

## **SECTION 25**

### **Luther's Instructions for Studying Theology as a Biblical Hermeneutical Method**

# Luther's Instructions for Studying Theology as a Biblical Hermeneutical Method<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

Never in the history of the church have so many good hermeneutics textbooks been available. Of course, never in the history of the church have so many bad hermeneutics texts been in print as well. Still, evangelicals have little to complain about. If we haven't learned to "read the Bible for all its worth," we have hopefully at least come upon "a basic guide to interpreting the Bible." Though current evangelical hermeneutics texts vary in strength, as a whole, they are excellent in defending authorial intent, providing a history of biblical interpretation in the church, giving rules for determining various literary genres and enumerating principles for interpreting those genres. With so many excellent texts on biblical interpretation available, it is striking how few hermeneutically-sound sermons one hears. Where is the clarity and power of sound Biblical interpretation manifested in pulpits, popular Christian literature, and Sunday School classes? Is something lacking?

Martin Luther, though he wrote nearly 500 years ago, provides some guidance on this subject in the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his German writings. Indeed, if the sole benefit of this paper is to serve as a goad so that you – the listener – find and read this short preface yourself, your time in this session will be well-spent, I believe. Luther's memorable style of expression undoubtedly exceeds the quality of my writing – and thus, I point you to it. ("*Ad fontes!*" as the Reformers said.) Yet, with faltering lips, I hope to summarize faithfully and apply some of Luther's thoughts to our current setting.

In his preface, Luther gives a three-part prescription for theological study, which I think provides the missing ingredients in much current evangelical hermeneutical instruction. This three-step method is *Oratio*, *Meditatio*, and *Tentatio* (prayer, meditation, and trial). These elements, I believe, are crucial to faithful biblical reflection, but are often neglected in current discussion. In this paper, I will proceed by looking at the basis for Luther's theological prescription. That is, *why* does he see prayer, meditation, and trials as the *sine qua non* of true theological study? Then, we will examine each one of his three recommended elements in turn. Finally, I will make some concluding remarks.

## II. Luther's Basis for his Prescription

Luther rather confidently commends his three-step method for theological study. In fact, he claims, "If you keep to [this method of study], you will become so learned that you yourself could . . . write books just as good as those of the [church] fathers and

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations of Luther's preface are from the following English translation: "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 63-68

[church] councils. . .”<sup>2</sup> On what basis can Luther make such an audacious claim for his prescribed method of study? He can make such a claim because he does not believe a human authority stands behind the prescription, but a divine one. Luther’s derives his method from Psalm 119 [the lengthiest psalm in the canon, as you know]. Luther notes that throughout the psalm, David repeatedly mentions three things:

- (1) David cries out to God for understanding of his Word (prayer, Oratio)
- (2) David thinks on, recites, sings, and variously ruminates on God’s Word as he seeks to understand and apply it (meditation, Meditatio), and
- (3) David is repeatedly oppressed by enemies and difficulties (trial, Tentatio).

A superficial reading of Psalm 119 will quickly note these motifs. For the purposes of this short paper, I will choose a few examples of each theme. Many more could be listed, and hearers of this paper are encouraged to search Psalm 119 for themselves.

**First, Psalm 119 models a prayerful approach to studying God’s word. [2x]**

Psalm 119:5 [David, addressing the Lord]  
Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!

Psalm, 119:10  
With my whole heart I seek you [Lord] ; let me not wander from your commandments!

Psalm 119:12  
Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes!

Psalm 119:17-20  
Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word. Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. I am a sojourner on the earth; hide not your commandments from me! My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times.

Psalm 119:34-37  
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.

Second, Psalm 119 models a meditative approach to studying God’s Word. [2x]

Psalm 119:11  
I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.

Psalm 119:13-16

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 65.

With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

Psalm 119:27

Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works.

**Third, Psalm 119 presents trials as integrally related to the psalmist's prayers and meditations. [2x]**

Psalm 119:23-24

Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes. Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors.

Psalm 119:28

My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word!

Psalm 119:41-42

Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise; then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word.

Psalm 119:49-55

Remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope. This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life. The insolent utterly deride me, but I do not turn away from your law. When I think of your rules from of old, I take comfort, O LORD. Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, who forsake your law. Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my sojourning. I remember your name in the night, O LORD, and keep your law.

Psalm 119 has 176 verses. In this short survey above, I draw from less than the first third of the psalm. Even from such a superficial analysis, one cannot miss the prominent repetition of prayer, meditation, and trial. In other words, Luther stands on firm evidential ground in asserting the importance of Oratio, Meditatio, and Tentatio in the psalm. And, as the psalm is about God's word and his people's approach to it, the text seems very fitting as a basic hermeneutical or theological method. It may also be of passing interest to note that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had the custom of requiring incoming theological students to memorize Psalm 119. One wonders - if prospective students were informed that they must memorize a 176 verse psalm before beginning study at Southern Seminary, how this new requirement might affect matriculation rates.

We will now look in more detail at the individual components of study recommended by Luther.

### III. *Oratio*

In our age of pragmatism (in which we seek seven simple steps to solve any problem), is it any surprise that we do not want to be told to wait? And prayer – a waiting and dependence upon God – has become less and less emphasized in Biblical study, whether that study be academic or pastoral. A survey of recent hermeneutics textbooks reveals the  cursory  attention given to prayer. Some hermeneutical discussion even implies that prayer biases the student of Scripture towards a pre-conceived conclusion. According to this understanding, it may actually be the non-believer who has the advantage in determining the meaning of Scripture, for he comes with little bias as to what the text will say, for it makes no authoritative claim on his life.

Daniel Fuller is the most recognized proponent of this view, though it has other prominent adherents. Fuller bifurcates understanding into cognitive and volitional categories. That is, there is cognitive understanding and volitional response, and the two are not to be confused. Fuller claims that supernatural intervention only functions on the volitional level.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is only in inculcating a desire to obey the meaning of the text that God supernaturally intervenes in the life of the believer. Thus, determining cognitively the authorial meaning of the text is solely the application of acquired skill and natural reason.

It seems striking to me that Fuller, who would likely pray readily for a surgeon's increased skill in an operation, believes that prayers for increased exegetical skill are to no avail. "No," an objector will say, "What one needs is more lexicons, more grammatical study, more time in the text!" Undoubtedly, grammatical study, lexicons, and time in the text are essential. But, is there a place for God's supernatural aid in understanding, acquired through prayer and God's gracious intervention? If not, then the traditional Protestant understanding of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is incorrect.

More common than an outright rejection of the value of prayer or divine aid in the understanding of the text is brief lip service to the idea, with the subsequent wholesale neglect of it. Where in any modern hermeneutics textbook can be found a thoughtful and biblically-based discussion of how prayer should practically be used in study? By failing to appropriately emphasize and instruct our students in the school of prayer, we are implicitly teaching them not to pray. Jesus' disciples saw the prominence of prayer in his life, and asked, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1) When our disciples view our lives, do they ask this question, or do they ask, "How do you read so many books?" Or, "How do you write so much?" Or, "How do you sleep so little?"

Is it any wonder that modern sermons and Christian writings so rarely fail to expose and cast out the spirit of the age? Indeed, (to commit my own hermeneutical faux pas), "this kind can only come out through prayer" (Mark 9:29).

A brief survey of texts that discuss the doctrine of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit illustrate a lack of clarity and exegetical grounding. On the other hand, Fuller's system, while clearly understandable, is biblically unconvincing and dangerous. While I do not personally impugn Fuller or any who follow him, I believe his system does encourage an arrogant independence from God in approaching the text. A semi-Pelagian reliance upon one's unaided reason seems to me also dangerous and unbiblical.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, "The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978), 192.

The doctrine of total depravity teaches us that the entirety of the human person is affected by the fall – reason, emotions, will. We need the specific and supernatural aid of God to counteract our sinful nature in the regular study of the Scriptures. No one can win a biblical argument by claiming, “The Spirit told me,” or “I prayed before I wrote this article.” However, it appears to me that the Biblical evidence presents understanding as an indivisible mixture of both cognitive and volitional elements – an understanding in fallen creatures that can and must be aided by God’s special intervention.

Does this mean, then, that non-believers cannot understand some portions of the Biblical text? No, but it does mean a believer who seeks God’s aid in understanding a text has advantages over a non-believer with equal intellectual gifts, background, and skills. It is not that the Spirit provides additional information that is not in the text, but the Spirit helps in seeing clearly the information there and in the weighing of contextual and debated factors. It is as though the Spirit provides the spectacles that bring the picture into clearer focus. As believers wearing the spectacles of faith, however, we must make our arguments on the basis of the words before us in the text – not by appealing to supernatural assistance, regardless of how real and ongoing that assistance may be. As I observe the revelatory landscape along with my non-believing dialogue partner, I must make my argument on the basis of the facts in front of me.

As I strain to see through my God-given spectacles, I might say, “I see a small white bird that has just landed in the cedar tree.”

My unbelieving, un-spectacled partner counters, “I saw a movement in the tree, but a bird you did not see – only the wind blowing.”

The same facts are there before us, but only one sees rightly.

#### ***IV. Meditatio***

In addition to being a prayerless people, we in the western church are a hurried and unreflective folk. We may respond to forty ministry-related emails in one day and daily read large sections of our Bible, but where is the chewing, ruminating, and deep reflecting on the text that causes it to sink down in our souls - and by God’s grace, change us. The great scandal of the church, one modern pastor has said, is large buildings filled with undisciplined people. Like skates on a frozen lake, the Word has skirted over our minds and hearts with little measurable effect.

Luther warns of the danger of unreflective Bible study. He writes, “And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken [the words of Scripture] once or twice, and that you have complete understanding. You will not be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe.”<sup>4</sup>

In some recent popular Christian writings, we are seeing a reaction to our unreflective and hurried lives. Is it any wonder that a minority, but growing number of Western Christians, are being drawn to the spiritual disciplines of solitude and silence as they seek to unclutter their souls. Unfortunately, in some books on this subject, it seems to me that a form of unbiblical Eastern meditation (maybe via Oprah or Hollywood) has been adopted. The highest goal of this meditation seems to be some sort of ethereal, ineffable experience of

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<sup>4</sup> Lull, 66

relating to God with an “empty mind.” From the Scriptures, however, it seems that God would have us meditate on his Word. Yes, we may seek moments of silence and solitude, but those are moments when God tries and tests our hearts – bringing to mind Scriptures, failings, obligations, words of encouragement, or challenges. Not an empty mind, but a mind convicted, filled, focused, and transformed by God is the goal of biblical meditation.

We are inclined to think of biblical meditation as sitting quietly and simply thinking about a text over and over. This is biblical meditation, but it is also much more. Luther rightly points to the multitude of ways in which David meditates on the Word of God in Psalm 119. The Reformer writes,

Thus you see in this same Psalm how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, nothing except God’s Word and commandments. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word; so take your cue from that. His command to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak, etc..., outwardly was not given in vain.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, meditating on the Bible is not simply quietly reflecting on a passage, but singing, reciting, memorizing, and writing the word. Meditating on the Word is using whatever intellectual and creative energies God has given us to focus on his revelation in thought, action, speech, or image.

In the Epistle of James, chapter 1, verse 25, we read, “The man who looks intently into the perfect law, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it, he will be blessed in what he does.” How desperately we as professors, pastors, students, and Christians in the pew need to be people who look intently into God’s perfect Word – and to be transformed into people who do not simply hear the word, deceiving ourselves, but do what it says.

With added attention to the Word of God, some other things will likely have to be scaled back – such as attention to secondary literature. I recall with personal delight I. Howard Marshall’s address on this campus in which he lamented the unnecessarily large number of books being published these days. I add my hearty “Amen,” as I find it nearly impossible to even read a summary of all the publications in my field in New Testament Abstracts. Might it, in fact, be a good thing, to spend less time in secondary literature and more time in the Bible?

With his own “Amen” to this idea, Luther writes:

I would have been quite content to see my books, one and all remain in obscurity and go by the board. Among other reasons, I shudder to think of the example I am giving, for I am well aware how little the church has been profited since they have begun to collect many books and large libraries, in addition to and besides Holy Scriptures, and especially since they have stored up without discrimination, all sorts of writings by the church fathers, the councils, and teachers. Through this practice not only is precious time lost, which could be used for studying the Scriptures, but in the end the pure knowledge of the divine Word is lost, so that the Bible

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 66.

lies forgotten in the dust under the bench (as happened to the book of Deuteronomy, in the time of the kings of Judah).<sup>6</sup>

Becoming a more prayerful and meditative people will come at a cost. Could the popular “less is more” principle be true when it comes to our theological intake?

### ***V. Tentatio***

Much energy in the Western world is directed at avoiding trials. Nearly one-fifth of the United States’ Gross Domestic Product goes towards insurance – a way of protecting ourselves against unplanned car wrecks, house fires, or medical expenses. Ironically, the very difficulties we seek to insulate ourselves from are often the means God uses to mature us. They are the means, Luther claims, of taking our abstract knowledge of what the Bible says and making it experiential and real. The Reformer writes:

[A trials is] the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdoms.<sup>7</sup>

And later Luther adds,

. . . as soon as God’s Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God’s Word. I myself (if you will permit me, mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil’s raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much, That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have been otherwise.<sup>8</sup>

Trusting and obeying God in the midst of trial leads to a more mature understanding of Christian truth. The Biblical authors so frequently link suffering to spiritual growth that it is difficult to know which of numerous examples to cite. James 1:2-4 reads, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Similarly, Romans 5:3-5 reads, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” And in Philippians 1:29, we read, “For it has been graciously granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake.” (Phil, my translation)

Just last week, I had planned to attend an all-day pastor’s conference where one of the main topics was God’s demonstration of his power through our weakness. On the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 67.



morning of the conference at 3:45 am, my daughter began several hours of a difficult bout with a stomach virus. My exhausted, pregnant wife, meanwhile, was recovering from a difficult cold. Is it possible that changing vomit-soaked clothes and sheets over and over could teach me more about God's power in weakness than hearing yet another speaker on the topic?

If we survey the lives of prominent saints in the Scriptures (e.g., Abraham, Moses, Paul), we see very quickly that God's path towards understanding of and service in the kingdom is often a path through repeated trials. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:13-14, "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

## **VI. Conclusion**

In this short paper, I have offered my introduction to and reflections upon Luther's instructions for studying theology, as recorded in the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his German writings. While not wanting to neglect the valuable secondary studies available to us, the Biblical text itself demands our own prayers, meditations, and trying experiences. The strength of Luther's proposal, I believe, is its rooting in the hermeneutical method advocated in Biblical revelation itself, that is, in Psalm 119.

Luther's own words provide us with a fitting conclusion:

There now, with that you have David's rules. If you study hard in accord with his example, then you will also sing and boast with him in the Psalm, "The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces" [Ps. 119:72]. Also, "Thy commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts," etc. [Ps. 119:98-100]. And it will be your experience that the books of the fathers will taste stale and putrid to you in comparison. You will not only despise the books written by adversaries, but the longer you write and teach the less you will be pleased with yourself. When you have reached this point, then do not be afraid to hope that you have begun to become a real theologian . . .<sup>9</sup>

May God grant that we be such persons in our day.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 67.