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"The Devil Much Prefers Blockheads and Drones": Martin Luther and Educational Reform

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The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is spurring renewed interest in Martin Luther and other Reformers. Luther's contribution to education is often overlooked, but this article argues that the importance of providing good schools and a quality education was a key part of Luther's Reformation agenda.

Introduction: Not an Argument, but a Plea

The 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation offers another opportunity to reflect on its meaning and ongoing importance. Martin Luther's personal role will doubtless be highlighted in the months and years ahead, but there is more to him than church reform, important as that was. Luther was a college professor—an educator—as well as a pastor, and his work as an educator retains its importance even today.

Unfortunately, knowledge of *Professor* Martin Luther and his work on education is limited and more obscure than knowledge about Luther the church reformer. Scan the indexes of major works on educational history, and while the names John Dewey, Johann Pestalozzi, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are frequently mentioned, few books say anything about Martin Luther.

Luther might be surprised by this, although I doubt he wanted to be famous at all. Still, those who have studied "Luther the Professor" believe that he saw teaching as the true vocation of his life; and it guided all his work as a church reformer.[1] 'Doktor Luther' was indeed a pastor, but it was his classroom and study where most of the issues of the Reformation were first sorted out. He saw himself as a "doctor of the Bible" first and foremost.[2]

As the humanistic currents of the Renaissance flowed through Europe, Luther and other university professors considered how these ideas might change their curricula.[3] It was as they made curricular changes that they

[1] Marilyn J. Harran, *Martin Luther: Learning for Life* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), 128, and Gustav Bruce, *Luther as Educator* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1928), 80.

[2] Bruce, *Luther as Educator*, 80.

[3] James M. Kittleson, "Luther the Educational Reformer," in *Luther and Learning: The Wittenberg University Luther Symposium*, ed. Marilyn J. Harran (Selinsgrove:

took up studying the text of the Bible itself rather than commentaries on it. Luther and his fellow professors had been working for some time to improve the curriculum at Wittenberg. He had remarked to the German nobility in 1521 that there was "nothing more devilishly mischievous than an unreformed university" and from 1517 onwards, he and his fellow faculty strove to improve the quality of their courses.[4] As is well known, once they studied the Bible itself, they began to see problems with the way the medieval church had understood certain doctrines. Educational reforms thus preceded and informed the church reforms; one reform movement helped the other.[5] This much can certainly be said about the Reformation: the professors' studies, research, and rediscoveries led to dynamic consequences.

Thirty years ago, at the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth, educational historian Richard W. Hibler wrote that Luther was "as revolutionary in his plans for reforming the schools of Germany as he was in his plans for changing the Church, yet few would recognize Luther as a great reformer of education as well" and urged more appreciation of his educational writings.[6]

It seems to me that it is appropriate to revive Hibler's concern now. Luther represents a time when the disciplines of education and theology were on friendlier terms than they are now. Education and theology are both academic fields that contribute to human flourishing. Luther clearly understood that, and saw them as complementary. He articulated broad, humane goals for education that contributed to the welfare of both general society and the church. The well-being of the school contributed to the well-being of the church, as Luther saw it. In one of his "Table Talks," Luther said that when things go well with schools, things go well with

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Susquehanna University Press, 1985), 95. See also Robert Rosin, "Luther on Education," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

[4] Martin Luther, "Address to the German Nobility Concerning Christian Liberty," in *The Harvard Classics,* vol. 36, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: Collier and Sons, 1910), 338–339. See also Timothy Wengert, "Higher Education and Vocation: The University of Wittenberg (1517–1533) between Renaissance and Reform," in *The Lutheran Doctrine of Vocation*, The Pieper Lectures, vol. 11, ed. John A. Maxfield (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008), 4–5, and Harran, *Luther: Learning for Life*, 172–175.

[5] Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements, Vol. II: The Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1987), 559.

[6] Richard W. Hibler, "Luther, The Educator," *The Educational Forum* 49.3 (1985): 297.

the church.[7] For Luther, the effectiveness of preaching and teaching the Gospel was enhanced, as well as all other areas of human endeavour by the creation and maintenance of good schools.[8] As historian Philip Schaff remarked, Luther understood that "church and school go together."[9]

Of course Luther was not the only Protestant Reformer who made notable contributions to education. Some may have gone even further than Luther: his colleagues, Phillip Melanchthon and Johann Bugenhagen, are generally seen as more involved in the ground level work.[10] Melanchthon is known as the *Praeceptor Germaniae*, not Luther, and given Melanchthon's direct involvement in school reform at the ground level, that is understandable.[11] Nonetheless, Luther made his own mark as an advocate and effective spokesman for the value of education.

The Importance of Luther to an Evangelical Philosophy of Education

Luther's chief contribution seems to have been the way that he put education in the service of both spirit and mind, which has become a rather lost idea today. Furthermore, Luther desired a good education for all: both boys and girls, from all economic classes, needed a solid education. Naturally he spoke up for clerical education, but he advocated the thorough education of the laity too. It was not just the quantity of the schools that he wanted to see increase, however. It was also their quality. Luther argued that a certain kind of education, one that included the Bible and the liberal arts, would help sacred and secular workers alike.[12]

Luther's educational philosophy explained how education addressed both eternal and temporal concerns, making a place for both. He felt that the life of the mind mattered immensely. Today, when many Christians

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[7] Quoted in Thomas Korcok, *Lutheran Education: From Wittenberg to the Future* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 53.

[8] Bruce, *Luther as Educator*, 211.

[9] Philip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church, Vol. 7. The German Reformation: 1517–1530* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 512.

[10] Frederick Eby, *Early Protestant Educators: The Educational Writings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Other Leaders of Protestant Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1931), 15.

[11] Harran, *Luther: Learning for Life*, 180, explains that Luther was the "grand strategist" and Melanchthon was the "field marshal" in educational reform activities.

[12] Harran, *Luther: Learning for Life*, 270–271. Also, Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 54.

seem indifferent to cultivation of the intellect, Luther's counsel is desperately needed. Luther tirelessly advocated robust church and civil support of education, for in his view, education always rewarded those who obtained it. He spoke about it often, and wrote about it in both direct ways with certain tracts, and in incidental ways as the topic came up in his theological writings.[13]

At the height of his career, he wrote a sermon to circulate among the Lutheran pastors and laity on the topic. His 1530 "Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School" reminded the people that whatever parents and civil authorities invested in schools was far cheaper in the long run than the bills that would come due if education was neglected.[14] Neither church nor society at large would survive for long in a land that neglected education of the young, Luther warned.

Luther knew how to appeal for the establishment of new Protestant schools. He believed that the pursuit of a liberal arts education enabled a person to read the Bible (in the original languages), which contained the Good News of eternal life. However, he also believed that liberal studies enabled the mind and spirit to soar and the human person to flourish in the here and now. Education made the way for children to prosper both spiritually and materially, and it is this both/and, rather than either/or attitude that makes Luther so helpful on these points.

Education, for him, was a value-added acquisition: it improved the quality of temporal life and it operated in concert with the church for gaining eternal life. In terms of temporal life, Luther saw the connection between education and vocation clearly, and he applied this concept in a new way.[15] No longer was vocation a term reserved only for the "religious." Luther broadened the term to designate the meaningful work we do in the service of our neighbours, regardless of whether or not it was "church work." Vocation was not reserved for priests, monks, and nuns. Schoolmaster, jurist, physician, cobbler, clerk and grocer and so on, were all valid callings in life, valuable occupations in the sight of God when used in the service of one's neighbour.[16]

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[13] Bruce, *Luther as Educator*, 131.

[14] F. V. N. Painter, *Luther on Education: A Historical Introduction* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1889), 216.

[15] Gene Edward Veith, "Dependable Treasures: A Lutheran Perspective on Vocation, Career Preparation, and Higher Education Today," in Maxfield, *The Lutheran Doctrine of Vocation*, 62–63.

[16] Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 56.

Education was the key that prepared people to serve in a host of vocations. Thus, "going to school" could no longer remain the privilege of the clergy and jurist alone, in Luther's mind. All occupations benefited from learning the arts of reading, writing, computation, history, geography. Luther is thus a chief spokesman of the early "Protestant educational ethic."[17]

While other Protestant reformers saw some connection between education and their reforming work, Luther stood out among them as a leading proponent of schools and schooling. As Marilyn Harran remarked

> Not all proponents of ecclesiastical reform in the sixteenth century were equally committed to education; indeed, some saw education as a threat. Particularly those who believed that the Day of Judgment was imminent tended to devalue learning, or at least to limit learning simply to religious education strictly interpreted, principally the study of the Bible.[18]

Modern Evangelicals still have some struggles where these matters are concerned. Perhaps Luther's writings could help this situation, for he had his work cut out for him in his efforts to see new and better schools founded. On the one hand, he faced the obstinacy of some parents and civic leaders who did not wish to release the coin to fund the schools. On the other hand, he struggled against the "enthusiasts" and "super spirituals" (Karlstadt, Müntzer, and others) who felt education was too "worldly" and therefore to be avoided.[19] While Luther unquestionably appealed to the authority of the Scripture in all areas of life, he was no narrow obscurantist who rejected intellectual pursuits in literature and other fields. Luther put the Bible at the head of the curriculum, but he wanted a full-orbed, liberal education for the boys and girls of Saxony and beyond. He wanted them to learn the Scriptures, but also the classical languages, history, music, and mathematics. There was no hint of anti-intellectualism in Luther. He once famously wrote that "reason is the devil's harlot," but that remark needs to be taken in context. Luther was anti-rationalist, not anti-intellectual. He grew angry when scholastics made no room for the need of divine revelation and put all their trust in human reason and its ability to gain salvation.[20] He grew just as upset

[17] Eby, *Early Protestant Educators*, 15.
[18] Harran, *Luther: Learning for Life*, 18.
[19] Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 39–40.
[20] He explains that unaided reason is simply not sufficient for the Christian life; spiritual illumination is needed. See his sermon on Trinity 8, Matthew 7:15–23 in

when "enthusiasts" or the "super spirituals" claimed they followed the direct impulses of the Spirit, making education superfluous.[21]

What is more, Luther knew that some parents were always counting the cost. He urged them to fund schools and educate their children because an educated son would never want for employment. In Luther's mind that may not have been the best motivation for supporting schools, but employment was certainly a good thing.

> I will not here speak of the pleasures a scholar has, apart from any office, in that he can read at home all kinds of books, talk and associate with learned men and travel and transact business in foreign lands. For this pleasure perhaps will move but few; but seeing you are seeking mammon and worldly possessions, consider what great opportunities God has provided for schools and scholars; so that you need not despise learning from fear of poverty.[22]

The balanced approach Luther took in his educational writings is worth noting, for it is not always apparent in others. He kept a sense of balance and proportion between the work of the church and the needs of civic life. Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms, whereby he parsed the duties and responsibilities of the temporal and eternal realms, shaped his thinking on education.[23]

For any Christian today who has faced opposition to education on account of its cost or because of claims that it is irrelevant to the church's mission, Luther is a much-needed ally. The Protestant Evangelical future would be brighter if more investment was made in creating, supporting and maintaining good schools than in entertainment and recreation, for instance. As Philip Schaff explained

> the genius of Protestantism favors the general diffusion of knowledge. It elevates the laity, emancipates private judgment, and stimulates the sense

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Luther's Works, *Vol. 78, Church Postil IV*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes and James L. Langebartels (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 286–302.

[21] Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 41.

[22] Martin Luther, in Painter, *Luther on Education*, 251.

[23] See David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 112ff.; Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert Shultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 40–46; and Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 98–100.

of personal responsibility. Every man should be trained to a position of Christian freedom and self-government.[24]

A Closer Look: Luther's Sage Educational Advice in the Letter to the German Mayors and Aldermen

Supposing that some may take up my plea and read Luther on education, where should they begin? Go to the source! Read Luther himself. The three most important tracts he wrote that directly addressed education were "Address to the German Nobility (1520)," which tackled the need for university reform, among other topics; "Letter to the German Mayors and Aldermen (1524)," which is dealt with below; and the aforementioned "Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School (1530)."

"The Letter to the German Mayors and Aldermen (1524)" was a general appeal that Luther made for the establishment of new schools. In this treatise, he noted that the Roman Catholic system of education had been decimated as the monasteries were abandoned and as cathedrals passed into Protestant control. That meant that the old schools were gone, for it was the monasteries and cathedrals that had served that purpose. What would take their place? This treatise was Luther's plea for a new system. Running for forty pages in the English translation by F. V. N. Painter, it provides a clear glimpse at how important education was in the mind of Luther for the well-being of the civic order and for the furtherance of the Reformation.

At the time he wrote it, Luther was 41 years old, had been "Doktor" Luther for 12 years, and was serving the University of Wittenberg as a lecturer in the Bible. He had been working hard for curricular reform there.[25] It had been seven years since he had nailed up the 95 Theses, three years since his testimony at the Diet of Worms, and he had been back from his exile in Wartburg for two years. Whether he had wanted it or not, he had become both a national and international figure; his translation of the Bible had become the world's first best seller, in the estimate of some scholars.[26] He had the "bully pulpit" of his day, and

[24] Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 513.

[25] Harran, *Luther and Learning*, 32.

[26] Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), 57; *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1950), 152, 238–239; and Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 184.

what do we find him proclaiming? The need for widespread education![27] With the momentous events swirling around him, perhaps things other than schools would have occupied his mind. He was "under the ban" and subject to a death sentence if he was caught.[28] Professor Luther was worried about the schools of Germany and shared with his now much enlarged audience his concerns over education. He lamented

> We see how the schools are deteriorating throughout Germany. The universities are becoming weak, the monasteries are declining … and because selfish parents see that they can no longer place their children upon the bounty of monasteries and cathedrals, they refuse to educate them.[29]

The problem, as Luther assessed it, was this: costs were now shifting away from the church to the people directly involved. Parents and cities would need to bear the brunt of educational expenses now that the Roman Catholic monasteries and cathedrals would no longer serve that purpose. Some were shirking this responsibility to absorb the costs. Luther challenged them on this point, by pointing out that with the collapse of the Roman sacramental system, there was more money free to invest in education. As he put it, there was no more need to spend money on "indulgences, masses, vigils, endowments, anniversaries, mendicant friars, brotherhoods, and other similar impositions."[30] What coin parents had once spent on the infrastructure of the Roman Catholic Church could now be invested in the establishment of schools and the paying of schoolmasters.

He felt parents were being very short-sighted in their neglect of this important duty. He supposed them asking, "Why should we educate our children if they are not to become priests, monks, and nuns, and thus earn a support?" He was astounded that they saw no benefit in education besides a pecuniary one, and that they only thought that the "religious" needed an education.[31] He attacked the point ferociously: there was far more to education than this. He set out to prove that the Christian who was not interested in education had misunderstood what education was. Luther grounded his treatise in spiritual reasons why education was so important, but he did not stop here. He went on to explain to

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[27] Painter, *Luther on Education*, 169.
[28] Painter, *Luther on Education*, 169.
[29] Martin Luther, in Painter, *Luther on Education*, 171.
[30] Martin Luther, in Painter, *Luther on Education*, 174.
[31] Harran, *Luther: Learning for Life*, 176.

his large audience why education mattered to the earthly well-being of their children.

To begin with, Luther addressed what he saw as a lurking spiritual danger. For him, and for perhaps all Reformation-era Europeans, the devil was the most feared adversary, and was hiding around almost every corner.[32] The devil, often portrayed in the artwork of the era as tempting people to the typical deadly sins of lust, greed, and pride, was far more subtle to Luther's mind. Luther suggested that it was the work of the devil to suppress schools and schooling, and undermine education. The devil would never allow the flourishing of schools and education because that would be an absolute "overthrowing" of his wicked kingdom.[33] Luther felt that a well-trained mind was not fertile ground for the devil; good reasoners, well taught and armed with the Scriptures could beat back this crafty foe. Education, a good, true education, was absolute death to the devil, as Luther saw it.[34] Ignorance was not bliss: it was rather the most fertile ground for sin to grow and flourish. As he put it,

> People fear the Turks, wars, and floods, for in such matters they can see what is injurious or beneficial; but what the devil has in mind no one sees or fears. Yet where we would give a florin to defend ourselves against the Turks, we should give a hundred florins to protect us against ignorance, even if only one boy could be taught to be a truly Christian man; for the good such a man can accomplish is beyond all computation.[35]

Moreover, ignorance made life in the here and now harder than it had to be. Suffering was a part of life, Luther believed, but ignorance compounded suffering. The devil was the chief sender of trials and tribulations in life, and the devil delighted when an uneducated person stumbled all the more in the midst of said trials. Life was hard enough, Luther noted, but "the devil much prefers blockheads and drones so that men many have more abundant sorrows and trials in the world."[36] Schools ameliorated some of the common human difficulties, which were compounded by ignorance. Better and clearer thinking, made possible by receiving a good education, was a positive good. Why compound human hardship, which was inevitable, by refusing to provide a good education for the young? Luther

[32] Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, 172.
[33] Painter, *Luther on Education*, 172.
[34] Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 125.
[35] Martin Luther, in Painter, *Luther on Education*, 173.
[36] Martin Luther, in Painter, *Luther on Education*, 200.

believed that the devil took special delight in making human burdens greater and harder through lack of understanding and training. Wilful ignorance was blighting; education, Luther believed, was ennobling. If it included Bible teaching, it elevated man's spirit. If it included liberal learning, it elevated man's mind. Both were good for the human being's earthbound condition.[37]

Luther not only spoke of the positive good that education could do in helping ameliorate suffering; he also encouraged civic leaders to support education because the quality of the proposed Protestant schools would be better than before. The potential teachers for the new schools could come from a new cadre of university graduates who had benefitted from the reformed learning. New schools would thus be able to employ new schoolmasters, and these new schoolmasters were more capable, in Luther's view.

> We now have excellent and learned young men, adorned with every science and art, who, if they were employed, could be of great service as teachers. Is it not well known that a boy can now be so instructed in three years, that at the age of fifteen and eighteen he knows more than all the universities and convents have known heretofore? Yea, what have men learned hitherto in the universities and monasteries, except to be asses and blockheads? Twenty, forty years, it has been necessary to study, and yet one has learned neither Latin nor German![38]

Finally, he grounded his appeal for schools in biblical commandments about parental obligations. The Bible, Luther pointed out, made instruction of children one of parents' plainest responsibilities. He urged parents to not be like "ostriches who laid their eggs in the sand" only to abandon their young to their fate. Luther argued that parental responsibility definitely extended to providing an education. However, some parents either could not or simply would not meet this obligation. So, he appealed to the Mayors and Aldermen to make provision for the education of all citizens.[39] Otherwise, as he put it, the devil had already won, and the Reformation as well as good civic order was doomed. Luther's concern

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[37] Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements, Vol. II: The Reformation*, 560.

[38] Martin Luther, in Painter, *Luther on Education*, 175.

[39] For a fuller discussion of Luther's attitudes on political responsibilities on the part of the State, see Gerhard Ritter, *Luther: His Life and Work*, trans. John Riches (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 180–182.

for the "least of these" is noteworthy. Education for the poor was something that he clearly desired. Luther was an educational egalitarian in all respects: he wanted rich, poor, boy or girl, noble or commoner to take part in greater learning. As his biographer Heiko Oberman put it, "[Luther] had always rejected the idea of an educated elite."[40]

Luther hoped these three arguments would convince the parents, mayors and councilmen to found and fund schools, but he was not yet done. In his final point, he countered expected objections that the mayors might make by urging that the pastors could simply take on the work of teaching the young. Just as the old Roman monasteries and cathedrals had been in charge of education, he expected them to say, the new Protestant churches and pastors could be in charge of education. Luther felt this was insufficient. The church pastors were too few and had too many church responsibilities to accomplish the task of serving as school masters as well. Besides, Luther was not in favour of a Bible-only curriculum. Pastors were to be specialists in Bible teaching, and not all the arts. Luther would not encourage the mayors on this point. Luther valued the teaching of the Scriptures immensely, but that was not the sum total of what he hoped would be in the schools. More subjects were needed for a well-rounded, liberal education. Pastors needed to teach the Bible and administer the sacraments; teachers and schools were needed to teach history, mathematics, the languages, and literature.

He urged his audience to consider one last point: education was essential to good civil society, just as much as it contributed to the well-being of the individual citizen. Good leaders were not born; they were made, and they were made in good schools. Civilization and good government flourished where good education flourished. And where civilization and good government flourished, then Christianity was all the better able to spread.[41] Christians helped their State when they helped support education.

> Even if there were no soul, and men did not need schools … for the sake of Christianity … this consideration is of itself sufficient, namely, that society, for the maintenance of civil order … needs accomplished and well-trained men and women.[42]

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[40] Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 213.
[41] Althaus, *The Ethics of Luther*, 59–60.
[42] Martin Luther, in Painter, *Luther on Education*, 40.

Luther concluded his treatise with an appeal for the mayors and aldermen to not only build schools, but also libraries with the "best books" in them for all citizens. Luther wanted schools for boys and girls alike, colleges and universities for students capable of higher learning, and libraries for young and old to gather and have access to accumulated learning and wisdom.

Conclusion

As a figure of ecclesiastical reform, Luther's reputation is assured. His writings on education deserve to be more widely known, especially among Evangelicals who have appropriated so much of his theological writings and thought. In Luther's mind, having good schools was one of society's most basic, urgent needs, and he did not think any expense should be spared in the acquisition of these goods. Religious concerns mattered to Luther greatly, and were uppermost in his mind. That viewpoint did not make him indifferent to the affairs of this earth. The civic life of his nation mattered to him, too, and he saw a robust educational system as central for the happiness and well-being of the Germans: both in the here and now, and in the hereafter.

It is hard to imagine how invigorating this viewpoint could be today—if churches, parents, and denominations saw the provision of a robust, flourishing school, college, or university as one means of fulfilling Christ's call to be salt and light in this world. In the thought of Martin Luther, good letters accompanied good living. Christianity, as he envisioned it, was a friend of learning, and learning was a friend of Christianity. "God has preserved the Church through the schools. They are the preservers of the Church."[43] In a word, it was the devil, not the Christians, who wanted people to be "blockheads and drones." As the 500th anniversary of the Reformation occurs, may all those who celebrate that milestone also stop to consider the educational goals and aspirations of one of the great reformers, and read his writings on this perennially important subject.

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[43] Korcok, *Lutheran Education*, 53.