

9.5 Theses on the Christian Identity of Augustana College

In the spirit of Brother Martin, in whose heritage we live, I offer these assertions for discussion, mutual understanding, and clarity. 95 theses would be more accurate historically, my hope is that 9.5 have a better chance of being read!

Identity

1. Christian identity is important, but unclear to this community.

If it is clear, please call Pastor Paul at x4805 and explain it to him.

I assert importance, because I hear it often. I assert unclear because when asked what is meant by Christian identity, people furrow their brow and at least to me speak more uncertainty than clarity. I seek clarity and understanding so that in the classroom, in admissions' conversations, on behalf of our community, people could speak with a collective as well as personal sense of what we mean by being Christian.

False starts

2. Assumptions about agreement do not fit a school committed to critical thinking.

We live in a day when many assume "Christian" means tacit agreement. We also live in a day that is profoundly aware of diversity. But challenging assumptions of agreement, I do not mean that we do not hold core values as clear and important, but we subject them to study and scrutiny. This both invites Christian faith into the academic work of our school AND supports academic exploration of our faith.

3. Our care for one another is insufficient basis of Christian identity.

Certainly it is Christian to care, and thankfully much care of students and colleagues is experienced in this place. The center of Christianity, however, is not our righteousness but God's righteousness in Christ mercifully extended to those who care incompletely and inconsistently. This frees us to admit that it often isn't clear what the "caring" thing to do is [see #2]. . . and even when it is clear, sometimes we refuse or fail to do this very thing.

Hope

4. Lutheran theology supports liberal arts, critical thinking.

The question that pervades our catechism is "What does this mean?" With God as creator of all things, with God's grace as the freedom to trust redemption of all things, we are freed to question, to discover, to grow because every assertion is incomplete.

Proposed identity

5. We are a Christian college because we are a community of worship.

Our daily calendar supports this assertion. Lutheran theology grounds this assertion [Augsburg Confession, article VII, claims that the church is present where the word is proclaimed and the sacraments administered] Worship is at the heart of faith for all Christian people. Our daily chapel seeks to receive and honor the witness of many denominations. Moreover, it is not only possible, it is wonderfully constructive for people who disagree about what prayer is to pray together.

This assertion not only makes concrete our Christian identity, but strengthens our identity as community.

Adjustments

6. Worship is a verb as well as a noun. . . it is something we do.

I do not hear people walk by the Elmen center saying “we have fitness” or by the library saying “we have wisdom.” I do hear people point to the chapel and say “we have worship.” Part of the strength of worshipping as the focus of our identity is it honors daily renewal of faithfulness the same way running and reading renews lifelong fitness and learning.

7. Students are taught by what we do as well as what we say.

Is worship perceived as a student opportunity? Are community and identity not applicable to all of us? I fully believe that if our community articulated and acted its conviction in worship that students would participate and learn. Our current level of practice may reflect a classic generation gap, “Dear students, do what we say, not what we do.”

Another consideration

8. Daily communal prayer is a wonderful antidote to the rampant pace of life in our time.

In a recent column Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “like other Americans, 95 percent of . . . students say they believe in God, but this belief offers them no relief from their exhaustion. Most will tell you that God expects the same things from them that everyone else does: high marks, full attention, top performance and complete devotion.” [Christian Century, Nov. 2, 2004, p. 33]

Sabbath may well be the most radical Biblical assertion of the Christian faith. God commands rest. God frees us to rest. Stopping is not only healthy, it serves imagination creativity, and care.

Reality check

9. How can the identity “community of worship” be lived in so that worship, time, togetherness, song and prayer are gifts and not burden?

At recent “all campus” worships, several staff commented they were in chapel for the very first time though they’d worked at Augie for years. How can tasks be arranged so that these colleagues and friends are free to come sometime? How can the invitation be extended?

I do not expect that suddenly this community will be in worship daily. I do think it’s reasonable that many of us could gather weekly. Is it more helpful to say, “We try to come once a week. . . on the day that works.” Or to say “Prayer is available M-W-F, but the community makes an effort to be together on Mondays [or whatever day] because we are a community of worship.

9.5 I could be wrong. If “community of worship” is not clarifying for our identity, what is?

Like I said, these assertions are for conversation and discussion. Teach me, dear colleagues!

Pastor Paul Rohde
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