

Reclaiming the Education of Our Lutheran Heritage

by

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The education of our Lutheran Heritage is inextricably bound to our theology and the theology of our Lutheran heritage is utterly, inherently, and to its core, dialectical. At many a CCLE conference have I explained how I teach in tandem dialectic and rhetoric to cultivate wisdom and eloquence. My RhetoricRing.com features myriad resources for parents and teachers who wish to learn how to teach rhetoric classically. On this occasion I will focus on dialectic. Dialectic dominates the documents of our confession. It is evident in the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Solid Declaration*, and, in a quite overt fashion, the *Epitome of the Formula of Concord* (organized as it is into negative and positive theses). It gives form to the catechisms of Luther. The certainty in the “this is most certainly true” is a product of the dialectic by which such conclusions are drawn. The prominence of the “both/ands” of Lutheran theology attest to the primacy of dialectic in our theology, and Classical Lutheran education, since it is deeply catechetical, is positively teeming with our theology.

Dialectic is not easily reduced to rational formulae, so it is imperative that, as we attempt to understand its ubiquitous role in our Lutheran pedagogical heritage, the approach be simultaneously both methodical and nuanced. (If I may be permitted one nuance at the outset . . . It is ironic that Lutheranism is so utterly dialectical but, on the other hand, not rationalistic. It is important here to point out that I did not say “non-rational.” Not being given to rationalism must be distinguished from “being non-rational.” This is an important reason to prefer, following Dorothy L. Sayers’ lead in “The Lost Tools of Learning,” the second stage of the trivium as “dialectic” and not logic. Logic, approached exclusively from a formal perspective, will not bear the same fruit, in terms of practical wisdom, that can be realized through training in dialectic. Let me return to being methodical!) First, I will provide an overview of Aristotelian dialectic, second, let us explore the differences between Aristotelian and Hegelian dialectic, third, let us explore various ways in which that dialectical method shapes our theology, and, finally, I will suggest strategies for teaching dialectically, so that our heritage will bring forth fruit, at least, in this next generation. We are here because God has given us the solemn charge of equipping the next generation of Lutherans for two things: to embrace our creedal and confessional faith and to serve our neighbor! The latter requires only that we walk in Christian liberty; the former requires a traditional liberal arts education; education that equips one to reason dialectically.

Aristotle’s *Topics* is explicitly concerned with formalizing the first set of rules for disputations and the label, “dialectician” is ascribed almost exclusively to competitors in mental gymnastics. However, a close reading of the text discloses Aristotle’s interest in applying dialectic to philosophical inquiry as well as to competitive debate. One learns there of the distinction between argument for intellectual sport and for the sake of learning. Aristotle’s final exhortation to the would-be disputant indicates his concern with the development of intellectual integrity: “Moreover, as contributing to knowledge and to

philosophic wisdom the power of discerning and holding in one view the results of either of two hypotheses is no mean instrument; for it only remains to make a right choice of one of them." Aristotle maintains this distinction between dialectical disputation and dialectical inquiry throughout his *Topics*. The clause, ". . . making a right choice of one of them," also underscores the distinction between Hegel's brand of dialectic and Aristotle's. Bear this in mind as we explore that distinction in a moment. For now, I will complete the sketch of Aristotelian dialectic.

Dialectic should be, according to Aristotle, understood also as "A process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries." The practice of dialectical disputation is indeed concerned largely with discovering arguments, but dialectical inference, dialectic in the broader sense, as a mode of reasoning, is a process of criticism and a way of securing the proof of propositions that are in doubt. So, the process of criticism, involves a means of "deconstructing" propositions, that is: defining key terms, consulting experience, and ferreting out the premises in which are rooted propositions under examination. By following those lines of inquiry one "reasons down to" the level of presupposition and therein lies the path that leads to the domain where ideas connect; where unity of knowledge resides, waiting to be discovered. To cultivate such mental abilities is a vital fruit of classical liberal arts learning. Liberal arts learning is integrated; the world of postmodern knowledge is fragmented. But for the Lutheran, this mental equipment is doubly important. More of that below.

Dialectic is, in the final analysis, exemplified in the Socratic method. As one reflects on the Platonic dialogues, two things are clear: (1) Socrates was serious about the pursuit of truth and, (2) The method by which Socrates pursues truth can be explicated. The Socratic method may be reduced to a three-step process: first, beginning with a proposition, then pushing it to its conclusion, drawing out implications, by means of question and answer, and, finally, application of the law of contradiction. The law of contradiction is what I. A. Richards calls a "rule of mind" and is first observed in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 1011^b:13 when he writes, "The most undisputable of all beliefs is that contradictory statements are not at the same time true." The law of contradiction is a statement about the manner in which the mind operates in the meaning-making process and it is at the operational core of dialectical reasoning. Our picture of Aristotelian (or, Socratic, or Platonic) dialectic is now fully developed.

Please realize however that, when our contemporaries speak of dialectic, they are likely referring to Hegelian, not Aristotelian dialectic because the former has much more currency today than the latter. Hegelian dialectic is a variation on classical dialectic that consists of three basic parts: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The synthesis arises out of the resolution between the extremes: thesis and antithesis. Hegelian dialectic does not reject contraries; it melds them. This

difference is vital because classical dialectic is useful for establishing foundational truth while Hegelian tends to be used for challenging tradition.

“But wait, Dr. Tallmon, we’re talking about Lutheran theology and pedagogy here. What about the ubiquitous ‘both/ands’ of Lutheranism? Aren’t they congruent with the Hegelian model?” Fully elucidating an answer to this insightful question is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, although the “both/and” *sounds* Hegelian, Hegelian dialectic is more related to social construction of knowledge (“truth is what we perceive it to be”) than “this is *most certainly* true.” The Lutheran “both/and” is a device that actually, in practice, upholds the law of contradiction beautifully! Take for example our signature refrain, “simul justus et peccator.” Lutherans’ use of this device is designed to underscore the truth that, in ourselves we are dirty rotten sinners, but, simultaneously, in Christ, we are justified before God. Ironically, though it appears to, it does *not* violate the law of contradiction because it highlights the distinction between our standing in Christ, versus a reliance on self. The contraries are not “resolved” or “melded” into a new synthesis. They remain unresolved; held in constructive tension. Luther’s *Small Catechism* also affords a ready example, not only of dialectic in our Lutheran theological heritage, but of grammar and rhetoric as well. But first, a preliminary observation about the trivium.

There are two important aspects one must bear in mind to appreciate the tools that constitute the trivium: they are taught in a way that is “age-appropriate” and each subject may be approached according to its grammar, its dialectic, and its rhetorical components. That is, the earliest stage of education is known, traditionally, as the “grammar stage” (hence, “grammar school”). This is the stage at which children learn the basic parts of language, how to write, and how to read. Once they have developed the cognitive abilities to understand more complex knowledge, they enter the dialectical phase of education; they learn the logic of the body of knowledge, along with rules of thought and disputation. According to Sayers, in the medieval classroom, children were not allowed to dispute with their classmates or tutor. They were expected to memorize, listen, learn, and keep quiet, not having yet cultivated the ability to engage in abstraction. When they were ready, in the upper grades, they entered the rhetoric phase, where they were invited to study the oratorical excellence of past masters, compose their own arguments, and engage in disputations with their peers and even their teachers. This is the stage in education where students are equipped to cultivate practical wisdom. The teacher focuses, at this stage, on equipping young minds with tools for building intellectual structures, so they will be at home in the realm of ideas, able to ferret out assumptions, respond intelligently and eloquently, with insight, to the arguments encountered in the course of the life lived well. From grade 5-8 they learn how to engage ideas; 9-12 they apply what they’ve learned to cultivate their positions, defend and “prune” or refine them, and, finally, mixed with imagination, bring them into full bloom. Not that

students have “arrived” at graduation. Classical learning equips for lifelong learning. But, contrary to postmodern education, there are ample certainties that can be dialectically secured, giving one confidence (through eradicating contradictions in one’s thought life).

Luther’s *Small Catechism* is a grammar. In it Luther identifies the “six chief parts” of our confession. In other words, these are for him the six basic constituents of the Christian faith. Mastering them is a threshold to full participation in the one true faith. Grammar is about breaking knowledge down into its fundamental parts, to facilitate learning. In the process of mastering those parts, the mind is “well ordered”: Habits of systematic thought are cultivated. Aristotelian dialectic is highly implicated in that process of mental growth. Dialectic, as has been said, is a search for truth based on rooting out contradictions. It establishes a class by means of definition and partition, and examines the knowledge established by beginning with a proposition, drawing out implications, then, spotting contradictions. The point is to reject contradictory elements and embrace that truth which withstands dialectical scrutiny. Consider how most every clause in the explanations are divided into contrary elements by Luther’s interjection of “but.” Why? To hold in constructive tension the contrary elements. It is a methodology derived from disputations; from dialectic, and we see evidences of classical dialectic throughout *Luther’s Small Catechism*.

It is clear that Luther, in keeping with his classical training in the rhetorical arts, employs devices to facilitate learning and memorization. Doing so would come naturally for him. Take, for example, the explanations. The ubiquitous, “What does this mean?” the rhetorical question begins each explanation, and the repetition of “This is most certainly true” acts as a hammer of God, driving the lesson deeper and deeper into the soul of the beloved student. Consider the rhythm of: “He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. . . . For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.” Of course this use of couplets is deliberate. These rhetorical devices aid memorization; the rhythm established thereby helps the various lessons penetrate. It is a grammar, it employs rhetoric, and it is formed by dialectic.

Why is this important to know? Cultivating in our young charges appreciation of these forms, elements, and devices aid in memorization, first, but also develops in them habits of mind that make them more receptive to truth, better equipped for learning, and inclined to think in a principled, methodical fashion (“. . . a process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries.”) When our junior high and high school age students learn to engage in dialectical inference, to “parse out” arguments, and to ferret out assumptions, they will be placed in that state of mind where they can think with precision, think quickly on their feet, and follow an argument to its logical conclusion. In short, they will possess

the mental discipline and perspicuity, the fruit of the dialectic phase of the classical liberal arts, that orders the mind and enables one to embrace our creedal and confessional faith. Consider the words of *The Athanasian Creed*: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly” (emphasis mine). Or this: “He, therefore, that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity. Finally: except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.” This dialectical verbiage (because it presupposes the law of contradiction, definitions, which imply essences, and mutual exclusivity,) is inherently distasteful to the postmodern mind. The *Athanasian Creed* employs, indeed exemplifies, amplification, a key rhetorical device. Its treatment of the basic pillars “of the catholic faith” attests to its standing as a grammar. So, again, it takes liberal education to fully appreciate these dimensions of our creedal and confessional heritage. Which is to say, it takes liberal arts education, in dialectic, to be precise, to follow the Socratic Method. But Luther wasn’t the only one who employed the Socratic method.

The Socratic method is evident as well in Pauline epistles! (Remember: Paul was a Hellene.) Take *Romans 2 & 3* for instance. The “movement,” as it were, throughout Paul’s extended argument regarding the gospel (Jew versus Gentile under the Law, the purpose of the Law, Law versus Gospel, justification by faith versus by keeping the law) is a textbook example of dialectic. The author begins with a proposition (“For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” 2:12); raises a series of rhetorical questions (vv. 17-24); in order to draw out implications (vv. 25-27); identifies a contradiction, then resolves it (vv. 28-29). Chapter three begins with more rhetorical questions! (Please take a moment to identify these elements in Romans 3.) Rhetoric + Dialectic + Syllogistic logic (If one recognizes these dimensions of rhetorical and dialectical reasoning in scripture, along with the basics of biblical hermeneutics, one can follow the train of thought throughout an entire book!) Thus far we have overviewed Aristotelian dialectic, contrasted it with Hegelian, and examined examples of it in our creeds, confessions, and now, in the Bible itself. Without hearing and seeing and embracing there can be no reclamation. So we need to learn to teach dialect and dialectically.

How does one teach in a manner that will help us reclaim our heritage? How can we help our students develop “ears to hear” the type of Truth we believe, teach, and confess? Thomas Korcok sums up the Lutheran distinctiveness in a pithy way: Baptism, catechesis and vocation (*Lutheran Education*, 285). Christian liberal arts education equips one for Christian liberty. Scripture teaches that the Christian uses his liberty to serve others. Therefore, Christian liberal arts education equips one to serve others. In the final analysis, Christian liberal arts education forms wise and eloquent leaders

for church and state as well as wise management of hearth and home. Or, as Korcok taught at CCLE XI, beginning with the Great Commission: "Growth in Baptism requires study of God's Word. Right understanding of God's Word requires right education. Therefore, Growth in Baptism requires right education!" Right education is liberal arts education is dialectical.

So, how does one teach dialectic? At the risk of appearing to be a self-promoter (but, really, for the sake of brevity) I wish to here simply refer you all to the previous presentations mentioned at the outset: "Pre-modern Pedagogy for Postmodern Pupils" or "Teaching it Old School" or "Cultivating Wisdom and Eloquence." If you were to visit www.rhetoricing.com/rhetoric-and-dialectic you will find there a wealth of information on teaching strategies. Finally, a piece I published in *Logia* is supremely helpful in this regard ("Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in Thought, Word, and Deed. Eastertide 2012, 56-9).** I sincerely wish to hold meaningful dialogue with educators and parents along these lines, so I make all these resources available on my Rhetoric Ring in hopes that you will drop me a line so I can share what I know. This is why I got into teaching in the first place!

My desire to keep this brief notwithstanding, I will conclude with one practical tip regarding how I approached the teaching of dialectic in our unit on World War II this past school year. At the end of the year we held a debate. However, in order to prepare my 6-8 graders for that debate, we spent three months investigating positions in conflict, points in dispute, definitions at odds with one another, learned to write an affirmative case brief and crafted arguments to "practice debate" in anticipation of potential objections to our own points of view. (*Please teach your students to not confuse point of view with fact!*) BUT I did not attempt to teach them everything discussed in this essay. In Logic instruction, we learned fallacies. I gave them a primer on logic; a smattering of rhetoric. *Clue them in without overloading them.* Have fun. Circle concepts. Have fun. Connect the dots. Model for them how to "do the dialectic" For goodness' sake, don't "teach a stand-alone unit on logic." Have fun integrating logic and disputation into history, science, and literature! Speaking of fun, Sayers' "The Lost Tools of Learning" is really fun on this point: "Wherever the matter for Dialectic is found, it is, of course, highly important that attention should be focused upon the beauty and economy of a fine demonstration or a well-turned argument, lest veneration should wholly die. . . . at the same time both teacher and pupils must be ready to detect fallacy, slipshod reasoning, ambiguity, irrelevance, and redundancy, and to pounce upon them like rats."

** The ideas and strategies discussed in this paper, along with practical tips galore, are the focus of <http://www.rhetoricing.com/helps-for-classical-educators/> (scroll to the bottom of the page and see, especially, "more resources") If you need assistance, please contact yours truly at: dr.tallmon@trinitycheyenne.org

When one's aim is cultivation of mental habits one employs different methods than when one's aim is mastery of content or grammar. Practice precedes theory. This year I *do* plan, for the sake of returning students, to teach them how to "do the dialectic"! Then we'll debate some more. Stair-stepped. Circle concepts. Application. Upward spiral. It takes time. Oh. And don't forget to have fun! One last quip from Sayers for the sheer joy of it:

It will, doubtless, be objected that to encourage young persons at the Pert age to browbeat, correct, and argue with their elders will render them perfectly intolerable. My answer is that children of that age are intolerable anyhow; and that their natural argumentativeness may just as well be canalized to good purpose as allowed to run away into the sands. It may, indeed, be rather less obtrusive at home if it is disciplined in school; and anyhow, elders who have abandoned the wholesome principle that children should be seen and not heard have no one to blame but themselves (<http://www.gbt.org/text/sayers.html>--near the conclusion).

A loving parent would never send a teenager across a desert, equipped with only a pair of tennis shoes, a walking stick, a baseball cap, and a power bar. No. We want our children to flourish, so we give them all they need to succeed in endeavors where much more is at stake than crossing a desert. Much more. Since we are called to teach a faith the confession of which requires specialized "gear," our students must be provisioned accordingly.