modernize curricula at the expense of the classic body of theological knowledge, an irreplaceable aspect of the ecclesiastical “ecosystem” of which Wardlaw spoke in the citation above will be lost. The church will be infinitely the poorer for it.

¹⁰ Dennis Olson, *Numbers. Interpretation*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996, p. 8.

Having said this, however, I want to turn to the second vital thing seminaries can teach emerging pastors: *a capacity for critical and creative reflection on the tradition and classical disciplines of the faith*. In an effort to define what I mean, let me return again to the book of Numbers, and to the insights of Dennis Olson.

Framing the second part of Numbers is a pair of narratives that pose a legal case concerning the *nabalab*, the “inheritance”, the apportionment of land to be given to each of the clans and families of Israel when Canaan is conquered and the divine promise fulfilled. The *nabalab* is the direct and tangible evidence of the participation of each Israelite family in the grace and benevolence of God. Numbers 26:1-11 and 37:1-12 tell the story of the transfer of the *nabalab* of Zelophehad to his five daughters. In the first half of the narrative, Zelophehad, a Manassite, was father of five daughters but no sons, a fact of considerable importance since the inheritance of property in ancient Israel was patrilineal (passing from father to son). Zelophehad has died in the wilderness, leaving his daughters without connection to either ancestral house or apportioned land. In Num 27:1-11 they bring this fact to Moses’ attention, along with the request that the tradition of patrilineal inheritance be altered to permit the daughters to claim their father’s *nabalab* (v.4). Moses seeks direction from God, who instructs him that the daughters of Zelophehad are correct in their request to inherit their father’s property. The clear priority in the text is for the retention of the land within the family, even if it means sacrificing the cherished practice of patrilineal passage of the *nabalab*.

In the second of the two texts, Num 36:1-12, the matter of the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad is brought to Moses a second time, but now by elders of the tribe of Manasseh. The elders do not challenge the decision to award the *nabalab* to the daughters of Zelophehad, but they point out that, if the daughters marry outside the tribe of Manasseh, the *nabalab* would logically pass to any sons born of those unions, sons whose tribal identity would be determined by their non-Manassite fathers. Thus the land apportioned to Manasseh would be lost to other tribes, thereby conflicting with the principle that all Israel should maintain the inheritance of their ancestral tribes. Moses rules that the elders’ claims are also right, and declares as the solution to the potential dilemma that the daughters of Zelophehad shall be free to marry whomever they will, as long as the husband is from one of the clans of the same tribe as their father. The solution thus preserves both the right of inheritance for the women and the principle of retention of the *nabalab* within its originally apportioned tribe. Moses accomplishes this solution, however, by limiting the potential pool of marriage mates to the confines of the father’s tribe, a limitation the daughters of Zelophehad willingly accept (vv.10-12).

In his insightful treatment of this text, Olson offers this story as a model for the critical and creative affirmation of tradition. The concern of both the daughters and the elders pits two values – patrilineal inheritance and retention of God’s providential care – against each other, forcing Moses, the daughters, and the community as a whole to exercise critical judgment. Their responses identify the core values of the community: a confidence in God’s imminent fulfillment of the promise and a commitment to keeping the whole community represented in that fulfillment. At the same time, they are willing both to create new freedoms (the right of women to inherit land) and to impose limits on others (the requirement that the women must marry within their own tribe) in an effort to preserve and protect those core values. As Olsen observes,

The people of Numbers are a people on the move, and God and God's law move with them.... God's word is not a sterile and entrenched legalism, but a robust and living tradition that leans toward the future in hope and anticipation.¹¹

I suggest that this spirit of critical and creative reflection on tradition – or, in the case of theological education, on the classical disciplines of the faith – is precisely the function of a seminary. More important in view of the accelerating pace of change in the church, seminaries need to prepare emerging ministers with the skill of critical and creative reflection. It is not enough to know the content of the classical disciplines of the faith; one has also to be able to apply that knowledge in settings for which one's training did not prepare. Like Moses in Numbers, pastors have to be able to identify the core theological values at stake in a given ministry situation, and act in creative ways that uphold those values from the tradition while meaningfully addressing the emerging situation.

Examples of this sort of thinking are readily visible. One that is intriguing, both for its potential value and its possible pitfalls, is the so-called “emerging church” movement. The definition of an “emerging church” is still very much under negotiation, but thoughtful treatments of the subject point to precisely this twin desire to use and value tradition without becoming enslaved to it. Worship forms the center of such communities, but it is worship that is designed for small groups, often meeting in informal worship spaces and without highly skilled musical support. There is clear leadership that is prepared with solid theological education, but that is oriented toward the development of other leadership abilities among the congregants, as opposed to calling additional pastoral staff to meet emerging needs or fostering a hierarchical model of ministry. Teaching the faith is essential to emerging churches, but such teaching may take place in settings completely other than the traditional Sunday School classroom using the current denominational curriculum.

The risk facing the “emerging church” is that it may overemphasize creativity while underappreciating the importance of critical reflection on tradition. In the interest of making worship accessible to people who are unfamiliar with the history and language of the faith, such congregations often abandon important visual symbols and liturgical rituals that enrich the worship environment. In seeking to find ways to use electronic media for the purposes of teaching, such communities occasionally lose the face-to-face encounter that the classroom provides. In seeking to “level the field” of relationship between pastor and parishioner, so that the community is more democratic and less hierarchical, such churches often obscure the singular and vital role of the pastor.

The challenge before such congregations is always to ask how we can preserve and embody what it means to be Christian, Reformed, and Presbyterian, without becoming enslaved to the forms and styles of former embodiments. Rather than abandoning liturgy for confession and pardon, can emerging congregations discern new liturgy that powerfully incarnates our human need for confession and mercy and God's constant readiness to forgive? Instead of converting the gospel into an individualistic exchange between the believer and Christ, can emerging churches find ways to move believers into closer communion with one another and simultaneously into meaningful and transformative

¹¹ Olson, *Numbers*, p.166.

engagement with the world? Will the next generation of believers, having been nurtured in the educational styles of the emerging church, have an understanding of the essentials of critical study of the bible, or will a simplistic literalism come to dominate the biblical view of the emerging church because it is easier to convey?

Seminaries must endow their graduates with the capacity to address these questions (and thousands more like them) as they prepare students to serve the church of the next decades. We cannot know what that church will look like or where it is going. What we can know is where it has come from and what its core values have been. The very best training graduates can have is a thorough grounding in those core values, coupled with a capacity to reflect critically and creatively on them as they seek to lead the church toward its future.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The suggestions I have offered in these pages do not seem to me to be radical departures from the work already being done by our seminaries in preparing emerging pastors for service. Rather, they seem more a matter of emphasis and environment than of reorientation. I am principally suggesting that seminaries – as, indeed, I hope the whole church – should take seriously the claim of our ecclesiology that we are “the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity” and “the sign in and for the world of [God’s] new reality.” I believe that an anticipatory stance toward theology – one that asks what it means to live out of the values of the new reality God is creating – will move us in that direction. Those values are expressed in what I have called “eschatological virtues” – humility, reconciliation, and trust.

I have also suggested that the basic mission of the church is captured well in the Reformation “Notes” – preaching, administration of the sacraments, and ecclesiastical discipline. However, I have argued that each of these notes needs to be understood broadly and with an eschatological frame of reference. I have tried to show how an emphasis in each area lives out humility, reconciliation, and/or trust, and thus embodies an eschatological ecclesiology. Seminaries will render their best service to the church as they lift up the mission envisioned in the Notes as a program for the education for ministry.

I have suggested that seminaries must teach not only the classical core curriculum of theological education, but that they must nurture in students the capacity for critical and creative reflection on the *magisterium* captured by that curriculum. This is not to say that the church can afford for seminaries to abandon the teaching of the classical disciplines of the faith; to the contrary, in the face of rapid change a mastery of the classical knowledge of the faith is more necessary than ever. But that knowledge must always be offered and evaluated with an eye toward what God is calling the church to become.

As a last word, it bears observation that PC(USA) seminaries as a group and individually do an extraordinary job of offering solid preparation to candidates for ministry of Word and Sacrament. These comments are intended to apply a particular ecclesiological idea – the idea that the church should seek to be the “provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity” – to the task of theological education. They are not a program for a broad-scale overhaul of our system of theological education, or of seminary curricula in particular. My hope is these ideas may offer a stimulus to conversation among seminaries,

presbyteries, and the church as a whole about our future and how we prepare the leadership to lead us toward it. It seems to me that the time for that conversation has come.