

PASTORAL FORMATION: *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*

NOTE: *These pages come from handouts provided by Professor John T. Pless at the 2005 Pastor's Conference, combined with notes taken at Professor Pless' lecture on this subject.*

"Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: A Right Way to Study Theology" (287-289) in *The Minister's Prayerbook* edited by John Doberstein is taken (in an abridged form) from the "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings, 1539" (AE 34:279-288).

I. Luther's "right way to study theology" is anchored in the three rules set forth in Psalm 119: *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*.

- For Luther "Everything centers around the practice of meditation, for prayer prepares for it and its results are confirmed in the experience of conflict. For Luther, meditation is the key to the study of theology. No one can become a true theologian unless he learns theology through it" (Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart", 142).
- For Luther, theologians are made not simply by "understanding, reading or speculating" but "by living, no rather by dying and being damned" (WA 5/163:28-29) as he said in a lecture on Psalm 5:11 in 1520.
- "Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone" (AE 34:285).
- You cannot study theology the same way you study engineering, or medicine, or law. God works through his Word on the hearts and minds of his people. Therefore the study of theology begins with prayer, continues with study, and becomes complete through spiritual affliction. This is the path of the theologian of the cross. The natural man is a theologian of glory. He wants to begin with study, (reason,) end in prayer, and skip the spiritual affliction altogether.
- *Oratio* is prayer. Prayer begins with the ear, with God speaking first to us. Prayer grows out of the Word of our Lord; prayer is the voice of faith. *Meditatio* is the continual study of God's word, of letting the Word of God dwell in you richly. *Tentatio* is the place of the cross: of spiritual affliction, trial, and temptation. Christ's suffering is His alone. Our place is to bear our cross in the vocation to which we are called.

II. *Oratio* (prayer) is grounded in the Word of the Lord.

- This is the prayer that is modeled by David in Psalm 119: "Teach me, Lord, Lord instruct me, lead me, show me" (Psalm 119:26 et al)...Although he well knew and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice give rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason, as if

they were *Markolf* or Aesop's Fables, for which no Holy Spirit and no prayers are needed" (AE 34:286).

- See prayer on p. 132 of Doberstein: "Come, Holy Spirit, shepherd him who is to shepherd others; guide him who is to guide others; discover to him (the Scriptures) who is to discover them to others; give to him who is to give to others, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us!" Also see such Pentecost hymns as "Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord" (224-TLH) and "Come, Oh, Come, Thou Quickening Spirit" (226 -TLH, especially stanzas 4-6).
- Prayer is the voice of faith. That is to say, that prayer grows out of the Word of the Lord. It acknowledges Him as the Lord who speaks. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (I Samuel 3:9). Note the hymn "Lord, Open Thou My Heart to Hear" (5-TLH).
- Prayer that invokes God (calls upon the name of the Lord) is grounded in the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Note Luther's explanation in the *Small Catechism*.
- "The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart" (Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 15).
- Prayer is "responding speech" (Peterson, 5).
- "Prayer escapes the danger of disorder and confusion only when it is enkindled by the words of Scripture. From the Word proceeds its inner justification, as well as its life-giving power and the clearness of its petitions. A prayer that does not stick to Scripture will soon become poor in ideas, poor in faith, poor in love and will finally die"(Koeberele, 176-177).

III. *Meditatio*

- We meditate on that which we love. In 15 16, Luther comments on Psalm 1 : "But no one meditates on the law of the Lord unless his desire has first become fixed on it. For what we desire and love we chew over inwardly and diligently" (Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart", 12). By way of contrast, the ungodly do not love God so they do not desire His Word. Note the connection with the 1st Commandment. This understanding of meditation can be seen in the late Reformation hymn by Martin Schalling, "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" (429-TLH). Especially note stanza 1 : "Lord, Thee I love with all my heart/I pray Thee, ne'er from me depart/With tender mercy cheer me/Earth has no pleasure I would share/Nea, heav'n itself were void and bare/If Thou, Lord, wert not near me/And should my heart for sorrow break/My trust in Thee no one could shake/Thou art the Portion I have sought/Thy precious blood my soul has bought/Lord Jesus Christ, My God and Lord, my God and Lord, Forsake me not! I trust Thy Word."
- Mary is the model for Christian meditation (see Luke 10:38-42). Also note the hymn, "One Thing's Needful; Lord, This Treasure" (366 TLH).
- *Meditatio* is the continual study of the Scriptures. In 15 18, Luther wrote "You should not only meditate inwardly in your heart but also outwardly by repeating

the words out aloud and rubbing at the written word (like a sweet-smelling herb), by reading and rereading it, carefully, attentively and reflectively, to gather what the Holy Spirit means by them" (quoted in Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart", 143; see AE34:286). Meditation is verbal.

- *Meditatio* is grounded in the *externum verbum*. See Smalcald Articles III:VIII "In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure" (Tappert, 3 1 2). Luther: "Let him who wants to contemplate in the right way reflect on his Baptism; let him read his Bible, hear sermons, honor father and mother, and come to the aid of a brother in distress. But let him not shut himself up in a nook...and thereby entertain himself with his devotions and thus suppose that he is sitting in God's bosom and has fellowship with God without Christ, without the Word, without the sacraments" (AE 3 :275).
- Note Luther comment in his pamphlet of 152 1, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*: "When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift" (quoted in Kleinig, "Meditation", 47). In a Christmas sermon of 15 19, Luther makes the same point as he emphasizes a sacramental meditation on the Gospel: "We meditate properly on the Gospel when we do so sacramentally, for through faith the words produce in us what they portray" (quoted in Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart", 146).
- Luther likened meditation to a cow chewing its cud. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 14: 1 of 1525, he writes: "To chew the cud, however, is to take up the Word with delight and meditate with supreme diligence, so that (according to the proverb) one does not permit it to go into one ear and out the other, but holds it firmly in the heart, swallows it, and absorbs it into the intestines" (AE 9:136)
- See Luther's advice in his "A Simple Way to Pray" (1 535) where he suggests taking each of the commandments, each part of the Creed "in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book" (AE 43:209).
- The goal of meditation is described by Jesus in his explanation of the parable of the sower in Luke 8:4-15 where he says "And as for that(seed) in the good soil,

they are those who, in hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience."

- To start with *Meditatio* is to start with the self. This eliminates the place of the trinity by anointing and exalting the self. This is the path of the theologian of glory.

IV. *Tentatio*

- God uses *tentatio* (spiritual affliction, trial, and temptation) to drive away from self and to His promises alone.
- *Tentatio* happens within the context of a person's vocation. "*Tentatio* is testing, temptation, and trial which occurs when God and his word intersect with us and our world" (Pfeiffer, 113). Suffering happens precisely because a person is faithful to his calling. See Luther's comments on "cross bearing" (see AE 5 1 : 195-208). "Peace with God brings conflict and adversity with the world, the flesh, and the devil"(Hein, 33).
- Pastors are not exempt from *tentatio*. In fact God uses it to draw us away from our own abilities to the gifts He gives in the Gospel and the Sacraments. See II Corinthians 4: 1- 12.
- "I did not learn my theology all at once, but had to search constantly deeper and deeper for it. My temptations did that for me, for no one can understand Holy Scripture without practice and temptations. That is what the enthusiasts and sects lack. They don't have the right critic, the devil, who is the best teacher of theology. If we don't have that kind of devil, then we become nothing but speculative theologians, who do nothing but walk around in our own thoughts and speculate with our reason alone as to whether things should be like this, or like that" says Luther in a "table talk" of 1532 (AE 5450).
- Luther is thankful for his enemies: "For I myself...must be very thankful to my papists for pummeling, pressing, and terrifying me; that is, for making me a fairly good theologian, for otherwise I would not have become one..."(Doberstein, 288).
- The devil gets into the act. Here the devil must fulfill God's purpose thus Luther can speak of him as "doctor consolation." The devil is used by God against his own evil purpose. "As soon as a person meditates and is occupied with God's Word; as soon as God's Word begins to take root in and grow in him, the devil harries him with much conflict, bitter contradiction, and blatant opposition. But these assaults (*Anfechtungen*) prove to be spiritually counterproductive, for by driving him to the end of his tether, they teach him 'to seek and love God's Word' as the source of all his strength and being. In such a situation of temptation, he experiences for himself the power and truth of God's Word. Temptation turns the student of God's Word into a real theologian, because it exercises and reinforces his faith in Christ. He experiences the power of God's Word in his own weakness. Paradoxically, he sees the presence of God and his grace most fully displayed under its apparent negation in adversity and trouble. Because he bears the word of Christ in himself, he must also bear the cross for it. But, as he bears his own cross, he gets to know himself and Christ whose glory was revealed by his death on the

cross. Meditation, then, ultimately elucidates temptation and is itself elucidated by it" (Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart", 147).

- Luther (Galatians 1535): "Therefore I admonish you, especially those of you who are to become instructors of consciences, as well as each of you individually, that you exercise yourselves continually by study, by reading, by meditation and by prayer, so that in temptation you will be able to instruct consciences, both your own and others, and take them from the law to grace, from active righteous to passive righteousness, in short from Moses to Christ. In affliction and in the conflict of conscience it is the devil's habit to frighten us with the law and to set against us the consciousness of sin, our wicked past, the wrath and judgment of God, hell, and eternal death, so that he may drive us into despair, subject us to himself, and pluck us from Christ" (AE 26: 10).
- An important distinction should be made between the church of Aaron and the church of Moses, because the *Tentatio* for a pastor is to build the church of Aaron instead of the church of Moses---to build a church that is seen instead of heard.
 - The church of Aaron is one of spectacle, of meeting felt needs, etc. This church is seen but not heard. The church of Aaron is the church of glory.
 - The church of Moses is heard and not seen; this is the church of the cross, the church that proclaims the law to the proud and worldly while proclaiming the gospel to the humble and penitent. The church of Moses is the church of the cross. The church of Moses meets people's spiritual needs, not their felt needs.

V. For Further Reading:

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