

Luther's Method For The Study Of The Word Of God¹

During the holidays our statue of Luther was removed from its old place at the Seminary and was erected here in its new place. For what purpose? We are not worshippers of relics, nor do we worship those relics of Luther. Also we do not hold the opinion that by this, our institution was adding something to its Lutheran character by having a statue of Luther. I do not know how many statues of Luther there are in the world. If an exact statistic exists concerning it, then it is not known to me. But it is known that statues of Luther exist at such places where they do not belong, because the doctrine of the Reformer of the Church who was sent by God is no longer taught there. Our Synod has been led by God's grace to Luther's doctrine, to the pure Gospel. Therefore we have a right to erect a statue of Luther.

If we ask, where is it considered a suitable place in our Synod to erect a statue of Luther, then we answer: In front of the teaching institutions of our church and especially in front of our theological seminary where true Christian theologians are to be educated. Just as Luther once again set up God's Word as a lamp for the entire Church, so that in doctrine and practice it would be a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (Psalm 119:105), just so he also especially gives the correct directions from Holy Scripture for the study of theology (God's Word). In a brief summarised form, he gives this instruction in the well-known statement: **"Prayer, meditation, affliction make the theologian."**

Let the statue of Luther, which has been erected in front of the main entrance to our new teaching building, also remind us of this axiom. In this way the statue calls to every student who studies theology: *Don't forget prayer, don't forget diligent study, don't forget that true theology is learnt on the pathway of affliction!* At the beginning of a new student year I would yet like to place on your hearts some words about Luther's method of studying theology (God's Word).

1.

Prayer

Why is **prayer** necessary for the study of theology?

It is necessary for this reason, because the textbook of theology, Holy Scripture, is a Book of an entirely unique nature. In contradistinction to all other books which are yet otherwise in existence in the world, *Holy Scripture is God's own Word*. We must not forget that. As often as we open the Bible, no less important a One than *the great, majestic God Himself* speaks to us concerning the only way to salvation. What kind of way is that? Holy Scripture teaches a way to salvation which has never entered into the heart of a single person — also not even into the heart of the most important people of this world, as the Apostle Paul testifies in 1 Cor. 2:7,8: **"We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, ...which none of the princes of this world knew."** The Scriptures teach as the only way to salvation *faith in the crucified Saviour, faith in the Son of God who became man, who died the death on the cross to pay for the debt of the sins of mankind*.

But now by nature in the hearts of all people, also in our hearts, also in the hearts of you students, exists another, completely different religion, *the religion of one's own works*, which is only removed from the heart by divine instruction, the instruction from above. As the Apology of the Augsburg Confession testifies on the basis of Scripture: "This opinion of the Law [salvation by good works] inheres [exists] by nature in men's minds; neither can it be expelled, unless we are divinely taught" (*Triglotta*. p.197, section 144).

Therefore *prayer is necessary for the study of theology* and therefore Luther in his instruction for the study of theology places *prayer* in first place. He reminds us of King David who in Psalm

¹ An Address delivered at the Commencement of the Student Year 1927 – 1928. *Lehre und Wehre* Vol. 73, No. 10, October 1927, pages 289 to 291.

119 so often cries to God: “**Teach me, O Lord, make me to understand, guide me, show me!**” though David “well knew the text of Moses and of many more such books.” *Luther warns against those who study Scripture according to their own wisdom* and says: “For that is what turns men into unruly fanatics who imagine that Scripture is subject to them and easily attained by their reason, as though it were the fables... Aesop, for which they need no Holy Ghost nor prayer.”

Therefore, Students of Concordia: **PRAY — Don’t forget prayer!** You take part, as a matter of course, in the daily fellowship of prayer (in your devotions). But let everyone pray also for himself before he goes to work. Also before your individual lectures, a sigh to God in your hearts is warranted: “Teach me , O Lord, make me to understand!” Without prayer you do not really succeed, when you want to reach your glorious goal to become true theologians who are taught by God.

2.

Meditation On God’s Word

But the Holy Spirit does not make theologians [it is the same with every true Christian, BLW] without **external means**. He does not make them faithful pastors [Christians] by grace which is communicated without means, or by a grace that is poured into the heart without means, but by the pathway of *study, of diligent and continuous study of Christian doctrine, which lies revealed before us in Holy Scripture*; as the Saviour admonishes: “**Search the Scriptures**” (John 5:39) and His Apostle teaches: “**For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning**” (Rom. 15:4). This is what Luther understands by MEDITATION ON GOD’S WORD.

Another theological method is being generally used in the new liberal theology. The new theology — also the so- called Lutherans themselves — does not want to “identify” Scripture and God’s Word, that is, *it does not regard Holy Scripture as God’s infallible Word and teaching (doctrine)*. By this very fact, it does not place itself under, but over Scripture and determines the **only correct theological method in this way** that the theologian does not draw Christian doctrine from Holy Scripture, but obtains it from his own inner self, from his own human reason, which claims for itself the duty to distinguish between truth and error in Scripture. Thus the new theology!

By *MEDITATION ON GOD’S WORD* Luther understands the exact opposite. He understands by this, as he himself declares: the “bare words” of Scripture, that means, the words as they stand written and as they read in the Scriptures, “read them and re-read them again and again, noting carefully and reflecting upon what the Holy Ghost means by these words.” (S.L. XIV, 434ff). Only what the Holy Spirit meant in the Scriptures and not what the theologians mean is valid in the Christian Church. What is being taught outside of Scripture, is not Christian doctrine, but human imagination. A Christian theologian must, as Luther reminds us, possess the ability to avoid everything which suddenly comes upon him outside of Scripture. [Luther: “Oh, how many fine insights I have had into the Scriptures which I have had to let go”. S.L.XX, 792; Am. Ed. 37,45. Ed.]

Students of Concordia! Here in our Theological Concordia Luther’s theological method is being observed. It alone is in conformity with Scripture. The Scriptures teach: “**If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God** [as the Word of God].” “So if anyone speaks,” namely, in the Church of God, “let him speak nothing but the Word of God”(1 Pet. 4:11). Also we, your teachers, speak. We teach you. That is our duty. But what we teach, we prove with “**Thus saith the Lord**”; “**It is written**”.

Therefore we also require of you to do memory work. We require of you that as much as possible you impress exactly on your memory such words of Scripture in which the Christian doctrine is placed before you, revealed in an especially clear manner, in order that you, wherever

you go and stand, are able to be moved to work on and devote yourself to the “bare words” of Scripture in your thoughts.

In this manner Luther studied. Luther requires of every theologian and of every one who wants to become one, that he be a person who was “well-versed in the text of Scripture.” Through this method Luther himself became a theologian. He says: “When I was young, I familiarised myself with the Bible, read it often, and became well acquainted with the text; so well acquainted that I knew where every passage that was mentioned was to be found; thus I became a good textualis” (S. L. XXII, 54f.). Luther describes the *result* of this theological method in the words: “With the text and from the foundation of the Holy Scriptures I have silenced and slain all my opponents”(S.L. XX, 6,7).

Therefore the statue of Luther in front of our teaching building admonishes all our students to become well-versed in the Scriptures. If you follow this admonition, then not only are you yourselves immovably certain of your faith, but also you are better equipped that by God’s grace you can “silence and slay” all opponents of Christian doctrine with the text of Holy Scripture.

3.

Affliction

Now a few words concerning **AFFLICTION**. Why is **affliction** necessary for everyone who wants to be and remain a theologian?

Luther says concerning **AFFLICTION**: “This teaches you not merely to know and understand, but also to *experience* how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how consoling, God’s Word is, wisdom above all wisdom” (SL XIV, 434 ff.). Luther here places the emphasis on personal experience. From knowledge must come personal experience.

How is this meant?

Thus: You know how to define the Law and the Gospel. You know the Law is that Word of God in which God demands of mankind the perfect keeping of His Law and which subjects the transgressor to His eternal wrath. You know further that the Gospel is that Word of God in which God forgives mankind all their sins for Christ’s sake and gives them eternal salvation. If you have now experienced for yourself in your heart and conscience and still daily experience that God’s Law condemns you to hell, and if you have experienced for yourself and still daily experience that God in His Gospel has forgiven you all your sins, and still daily and richly forgives all sins, then you by God’s grace are going through **AFFLICTION**, are going through the experience which is necessary for a theologian.

Indeed, the Reformation of the Church resulted from **AFFLICTION**. In the awakening papal church Luther sought to obtain a gracious God by the way of the Law, that is, through his own piety and his own good works. But for years in zealous efforts by this way, he went through the experience which he himself describes in the words:

“The anguish drove me to despair,
That nothing remains for me but death,
Into hell I must sink.”

When God then opened his eyes and heart to the Gospel which is revealed in the Scriptures, to that Gospel, he accepted the grace of God without the works of men for the sake of Christ’s righteousness, then he went through the experience which he describes in the words: “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates” (Am. Ed. 34, p. 337: S.L. XIV, 447 f.).

Further to this then came for Luther the powerful **AFFLICTION from the outside**. He was commanded not to teach publicly, but to retract the Gospel of grace, the Door to Paradise. But already two years before Worms he wrote to his colleagues, the theological professors of Wittenberg, he could not deny that by which he had become a Christian and on that which rests

the eternal salvation of every person. It is well-known then that Luther did not deny that at Worms. But he was excommunicated from the church as a dangerous member of the church by both a papal and state decree.

Also upon us **AFFLICTION** has come abundantly from the outside. Modern Lutheran theology, both the homebred and the imported varieties, has fallen so deeply from the Christian viewpoint, that it opposes us on account of our confession of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone and rebukes us as being in the Calvinistic camp. But by God's grace we will not deny the Christian Religion of grace, but also in future confess it, because we know from Scripture and also from our own experience, that the doctrine of salvation by grace alone is that doctrine by which we alone become Christians and on which rests the salvation of all mankind.

Dear Saviour, Jesus Christ, grant us grace that we teachers of our Concordia also this year correctly teach the sacred theology under **prayer, meditation and affliction**, as it pleases Thee. Grant also Thy grace that all the students here correctly learn the sacred theology in the manner of **prayer, meditation and affliction**. O Christ, rule Thou my heart, mind, and tongue! We are certain that Thou wilt not let Thine ears be deaf to those who pray. Let the glory be Thine for ever and ever! Amen.