

Tuesday, October 2, 2007

To: Members of the Northwestern College Faculty Assembly
From: Paul Kjøss Helseth, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Christian Thought
Re: My Role in Recent Events at Northwestern College

On Tuesday, June 26, 2007 I received a request from the Governance Committee of the Board of Trustees to participate in the meeting of the Board that was scheduled to take place the following weekend. I was asked to participate so that I could serve as a theological resource during the discussion of the doctrinal statement that would occur at the Friday afternoon and Saturday morning sessions of the meeting. I felt honored to serve the College in this capacity, so I devoted the following days to a review of NWC's doctrinal statement, and then participated in the – at times lively, at times disconcerting – discussion that took place during the Friday and Saturday sessions. When queried by one board member or another over the course of the weekend about my views on the current state of the institution, I made no secret of the fact that I have concerns about the direction and leadership of the College.

At the beginning of August, I was again contacted by a member of the Board, and later by the Chairman of the Board, and asked to be more forthcoming about my concerns regarding institutional drift at a private meeting with the Chairman of the Board, the President, and possibly others. I accepted the invitation to this meeting for two primary reasons. The first, I hope, is altruistic. I accepted the invitation because I felt called to articulate my concerns and to represent as best I could those of you who I know share them but were not given the privilege of a similar opportunity. Let me be clear at this point just so there is no confusion. I know that a number of you share my concerns because you have communicated your concerns to me. But I do not presume now – nor have I ever presumed – to speak for the entire faculty of NWC.

I accepted the invitation, secondly, for reasons having to do with a kind of self-interest. For some time, I have had the distinct impression that the College is embracing a more or less secular understanding of knowledge. According to this understanding – which I believe is manifest in the kinds of concerns I outline in the document I prepared for the meeting on August 23 – the truth claims of faith are of lesser significance than other kinds of truth claims, for the truth claims of faith are presumed to be beyond verification. While witting and unwitting secularists are willing to acknowledge that people of faith have religious convictions that are derived from a variety of sources, including religious texts like the Bible, they are unwilling to afford those convictions a decisive role in the life of the mind, for they presume that the substance of those convictions is utterly inscrutable, having no material bearing on the world in which we live. For those of you who are familiar with the history of Christian higher education in the United States, you will recognize that, if this impression is correct, then it is no merely academic concern, but a concern with profoundly practical implications for our students as well as for all of us, for it suggests that we at NWC are in the process of accommodating the very same assumptions that undermined the Christian witness of once distinctively Christian institutions like Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and St. Olaf. In short, I participated in the meeting because I am persuaded that acceding to such accommodation not only undermines the Philosophy of Education Statement of NWC, it makes us party to our culture's subversion of the truth that is at the formative center of the Christian worldview. This, I believe, is in no one's best interest – not mine, not yours, and certainly not our students.

For these and other reasons, then, I met on August 23, 2007 with President Cureton, the Chairman of the Board and two other board members, along with Drs. Tim Tomlinson and Douglas Huffman to present my concerns. At the end of the meeting I requested and was given the assurance that the document I had prepared would be distributed to all of the members of the Board so that they could have unfiltered access to the written record of my primary concerns if they so desired.

At this point I need to clarify a sentence in the email you received on Friday, September 14, 2007 announcing this special meeting of the Faculty Assembly. The email you received indicates that our documents “were prepared at the request of the chairman of the NWC Board of Trustees and discussed on August 23, 2007 in a special meeting with the President.” While our documents in fact were “discussed on August 23, 2007,” they were not prepared “at the request” of the Chairman of the Board, but on our own

initiative, and in order to safeguard the integrity of our testimony. We did not prepare these documents because we were asked to do so, but we did so precisely because we didn't want our testimony to be spun. We wanted to ensure, in other words, that the concerns we expressed at the meeting were represented fairly and accurately to members of the Board who were not present to hear the substance of what we had to say. To date, we have not been fully apprised as to exactly how the Chairman of the Board disposed of our documents.

While we are not aware of what impact, if any, our documents had on the deliberations of the Board, we are now quite happy that we prepared them, for the President, sadly, did not represent either our concerns or our intentions accurately in his address to the faculty on Wednesday, September 12, 2007. In my estimation, at least four points of clarification are therefore in order: 1) we have never suggested that the President is "intentionally" or "purposefully" leading NWC away from its historic commitments. Our attempts to account for what we regard as institutional drift have always included significant qualifications regarding what may or may not be the unspoken intentions of the leadership. 2) Our "key" concerns and the concerns of the Board members with whom we had contact prior to our meeting are simply not complementarianism and premillennialism, but the centrality of biblical truth and doctrinal integrity. In fact, the President's characterization of our primary concerns needs considerable massaging, for it elevates what are at best examples of primary concerns to the level of primary concerns themselves. 3) We have no desire to stifle debate or to quash academic freedom on one controversial issue or another. On the contrary, we are eager for NWC to be the kind of place where rigorous debate is encouraged, the kind of place where the "best ideas" – which according to our Philosophy of Education Statement are those that are grounded in the Scriptures – are allowed to win. Just so there is no confusion at this point, if this means that at the end of such a debate my cherished opinions on one controversial issue or another must be rejected because they cannot stand when subjected to penetrating biblical analysis, so be it. Finally, 4) we are not members of a subversive cabal that is attempting to take over the College. Agents of the College – including the Chairman of the Board of Trustees – solicited input from us and we obliged their solicitation. Please understand this: we did not pursue them; they pursued us. I think I can speak for Drs. Tomlinson and Huffman when I say that nothing that has transpired in recent weeks has been particularly enjoyable for any of us. It gave us no pleasure to communicate our concerns directly to the President on August 23, nor is it now especially heartening to know that colleagues with whom we have hitherto enjoyed amiable relations presently regard us as self-righteous ideologues at best, or seditious coconspirators at worst.

Let me conclude by granting that the President was right when he suggested on September 12 that our documents represent our perceptions, perceptions that some may regard as "misperceptions." That our perceptions are "misperceptions," however, is not something that the President or anyone else can simply assert, but rather must demonstrate, for simply saying something doesn't make it so. In like manner, just because we say something doesn't make it so. Just as no one should conclude that the President's perceptions are true simply because they are his perceptions, so too no one should conclude that our perceptions are true simply because they are our perceptions. So how should we proceed when we are faced with conflicting perceptions about consequential matters? I would suggest that as believing academics who claim to be Christ-centered and Bible-based we should subject these and other matters to rigorous analysis that is informed not by one ill-chosen proof text or another, but by the light that is afforded by the whole counsel of God.

With that in mind, let us gather as a community of Christian scholars not just to tell one another our stories, but to "reason together" (cf. Isaiah 1:18) and to spur one another on to seeing things more biblically and therefore more clearly.

Thank you for your time and attention. May God grant us grace and courage and wisdom as we strive to be good stewards of the sacred trust that is the high calling of Christian education.

Respectfully,

Paul Kjoss Helseth, Ph.D.