

“Luther on the Practice of Piety”

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Luther is largely unacknowledged as a teacher of the spiritual life even in the Lutheran church. Yet that has begun to change as scholars gain a new appreciation of him as a pastoral theologian.¹ This, in turn, has led to growing appreciation of his teaching on Christian spirituality, a teaching that is simple and yet profound, personal and yet communal, experiential and yet sacramental.²

It is, however, easy to misrepresent the spiritual riches and pastoral wisdom of teaching because he developed it piecemeal by the ongoing application of the Scriptures to the problems that he faced in his own life, the church, and the world around him. That tends to obscure the comprehensive reach of his teaching and its practical coherence. While certain themes recur, he did not draw together his insights into the nature and practice of evangelical piety systematically in any work

¹ See, for example, Timothy J. Wengert (ed), *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology* (Lutheran Quarterly Books, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, UK, 2009).

² See Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1981), 138-58; Endel Kallas, “The Spirituality of Martin Luther: A Reappraisal of His Contribution,” *Spirituality Today* 34/4 (1982): 292-302; Jared Wicks, *Luther and His Spiritual Legacy* (Theology and Life Series 7, Michael Glazier: Wilmington, Delaware, 1983); Egil Grislis, “The Spirituality of Martin Luther,” *Word & World* 14/4 (1994): 453-59; Bengt R. Hoffman, *The Theology of the Heart: The Role of Mysticism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, edited by Pearl Willemssen Hoffmann (Kirk House Publishers: Minneapolis, MN, 1998); Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Luther’s Contribution to Christian Spirituality,” *Dialog* 40/4 (2001): 284-89; Scott Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” in *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, edited by Timothy J. Wengert (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2004), 240-60; Philip D. W. Krey & Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality* (Paulist Press: St Louis, 2007); Dennis Ngien, *Luther as a Spiritual Advisor: The Interface of Theology and Piety in Luther’s Devotional Writings* (Studies in Christian History and Thought, Paternoster: Milton Keynes, UK/Waynesboro, GA).

apart from the two catechisms in 1529 and the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his German writings in 1539.

Receptive Piety

Luther repeatedly develops three themes in his teaching on the spiritual life: the common call for all Christians to participate in it, its receptive character, and its reliance on the power of God's word as the instrument of the Spirit.

Luther maintains that the spiritual life is the common life of faith for all Christians. Karl Marx summed that up rather well by his witty remark that Luther "turned priests into laymen because he turned laymen into priests".³ In fact he went even further than that, for he promoted the Christian family as a holy order, a kind of monastic institution.⁴ He advocated a form of common piety for all the members of the congregation, the piety of lay man and lay woman, a piety that was based on their common baptism and common participation in Holy Communion, a down to earth piety for ordinary people rather than the super-piety of spiritual high fliers. He presupposed that since they were part of Christ's priesthood, they all shared a common call to a holy life in the church, the family, and the world. Through faith they all had hidden access to heaven here on earth. So, since Luther as a monk was steeped in the rich monastic tradition that reached back to the early church, he

³ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 69. See also John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Truman State University Press: Kirksville, MO, 2008), 73-140; Dorothea Wendebourg, "Luther on Monasticism," in Timothy J. Wengert ed., *The Pastoral Luther*, op. cit., 340-47.

⁴ See LW 252: 252 (WA 42, 441) where Luther portrays Abraham as a monk and Sarah as his companion in the monastic order of marriage.

drew on it and adapted its practices for use by ordinary Christians in family prayer and personal devotions.

Luther also taught that spiritual life is basically a matter of reception rather than performance. This comes as a corollary to the teaching of justification by grace of God the Father through faith in his Son and as a result of interaction with late medieval thought.

There had been much profound reflection on the nature of theology throughout the Middle Ages. This culminated in a discussion on whether theology was basically practical or theoretical.⁵ That issue was associated with a related monastic debate, based on the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42, on whether the contemplative life of meditation and prayer was superior to the practical life of obedience to God with self-discipline and ritual observance.

For Luther the Christian life was not basically a matter of doing or of thinking. Rather, it was a “passive life”,⁶ a receptive state of being, the life that we receive from God, the life in which we produce nothing by ourselves but receive everything from God, the life in which we hear what He says and experience what

⁵ See Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, edited and translated by Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Lutheran Quarterly Books, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2007), 21-24.

⁶ Latin, “vita passiva.” See Luther’s remarks on Rom 5:1-5 in WA 5:165-66 (my translation): “The truly active life... does not produce or work hope, but presumption... On that account the passive life must be added which puts to death and destroys the whole active life so that no merits remain in which a proud person may glory... For while tribulation removes everything from us, it at leaves God alone, for it does not remove God but rather leads to God... Truly the passive life is the purest kind of life.” For an analysis of this key term in Luther’s thinking see C. Link, “Vita passiva: Rechtfertigung als Lebensvorgang,” *Evangelische Theologie* 44 (1984): 315-51; Oswald Bayer, *op. cit.*, 22-27, and Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK, 2000), 31.

He does to us.⁷ We receive and so “suffer” what God does.⁸ We can think and act spiritually only because He is active on us, in us, and through us. Since we people of faith are always “passive” recipients, we do not produce our own righteousness and holiness but possess “passive righteousness,”⁹ and “passive holiness”¹⁰ that we keep on receiving from Christ and never possess apart from him.

Luther’s maintains that the practice of receptive piety combines both contemplation and action, for Christ himself embraces both as God and man.¹¹ So each Christian is called to embrace both the contemplative and the active life.¹² While the contemplative life is exercised liturgically and devotionally by prayerful faith in God’s promises which sees what is otherwise unseen,¹³ the active life, which is ordained by God in the Decalogue, is exercised by faith that is active in love toward God and the neighbor in the church and the world.¹⁴

Luther also teaches that Christian meditation¹⁵ and prayer¹⁶ are empowered by God’s Word and done with His Word. We do not devise our own spirituality

⁷ See LW 13:137 (WA 40/3:588); LW 33:67, 157 (WA 18:636, 697). Like perception (*sensus*) understanding (*intellectus*) is a passive power (WA 9:97). Yet our passive reception from God results in obedience in which we are not entirely passive but become coworkers with God (LW 13:139 [WA 40/3: 590, 31]).

⁸ In Latin *passio*, passion, means something that is experienced as well as something that is suffered.

⁹ See LW 26:4-11 (WA/1 40:40-51); LW 34:337 (WA 54:186).

¹⁰ See LW 26:25 (WA 40:70); LW 27:82(WA 41/2:103).

¹¹ LW 14:327 (WA 5:58).

¹² LW 5:345-49 (WA 43:667-69).

¹³ Luther teaches the liturgical contemplation of God’s incarnate Son in the spoken Word and the enacted sacraments in LW 3:275-77 (WA 43:71-73); LW 5:247-51 (WA 43:598-02); LW 22:202, 420, 421, 505 (WA 46:712; WA 47:138-40); LW 24:64-67 (WA 45:519-22).

¹⁴ LW 6:260-63 (WA 44:193). On this see John A. Maxfield, *op.cit.*, 119-26.

¹⁵ Luther main works on meditation in English are his two commentaries on Psalm 1 (LW 10:11-34 [WA 3:11-31]; LW 14:287-311 [WA 5:24-247]), his commentary on Psalm 77 (LW 11:10-37 [WA 3:530-49]), his commentary on Psalm 119 (LW 11:287-311 (WA 5:24-247)), his Christmas sermons on Matthew 1:1-17 (translated by John W.

but have it instituted for us by God's Word which establishes and empowers it. His Word does not just teach us how to meditate and pray, but also enables us to meditate and pray in a God-pleasing way. We meditate and pray with the Word.

Luther presupposes that since the Scriptures are inspired by the God's Spirit, they inspire us with His Spirit. In them the Father speaks to us through His Son in order to give us His Holy Spirit. As we listen to His Word, the Holy Spirit is at work on us and in us through it. Its power, Luther claims, is like the effect of Christ's touch: "If a touch of Christ healed, how much more will this most tender spiritual¹⁷ touch, this absorbing of the Word, communicate to the soul, communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word... Just as heated iron

Kleinig, *John W. Kleinig Resources Publications*, <http://www.johnkleinig.com>) [WA 9:439-42] and on Luke 2:1-14 (LW 52:7-31 [WA 10/1:58-950, the popular tracts on "A Meditation on Christ's Passion" (LW 42:7-14 [WA 2:136-42]) and "A Simple Way to Pray" (LW 43: 193-211 [WA 38:358-75]), and the preface to "the Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther" (*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy John Wengert, Fortress: Minneapolis, 2000, 379-83 [*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, henceforth cited as BSLK, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963, 545-53]). For the study of this neglected topic see Martin Nicol, *Meditation bei Luther* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1984); John W. Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart: Luther on Meditation," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 20/2&3 (1986): 142-51 (also at *John W. Kleinig Resources Publications*, <http://www.johnkleinig.com>).

¹⁶ Luther's most significant works on prayer in English are his "Personal Prayer Book" (LW 43:11-45 [WA 10/2: 375-406]), his treatment of the Lord's Prayer in the "Large Catechism" (op. cit., 440-56 [BSLK, op. cit., 662-90]), his exposition of Matthew 6:5-15 in "The Sermon on the Mount" (LW 21: 137-55 [WA 32:416-27]), the popular tract on "A Simple Way to Pray" (LW 43:193-211 [WA 38:358-75]), and his insightful discussions in the *Sermons on the Gospel of St John: Chapters 14-16* (LW 24: 86-90, 238-41, 382-401, 406-8 [WA 45:539-543, 678-81; WA 46:75-92; 95-98]). See also Charles P. Arand, "Battle Cry: The Catechism's Exposition of the Lord's Prayer," *Concordia Journal* 21 (1995): 42-65; Friedemann Hebart, "The Role of the Lord's Prayer in Luther's Theology of Prayer," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 18/1 (1984); Martin E. Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer* (Northwestern Publishing House: Milwaukee), 1985; Dennis Ngien, "The Theology and Practice of Prayer: God's Initiative and Human Appropriation," op. cit., 105-30; Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Lord's Prayer*, trans. Daniel Thies (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 2011); David P. Scaer, "Luther on Prayer," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47 (1983): 305-15; Maurice Schild, "Praying the Catechism and Defrocking the Devil: Aspects of Luther's Spirituality," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 10/2 (1976): 48-56; Timothy J. Wengert, "Luther on Prayer in the Large Catechism," in Timothy J. Wengert (ed.), *The Pastoral Luther*, op. cit., 171-97.

¹⁷ The German text has "in the Spirit" (*im Geiste*) to show that the hearer is touched in the spirit by the Holy Spirit.

glows like fire because of the union of fire with it, so the Word imparts its qualities to the soul”.¹⁸

Luther’s appreciation of God’s Word as a means of the Spirit is the reason for its “sacramental” use in meditation and prayer, for “just as baptism is the sacrament by which God restores a person, and absolution is the sacrament by which God forgives sins, so the words of Christ are sacraments¹⁹ through which he works our salvation”.²⁰ Through faith they produce what they say and portray in those who attend to them. He therefore speaks about “sacramental meditation on the Gospel”.²¹ So those who meditate on a story about Jesus in the gospels as their story receive Christ and his gifts. Luther explains its spiritual impact in this way:²²

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 perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are 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

¹⁸ LW 31:349 (WA 7:53).

¹⁹ Here Luther uses this term more broadly than usual for holy acts, human acts done at God’s command by which He has promised to be at work in some way.

²⁰ WA 9:440. Luther adds (my translation): “Just as grace is undoubtedly given through baptism and the forgiveness of sins through absolution, so grace and salvation are undoubtedly given through meditation on the word of Christ. But three things are necessary for this to happen. First, the word must be preached; it does not matter whether it be by meditation or by reading. Secondly, we must regard what is preached as done for us and relevant to us. That is, if I hear the history of Christ and do not reckon that everything is relevant to me; for example, that Christ was born suffered and died for me, then the preaching and knowledge of the history is of no benefit to me. Lastly, faith is also required. That is by far the most important thing of all, even though it is often denied. However friendly and good Christ may be, he will not be known, he will not gladden us, unless I believe that he is friendly and good to me...”

²¹ See WA 9:439-42 and my translation of this sermon in *John W. Kleinig Resources Publications*, <http://www.johnkleinig.com>). In his stress on the power of meditation on the Scriptures Luther reclaims the heritage of sacred reading in early monasticism as described by Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford University Press: New York/London, 1993), 107-33. Like those monks he regarded the close, attentive reading the Scriptures as an exercise in meditation.

²² LW 35:121 (WA 10/1/1: 13-14).

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.

When we meditate on Christ and His Word God opens up heaven before us.²³

Likewise, prayer that is based on Christ's "commandment and promise...may well be regarded as a sacrament and a divine work rather than a work of our own."²⁴ We do not just pray as Christ has commanded in order to receive what God has promised but also to join our prayers with His to help us to in a God-pleasing way.

When we meditate on God's word and pray with it, the Word delivers us from the devil and makes us fruitful. Thus Luther maintains:

Even though you know the Word perfectly and have already mastered everything, you are daily under the dominion of the devil...Therefore you must constantly keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion, and

²³ See Luther's comment in LW 5:25 (WA 43:601: "Indeed, if anyone speaks with himself and meditates on the Word, God is present there with the angels; and He works and speaks in such a way that the entrance to the kingdom of heaven is open.")

²⁴ LW 21:151 (WA 32:424).

it constantly creates clean hearts and minds. For this Word is not idle or dead, but effective and living...through the Word the devil is cast out and put to flight.²⁵

Since it is most holy, it also makes us and all we do holy:

God's word is the treasure that makes everything holy. By it all the saints have themselves been made holy. At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed...Accordingly, I constantly repeat that our life and work must be based on God's Word if they are to be God-pleasing and holy.²⁶

So through this use of God's word the life and work of a Christian becomes holy.²⁷

Luther's three rules for the exercise of receptive piety

Luther developed his insights on the practice of receptive spirituality most fully in his *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition* of his German writings.²⁸ There he outlines "a correct way of studying theology", "the way taught by holy King David" in Psalm 119.²⁹ Yet he does not, as we would expect, propose a method for the study of academic theology. Rather, he describes the practice of receptive

²⁵ "The Large Catechism," op. cit., 399 (BSLK, op. cit. 583). Luther vividly contrasts the holy power of God's Word with the use of holy water and incense in popular devotion by claiming that it is much more effective than these in driving the devil away from those who meditate on it ("The Large Catechism," op. cit., 381 [BSLK, op. cit., 549].

²⁶ "The Large Catechism," op. cit., 400 (BSLK, op. cit. 586). See also LW 37:365 (WA 26:50); LW 41:148-49 (WA 50:628-29); LW 43:202 (WA 38:366); LW 51:262 (WA 36:354).

²⁷ For a summary of Luther's teaching on this topic see John W. Kleinig, "Luther on the Reception of God's Holiness," *Pro Ecclesia* 17/1 (2005): 76-91 (also at *John W. Kleinig Resources Publications*, <http://www.johnkleinig.com>).

²⁸ LW 34:283-88 (WA 50:657-61). On this see Oswald Bayer, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio. Eine Besinnung auf Luther's Theologieverständnis," *Lutherjahrbuch* 55 (1988): 7-59; Oswald Bayer, *op. cit.*, 33-65; Reinhard Hütter, *op. cit.*, 72-78; John W. Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes a Theologian?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66/3 (2002): 255-67; *Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (Concordia Publishing House: St Louis, 2008), 12-22.

²⁹ LW 34:285 (WA 50: 659).

spirituality that he had learned from singing, saying, and praying the Psalms. But even that is misleading. He does not advocate a particular practice of spirituality, but outlines the dynamic process of spiritual formation in the life every Christian's life by the interplay between three factors: the Holy Spirit, God's Word, and Satan.

He begins with three "rules" for practical, theological formation.³⁰

I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that This is the way taught by holy King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred and nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented in the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio* [prayer], *Meditatio* [meditation], *Tentatio* [temptation].

Here Luther distinguishes his own practice of spirituality from the tradition of spiritual formation that he had experienced as a monk. That tradition followed a well-trying sequence: reading the Scriptures out aloud,³¹ meditation, and prayer.³² Its goal was contemplation, the experience of union with the glorified Lord Jesus. To reach this goal, a monk ascended in three stages, as on a ladder, from earth to heaven. The ascent began by reading a passage from the Scriptures aloud to quicken the mind and arouse devotion in the heart; it proceeded to meditation by

³⁰ LW 34:285 (WA 50: 659).

³¹ See Douglas Burton-Christie, op. cit., 115-22; Jeffrey W. Ware, "A Lutheran Perspective on *Lectio Divina*," *SoundWitness*; http://soundwitness.org/evangel/lectio_divina; accessed 30 June 2013.

³² See the classical formulation of this practice in Guigo II, "The Ladder of Four Rungs," *U.M.I.L.T.A.* <http://www.umilta.net/ladder.html>; accessed 30 June 2013.

reflecting on heavenly things and heartfelt prayer for union with Christ; its goal was the experience of contemplation, the bestowal of spiritual illumination.³³

In contrast to this, Luther proposed the practice of devotion for spiritual reception rather than spiritual self-advancement. This involves three things: **prayer, meditation, and temptation**, all which are interactively entwined. All three revolve around ongoing, faithful attention to God's Word. These three terms describe the life of faith as a cycle that begins with prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, concentrates on the reception of the Holy Spirit through meditation on God's Word, and results in consequent spiritual attack. This, in turn, leads a person back to further prayer and intensified meditation. Thus the spiritual life is viewed as a process of reception that turns proud people into humble beggars before God.

Luther advises us to begin our devotions with **prayer**:

Firstly, you should know that the 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. Therefore you should straightway despair of your own reason and understanding. With them you will not attain eternal life, but, on the contrary, your presumptuousness will plunge you and others with you out of heaven (as happened to Lucifer) into the abyss of hell. But kneel down in your little room [Matt. 6:6] and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding . Thus you see how David keeps praying in the above-mentioned

³³ See Martin Nicol, *op. cit.*, 19, 81-83.

Psalm , “Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me,” and many more words like these. 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 that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher.³⁴

This advice presupposes that we have been given the gift of eternal life and can, by faith, enjoy it now. No human teacher can either give it or teach it to us. Neither can we gain eternal life for ourselves by reflecting on our experience of God or interpreting the Scriptures in the light of our own experience. In fact, if we attempt to gain eternal life through theological speculation and spiritual self-development, we commit spiritual suicide. Those who make their own ladder for devotional ascent into heaven, will, like Lucifer, plunge themselves and others into hell.

But we have no need to climb up to heaven by ourselves. The triune God has come down to earth for us. His Son has become incarnate for us to give us eternal life here on earth and to draw us into it through His Word. We also have “the real teacher of the Scriptures”, the Holy Spirit, who uses them to teach us to understand that life and helps us to live it. We receive the hidden gift of eternal life from God and live in it by relying on the Holy Spirit to be our instructor, our spiritual director. We therefore need pray to God the Father through His Son to receive the Holy Spirit as the teacher of eternal life in order to meditate on the Scriptures.

³⁴ LW 34:285-86 (WA 50:659).

Luther does not claim that we will receive special insights and prophetic revelations through prayer and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Rather, he holds that God the Father grants His life-giving, enlightening Holy Spirit through His Word. This Word is the means by which we receive the Holy Spirit. So we may pray for the enlightenment, guidance, and understanding that the Holy Spirit alone can give through the Scriptures, for fruitful meditation on the Scriptures is produced by the Holy Spirit. The reason for this, as Luther wrote, is that “God will not give . . . his Spirit without the external Word”.³⁵ The Scriptures are the God-breathed, in-Spirited Word of God. The same God who inspired them with his life-giving Spirit uses them to inspire and energize us with His Spirit. So since God’s Word is the means by which the Father grants the Holy Spirit through His dear Son, we receive the Holy Spirit through meditation on His Word.

The practice of receptive spirituality, then, is based on prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit turns us would-be spiritual self-promoters into humble, lifelong students of the Scriptures. Apart from the Spirit and the power that He gives, we have no access to eternal life and know nothing about it. So prayer for God’s ongoing bestowal of the Holy Spirit through Jesus and the ongoing reception of the Spirit is the foundation for Christian spirituality, the life that is produced and developed by His Spirit. And that is a lifelong undertaking!

³⁵ See too Luther’s remarks in the “Smalcald Articles,” (*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy John Wengert, Fortress: Minneapolis, 2000, 322-23 (BSLK, op. cit., 453-56), and LW 40:146 (WA 18:136).

After prayer for the Holy Spirit comes **meditation** on God's word:

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart but also externally, *by repeating the written words externally and rubbing them (like a herb for its flavor),* reading and re-reading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. . . Thus you see in this same Psalm how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, and read, by day and night and always, about 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., *externally* was not given in vain.³⁶

When Luther speaks about "the external Word", he implicitly criticizes two other kinds of meditation, both of which bypass the incarnation of our Lord and His physical interaction with us through the Word. On the one hand, Luther is critical of the method of meditation that he learned as a monk. This method used the Scriptures as a kind of spiritual springboard for mental reflection on heavenly realities and the ardent prayer for the ecstatic union of the heart with its heavenly bridegroom. On the other hand, he is equally critical of the practice of meditation

³⁶ I have put my own corrected translation in italics: LW 34:286 (WA 50:659). In the fourth line of the quotation Luther translates שׁי in Ps 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 97, 99, 148, with "talk" rather than "meditate" as in most other translations (see Ps 119:46). Where the English has "meditate" [the following verb after "meditate"] Luther uses the German verb *tichten/dichten* here and in the Preface to the "Large Catechism" (op. cit. 383 [BSLK, op. cit. 553] for imaginative reflection. Like his predecessors Luther holds that meditation is an exercise of the whole heart which includes both understanding (*intellectus*), active mental apprehension, and affect (*affectus*), passive emotion. For him there are four basic affects: joy and grief, fear and hope (LW 10:343 [WA 3:404]; LW 35:255 [WA DB 10/1:103]). The active emotions, love and hatred, which drive these passive emotions, determine the object, manner, and outcome of meditation (LW 10:17 [WA 3:19]; LW 14:297-98, 315 [WA 5:43-45, 49]. For meditation by singing see Ps 119:54; cf. 119:12, 164, 171, 175.

on the inner word of the Holy Spirit, spoken as prophecy in the hearts of Spirit-filled people. Luther instead advocates meditation on “the external Word”, the embodied Word of Christ, spoken from human lips, written with human hands, and heard with human ears. Like the light of the sun, the Word is present with us here on earth, addressed to us by a pastor, written in a book, enacted in the divine service. Meditation is indeed a matter of ‘the heart’, but not only of the heart. The way to the heart is from the outside to the inside, from the mouth through the ears and into it. In meditation we hear inwardly what is outwardly spoken to us.

This understanding of God’s Word as the physical means by which He gives the Holy Spirit led to two profound changes in the practice of meditation for Luther. First, whereas as he had initially regarded meditation as a mental act, an attentive state of being marked by inward, silent reflection,³⁷ he later realized that Christian meditation was primarily an oral, verbal activity.³⁸ As we speak God’s words to ourselves, we listen attentively to them with our whole heart, “so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them”. In this Luther was influenced by his study of the Psalms in Hebrew. He discovered that all the Hebrew words for the practice of meditation referred to various forms of vocalization and sub-vocalization, ranging from speaking to murmuring, chattering to musing, singing to humming, muttering to groaning. So when we meditate, we listen closely to God’s spoken Word to us.

³⁷ See LW 10:17 (WA 3:19).

³⁸ See LW 14: 296, 297-98 (WA 5:34, 35); LW 14: 315(WA 5:49).

We concentrate on the Word and attend to it; we speak it aloud to ourselves again and again; we read and reread it; we compare what is said in this place with what is said about it elsewhere in the Bible;³⁹ we ruminate on it, like a cow chewing its cud, in order to digest it;⁴⁰ we rub at it, like a herb that releases its fragrance and its healing medicine by being crushed; we take it in, physically, cognitively, emotionally, and personally, so that it reaches our hearts, the centre of our being. There we receive what God gives to us through His Word.

Second, in his teaching on affective meditation Luther connects our personal devotions with our involvement in public worship, for there God's Word is spoken and enacted publicly. God commanded the Church to preach, read, hear, sing, and speak His Word, so that through it He could deliver His Holy Spirit to His people. So the enactment of God's Word in the divine service determines how to meditate, and on what. Just as the Scriptures are read in the divine service, so we read them out to ourselves as we meditate on them. Just as the psalms are sung there, so we sing them to ourselves. Just as God's Word is preached there, so we preach it to ourselves and hear the Holy Spirit preaching it to us.⁴¹

Luther claims that the practice of prayerful meditation shapes our experience. We experience what the Word does to us by the fruit it produces in us. Strangely,

³⁹ See LW 14: 296 (WA 5:34).

⁴⁰ See also LW 9:136 (WA 14:650); LW 11:21, 23 (WA 3: 538-39, 540).

⁴¹ See Luther's remarks to his Barber in LW 43:198 and 201 (WA 38: 363, 366). Just as the reading of the Scriptures prepares for the preaching of the sermon to the congregation, so prayerful meditation on God's word prepares for the preaching of the Spirit in the heart. That sermon, with its 'rich, enlightening thoughts', "is far better than a thousand prayers".

we discover the power of God's Word, the hidden work of the Holy Spirit in and through the Word, most clearly in **temptation**.⁴² Luther says:

Thirdly, there is *tentatio*[testing/temptation], *Anfechtung*.⁴³ This 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 wisdom. Thus you see how David, in the Psalm mentioned, complains so often about all kinds of enemies, arrogant princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions, whom he must tolerate because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God's word (as has been said) in all manner of ways.⁴⁴ For as soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor [of theology] of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God's Word.⁴⁵

The kind of experience that Luther describes differs quite radically from what we would normally regard as a spiritual experience. He describes what we experience passively from the work of God's Word in us. While this experience begins with the conscience, it touches all parts of us and affects the whole person, mentally, emotionally, and physically. The Spirit-filled Word attunes us to God the Father by conforming us to His dear Son. We not internalize Scripture and assimilate it to our way of being; rather, the Word assimilates us to Christ and makes us godly like

⁴² See Won Yong Ji. "Significance of Tentatio in Luther's Spirituality," *Concordia Journal* 15/2 (1989): 181-88

⁴³ This German word is a military term for an aggressive act of war by the army of an enemy.

⁴⁴ See Ps 119:23, 78, 95. In each of these cases the Hebrew text does not explain whether the psalmist is persecuted because he meditates or whether he meditates because he is persecuted.

⁴⁵ LW 34:286-87 (WA 50:660).

him. We do not use Scriptures to make something of ourselves with them; instead the Holy Spirit uses them to unmake us and remake us in the likeness of Christ.

This experience of transformation happens through “temptation”, “trial”. When Luther speaks of temptation, he uses the word in a special way. Here he does not refer to the enticement by the devil to sin. The German word *Anfechtung* describes Satan’s “attack” upon our faith in Christ.⁴⁶ As long as we operate by our own power, with our own intellect and our all too-human notions, the devil lets us be. But as soon as we meditate on God’s Word and draw on the power of the Holy Spirit by meditating on it, the devil attacks us by arousing misunderstanding, contradiction, opposition, and persecution. He mounts his attack through the enemies of the gospel in the Church and in the world. The purpose of this attack is to destroy our faith and undo the hidden work of God’s Word in us. As soon as God’s Word is planted in our hearts, the devil tries to drive it out, so that we can no longer operate by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But, paradoxically, these attacks are counter-productive, “for as soon as God’s Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor [of theology] of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God’s Word.” Thus the devil’s attacks on us serve to strengthen our faith because they drive us back to God’s Word as the only basis for our spiritual life. If we rely

⁴⁶ See LW 26:10-11 (WA 40:49-50) and LW 54:105-7 (WA TR 1:275-80 [no. 590]) for the devil’s attack on forgiven sinners by his misuse of God’s law to condemn them.

on our own resources in the battle against Satan and the powers of darkness, we will fail. In that situation our only hope is in Christ and His Word. Our experience of utter spiritual weakness makes us trust in the power of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God's Word, which is "wisdom above all wisdom". So through temptation we learn to seek help from God in meditation and prayer. Through the attacks of the evil one we are drawn further out of ourselves and deeper into Christ. We become more receptive to him and His gifts.

By these attacks on us we also become spiritually mature and fruitful. We thereby "experience" the righteousness and truth, the sweetness and loveliness, the power and comfort⁴⁷ of God's Word with our whole being, rather than just with our minds or emotions or senses. Since God uses temptation to make us spiritually mature, it is the touchstone for our spirituality. Temptation discloses what is otherwise hidden from us. Just as a pawnbroker uses a touchstone to test the presence and purity of gold in a coin or a piece of jewelry, so it tests the authenticity of our faith and proves our spiritual maturity.

Luther's handbook for evangelical piety

The theological profundity of Luther's teaching results, rather surprisingly, in a simple pattern of daily devotions both for himself and others. In his daily devotions

⁴⁷ See Birgit Stolt, "*Lasst uns fröhlich springen!*" *Gefühlswelt und Gefühlsnavigierung in Luther's Reformationsarbeit* (Weidler: Berlin, 2012), 105-07, for Luther's use of "comfort" (Trost) for the provision both physical and emotional encouragement, strength, and courage.

Luther prayed the catechism.⁴⁸ That, for him, consisted of three main texts: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. That is also what he advocates for all Christians and teaches in his Small Catechism.⁴⁹

The Small Catechism is his handbook for family devotions, his textbook for evangelical piety. Like a handbook for the training of an artisan, it gives instruction in "the rules and practices" of the Christian life.⁵⁰ The core of each section is a foundational scriptural text for recitation and memorization. Those texts do not just give God's foundation for the practice of faith and love in the Christian family; they also consecrate the life and work of all its members do as they say.⁵¹

In his Small Catechism Luther provides two kinds of resources for the head of each Christian household to use in teaching its members to live fruitful holy lives. In it he teaches the seven basic elements of evangelical piety. First, we have the Ten Commandments, which teach us what "God wishes us to do and not to do".⁵² In them God shows us how to use our holy gifts from Him in the first table as well as His common gifts for all people in the second table of His law. Second, we have the Creed, which "sets forth all that we can receive from God... to help us to do

⁴⁸ See LW 14:8 (WA 31:227); LW 41:185 (WA 51:469); LW 43:193(WA 38:358-59); and LC, BC, 380 (BSLK, op. cit., 547-48).

⁴⁹ "Handbook: The Small Catechism [of Dr. Martin Luther] for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers" (*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy John Wengert, Fortress: Minneapolis, 2000), 437-75 (BSLK, op. cit., 499-541).

⁵⁰ LC, BC, 383 (BSLK, op. cit., 554).

⁵¹ See LW 41: 164 (WA 50:641, 27-29): "The creed and the Ten Commandments are also God's word and belong to the holy possession(s), whereby the Holy Spirit sanctifies the holy people of God."

⁵² LC, BC, 431(BSLK, 646).

what the Ten Commandments require of us”.⁵³ It “tells us what God does for us and gives us”, so that we can see “how God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts”.⁵⁴ Third, we have the Lord’s Prayer, so that we can “obtain the power to do” what God requires of us by spreading our apron wide “to receive many good things” from God.⁵⁵

Luther then adds four other practical matters to this foundational teaching of the spiritual life for ordinary people. The fourth item is the teaching on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, so that those who have received the gifts of forgiveness, redemption and eternal life may use it to put to death the old self by daily repentance and be raised up “to live before God in righteousness and purity forever”.⁵⁶ The teaching on public and private confession and absolution is included in this section. The fifth item, the teaching on the Sacrament of the Altar, encourages Christians to receive forgiveness, life and salvation from Christ’s body and blood. The sixth item is an order for morning and evening prayer as well as an order for grace before and after meals to acknowledge God as the Host and consecrate the food “by the Word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:5).⁵⁷ The seventh

⁵³ Ibid., 431(BSLK, 646).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 440 (BSLK, 660).

⁵⁵ Ibid., 444 (BSLK, 668).

⁵⁶ SC, BC, 360 (BSLK, 517).

⁵⁷ On the origin and purpose of these prayers see Frieder Schulz, “Die Hausgebete Luthers,” in Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*, 5 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1994), 191-204. For an analysis of the grace before and after meals see Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Benedicite and Gratias,” *Response* 5/3 (1964): 139-43.

item is a list of Bible passages for the performance of holy, priestly service in the three holy orders of the church, politics, and the family.⁵⁸ That list with its admonitions for Christians in their particular station and vocation culminates in two general directives for the whole church: Rom 13:9 and 1 Tim 2:1, for wherever they are located they have a common calling to serve as priests by mediating God's love to others in the world and interceding for them before God in heaven.

As part of this elementary teaching on evangelical piety he also provides a simple order of family prayer in its sixth section in which he shows how to use the catechism in family meditation and prayer.⁵⁹ It is significant that he calls it an order for the morning and evening "blessing"⁶⁰ which is to be prayed by the whole family from memory on getting up from bed and going to bed. It is so short and simple that it could be done in any family and yet it is flexible enough to include other devotional acts. It consists four main parts: a Trinitarian blessing, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and short personal collect.⁶¹

The order begins with a Trinitarian blessing: "God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watch⁶² over me. Amen." This was accompanied by the sign of the cross. By

⁵⁸ See LW 37: 364-65 (WA 26:504, 505).

⁵⁹ SC, BC, 363, 364 (BSLK, 521, 22).

⁶⁰ In LW 5:140 (WA 43: 524, 525) Luther asserts that blessings are not mere wishes. They state facts and are effective, for "they actually bestow and bring what the words say".

⁶¹ See Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "As You Get Out of Bed-As You Go to Bed," and "This Little Prayer in Addition," *Response 5/1&2* (1963): 35-40 and 70-73; Glenn Borreson, "Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers as Baptismal Spirituality," *Word & World* 22/1 (2002): 55-63.

⁶² Here Luther uses the German verb "walten" by which he translated the Hebrew verb גבר in Ps 103:11 and 117:2 for God's grace and truth "prevailing" and so "ruling" over His people.

its enactment this benediction claimed all the heavenly blessings of Holy Baptism for daily life as lived with God and in His presence here on earth.

By the recitation of the Apostles Creed the family, standing as free royal children in their Father's presence, or kneeling in homage to their heavenly King, confesses its faith in the triune God. As in baptism, it renounces the devil and declared its allegiance to the triune God. The faith that is proclaimed in that Creed is the foundation for their life of faith, their reliance on God at work and in sleep.

After the confession of faith comes the Lord's Prayer, because Christian prayer presupposes faith in the triune God and exercises that faith. As with the Creed the family stands or kneels as it prays. It is "the very best prayer" because "God the Father composed it through His Son and placed it in His mouth".⁶³ It is both His Word to us and His prayer for us. In it "He takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use".⁶⁴ When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ascend heavenwards to God the Father "in his skin and on his back";⁶⁵ we come to the Father in the name of Jesus and pray together with him. This is how Luther describes what happens when we pray in the name of Jesus:⁶⁶

I am justified in saying: "I know that my heavenly Father is heartily glad to hear all my prayers, inasmuch as I have Christ, this Savior in my heart. Christ prayed for me, and for this reason my prayers are acceptable through His." Accordingly we must weave our praying into

⁶³ LW 21:146 (WA 32:420).

⁶⁴ "The Large Catechism," op. cit., 443 (BSLK, op. cit., 667).

⁶⁵ LW 42:23 (WA 2:84).

⁶⁶ LW 24:407 (WA 46:97-98).

His. He is forever the Mediator for all men. Through Him I come to God. In Him we must incorporate and envelop all our prayers...He unites us with Himself, really puts us on a par with Him, and merges our praying into His and His into ours.

The personal needs of the household are brought before God in a model prayer that differs slightly from the morning⁶⁷ to the evening⁶⁸. In the morning each person gives thanks for protection during the night and asks for protection during the coming day for the performance of God-pleasing service, before entrusting their bodies, souls and possessions to God⁶⁹ and seeking the company of a guardian angel in the daily battle against the accusation and condemnation of the devil.⁷⁰

The evening prayer differs from this with its focus on God's gracious protection, its lack of reference to God-pleasing work, and its request for pardon for the sins of that day. Whereas the morning order of prayer prepared for joyful work with God, the evening order prepared for joyful rest with Him.

The purpose of this family blessing is simple and yet profound. Through its enactment the daily life of the family is consecrated by the Word of God and

⁶⁷ This is the morning prayer ("The Small Catechism," op. cit., 363[BSLK, op. cit., 521]): "I give thanks to you, my heavenly Father through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have protected me this night from all harm and danger, and I ask you that you would also protect me today from sin and every evil, so that my life and actions may please you completely. For into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen."

⁶⁸ This is the evening prayer ("The Small Catechism," op. cit., 364[BSLK, op. cit., 522]): "I give thanks to you, my heavenly Father through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have graciously protected me today, and I ask you to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously to protect me tonight. For into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen."

⁶⁹ This combines the prayer of Jesus in Luke 23:46 from Ps 31:6 with the advice given in Ps 37:5 and Paul's admonitions in Rom 6:13, 19; 12:3.

⁷⁰ While the German text mentions the "power" of the devil, the Latin text speaks of his "legal right" (*ius*), his juridical claim to have the right to use God's law to condemn the righteous.

prayer (1 Tim 4:5). Through it the whole household claims God's protection for the daily battle against the devil and receive God's heavenly gifts for daily service in the church and in the world.

Conclusion

The life of faith receives its shape from its location in Christ, for just as the Father gives His Spirit through His Son to those who meditate on God's Word, so by the Spirit the Son brings them to the Father as they pray with it. In a sermon on John 1:50 Luther portrays this most vividly by linking the opening of heaven at the baptism of Jesus with the story of Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28:10-22.⁷¹ Since we are united with Jesus we are located with Him under an open heaven. There we hear the Father addressing us with Jesus as His dear children; there we, like Jesus and in Him, address God as our dear Father.⁷² Luther adds:⁷³

Thus we still see the heaven open; indeed, we ourselves live in heaven. Although we in a sense still dwell on earth, in a spiritual sense our names recorded among those of the celestial citizens in heaven. There we have our being before God in prayer, in faith, and in the divine word, likewise in the Sacraments. There we walk in love toward our neighbor; there we grow in the Word and in the knowledge of Christ, and we also increase in all things necessary for eternal life. This is our heavenly life, begun here in faith. Yes, heaven is open for us. We live

⁷¹ See LW 22: 200-11 (WA 46:711-21) and Luther's meditation in LW 5:215-24, 244-51 (WA 43: 577-83, 597-602).

⁷² See LW 22:201-02 (WA 46: 711-12).

⁷³ LW 22:204 (WA 46:714).

and have our being in heaven; we dwell there as citizens even though we are still on earth according to our physical body.