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*Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio  
Faciunt Theologum:*  
**Luther's Piety and the  
Formation of Theologians<sup>1</sup>**

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**INTRODUCTION**

According to much current analysis, the Christian churches in North America have entered into a "post-Christendom" or "post-Constantinian" era.<sup>2</sup> While theologians and ethicists disagree over details and proposals, most agree that theology will need to be done differently in the next century if it is to make a positive contribution to church and society.

If theology is to be done differently, then theologians will need to be educated differently. Since the eighteenth century the education of theologians in North America and Europe has been carried out in universities or in seminaries modeled on university theology faculties. These institutions and their curricula have been based on the intellectual foundation of the Enlightenment. In recent years there have been concerns raised about the theory behind the theological curriculum,<sup>3</sup> the content of the curriculum,<sup>4</sup> and the piety of seminarians.<sup>5</sup> Whether any of these questions or initiatives address the problems of the ideology that has guided the education of theologians in the last two hundred years remains to be seen, and discussion of problems and proposed solutions continues.

For the historian of theology it is interesting that the Reformation began in the midst of similar questioning of and attempts to reform the theological curriculum that grew up along with the Medieval universities. For example, the first years of the sixteenth century had seen the controversy over the teaching of Hebrew, which centred on Johannes Reuchlin and the

University of Cologne but had touched almost every faculty and theological professor in Germany. Curricular reform was already underway at the University of Wittenberg when Luther set off the indulgence controversy in 1517. There was a strong sense that a new era needed a new sort of theologian and a new curriculum for educating theologians.

In the current concern to develop theology and theologians appropriate to a post-Christendom church, can the sixteenth century be of any help? Certainly the church of sixteenth century Germany was a "Constantinian" church, but many believe that Luther's *theologia crucis* is a great help in developing a "post-Constantinian" theology.<sup>6</sup> This essay asks whether Luther's advice about the necessities for the formation of a theologian might add to his suggestion for a theological paradigm. The investigation will be based on Luther's preface to the 1539 edition of his German works.<sup>7</sup>

## LUTHER'S ADVICE TO YOUNG THEOLOGIAN

Herein I follow the example of St. Augustine, who was, among other things, the first and almost the only one who determined to be subject to the Holy Scriptures alone, and independent of the books of all the fathers and saints....

Moreover, I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had some practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils, even as I (in God) dare to presume and boast, without arrogance and lying, that in the matter of writing books I do not stand much behind some of the fathers. Of my life I can by no means make the same boast. This is the way taught by holy King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio*, *Meditatio*, *Tentatio*.<sup>8</sup>

For Martin Luther there was no greater duty, no higher vocation, than the call to preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The theologian and pastor<sup>9</sup> was the womb of the Lord Jesus to carry people through the Word of God to faith and love of neighbour, and ultimately to rest in Christ.<sup>10</sup> Thus, for Luther, the formation of theologians was an issue of utmost importance for the reform of the church and he dedicated his life to this calling.

Naturally, a great proportion of Luther's writing is lectures and sermons to young theologians in formation and brims with advice for these eager students. His favourite piece of advice, playing the Medieval steps for the reading of Scripture, was that there were three essentials: *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*, by which Luther meant prayer, study, and the experience of the cross. The formation provided by the Holy Spirit through *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* would enable the theologian to preach and teach a practical theology of justification by faith.

### *Oratio*: 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 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 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 Psalm [119], "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. For such practice gives 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.<sup>11</sup>

The first of Luther's necessities for the formation of a theologian is *oratio*, prayer, especially the prayer for both insight and humility. The prayer for insight will be granted by the Holy Spirit and that for humility through persecution and trials. Prayer which struggles to lay hold of the real teacher of Scripture is itself an experience of the cross. In the Winter Semester of 1515-1516 Luther told his students that we should hopefully expect God to hear and answer our prayers. But God's "Yes" is more difficult to hear than God's "No". The

sign that God has heard and is answering our prayers is that everything appears to go against what we have prayed for so fervently. Why? We would like to restrict God to our preferences, to what we are capable of conceiving, but God cannot be captured so easily. God is always beyond our thoughts and concepts, and so God's answer to our prayers is always beyond anything we could conceive. Before we can accept God's "Yes" to our prayers, God needs to overcome the limitation of our concept of how things must be. When we are on the brink of despair, almost convinced that God has turned away from us forever, when we feel beyond hope, when our prayers are reduced to unutterable groans, the Holy Spirit is praying with us and for us in those groans. Only the prayer of the Spirit enables us to bear up under this alien work of God by which God's proper work is accomplished.<sup>12</sup>

So, prayer is both dangerous and necessary. It is dangerous because prayer brings us into *Anfechtung* and to the very gates of hell. It is necessary because it is only when we see the jaws of hell open beneath our feet that our pretensions die and we are capable of hearing God's "Yes" not only to our prayers, but to our very being. The theologian who prays becomes open to the Gospel and to the alien ways in which God communicates the Gospel. The theologian who prays stands before the cross. The theologians who proudly trust in their own reason rather than praying for the illumination of the Holy Spirit avoid the cross and produce a theology of glory.

For Luther, prayer can be about many subjects and it can be for self and others, but it is fundamentally placing ourselves in God's hands. As noted, what Luther had most clearly in mind was our concern for salvation, which, if allowed to become the central concern of our lives, can actually prevent us from hearing God's grace. Instead of becoming wrapped up in the quest for salvation, we prayerfully place our salvation in God's hands and direct our attention toward the needs of our neighbour.

Prayer is not melancholic introspection, but giving our troubles over to God. Prayer is not hanging our heads and brooding on our own misery, but getting down on our knees and looking to heaven. Luther advises, "Read a psalm or the Our Father, call on God, and tearfully lay your troubles before Him." God wants us to pray and so to turn our burdens over to divine

care rather than multiply our troubles through our own efforts to free ourselves. When we see that we are too weak to bear our troubles alone we grow strong in the Lord, and by this gift of strength, God is glorified. It is experiences such as these that enable us to become “real Christians. Otherwise [we] remain mere babblers, who prate about faith and spirit but are ignorant of what it is all about...”<sup>13</sup>

The ministry of the Word is service of the neighbour, and it is a service which makes prayer especially important. The office of theologian and pastor is a position of responsibility for the eternal destiny of those entrusted to the teacher/preacher’s care. Prayer is important because the devil is unalterably opposed to the Gospel and will do everything possible to silence its message, including attacking preachers with both persecution and temptation to pride. Prayer, because it reduces our conceptions to nothing before God, is perhaps more necessary for theologians than for other Christians. The theologians must learn to pray for grace and peace for themselves so that the Gospel might be communicated and their responsibilities fulfilled.<sup>14</sup>

### *Meditatio*: Study

Secondly, you should meditate, that is not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you then have complete understanding. You will never 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.

Thus you see in this same Psalm [119] how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, 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, hear, sing, speak, etc., outwardly was not given in vain.<sup>15</sup>

*Meditatio* is perhaps the easiest of Luther’s three essentials for moderns to misunderstand because the meaning of the word has changed somewhat in the last several centuries. What we mean by “meditation” is closer to what the Medievals meant by

*contemplatio*. *Meditatio* is closer to the modern “study”, but study of a more intense sort than we often undertake. Luther was recommending *meditatio* and defining it for his students already in his first lectures as Professor of Sacred Scripture. Like thinking, *meditatio* is an ability of reason. The difference is that *meditatio* is deeper, more careful and diligent thought. *Meditatio* is disciplined study which moves us in our inmost being. *Meditatio* is not only thought, but also involves oral questioning and discussing.<sup>16</sup>

The focus of our meditation is Scripture; to meditate is to make progress in our knowledge of and familiarity with the testimonies of Scripture and the holy teachers of the church.<sup>17</sup> When we study the Scriptures we are “to think deeply and explore the inner parts”, following the Spirit to understanding and action. Thus an essential for meditation is not only diligence in study, but also faith. *Meditatio* does not produce mere academic knowledge. Because it is undertaken in faith, *meditatio* produces growth in knowledge which contributes to faith and the practice of the Christian life.

We must know that our own understanding is limited and so not make our personal interpretation the standard or become embroiled in controversy over those things we do not fully understand. This is the point of Luther’s often voiced critique of “reason”. He is not criticizing rational thought, but the pretentious limiting of God’s possibilities to our own ideology. Thus an important aspect of meditation is that we know that there is always more to faith and action than we yet understand, so we wait and hope for the day when understanding and action are complete. Scholars cannot allow themselves to become lost in pride at what is already accomplished, but are to meditate in hope that the testimonies of Scripture will be revealed.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps we can begin to appreciate the importance that study held for Luther by looking at his own preparation for teaching theology. He followed the standard curriculum of the times, beginning at age six or seven with the study of Latin, advancing through the ancient subjects of the trivium and quadrivium, moving to the arts faculty of a university and, after achieving the degree of Master of Arts, finally beginning the study of theology. The curriculum of the theological faculties of the time included work in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and the generations of commentators on Lombard, the

Scriptures, and the Church Fathers. Along with the usual academic curriculum, members of the Augustinian Hermits also memorized large blocks of Scripture as part of their monastic discipline, and Luther later remarked on shaking most of the leaves on the tree of the Bible. Promising students such as Luther added Greek and Hebrew and more intensive reading and study of particular ancient theologians, in Luther's case especially Augustine.

By 1512 when Luther received his doctorate in theology he had studied most of the available philosophical and theological knowledge of the late fifteenth century, and he then applied this background to the study and exposition of Holy Scripture, most of which he could cite from memory. Later he did not always speak positively about all that he had studied, and he participated in reforming the curriculum of the University of Wittenberg and German secondary schooling, but no change he proposed lessened the amount of study required of young theologians in formation. In fact, educational requirements for ordination in Saxony were more rigorous after the Reformation, but the focus of studies had changed away from the Medieval Scholastics to the Scriptures themselves and more contemporary systematic theology.

What *meditatio* adds to scholarly discipline is faith. Theologians who meditate on the Word not only study Scripture using every tool at their disposal, but also do this study hoping for the illumination of the Holy Spirit and expecting to meet Christ. While theological study in the later Middle Ages presumed that the theologian was a faithful member of the church,<sup>19</sup> Luther found something lacking in the theology he had learned. *Meditatio* looks to Scripture not for debating points or defenses of papal and episcopal practices, but for the Gospel. It is the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit sets people free from the power of sin, the Gospel which is the focus of study. Here is the connection with *oratio* and *tentatio*, for it is prayer and the cross that keep study oriented toward struggling to hear the Gospel.

*Meditatio* is study focused on the Scripture as the Word of God, that is as the "manger" which carries Christ and which communicates the Gospel of justification *sola gratia, sola fides*, and *solus Christus*. The Scriptures and the Gospel which they communicate are the Christian's armour against the devil and

the theologian's tool and weapon. The Scriptures stand at the heart of the theological curriculum and the young theologian's *meditatio*.

But *meditatio* is not mere pious "devotional reading" of Scripture. Luther points to the necessity of the *discipline* of study. It is necessary that we devote ourselves and give attention to the Scriptures. There is always the chance that the theologian will become lazy, and so discipline in study is to be maintained.

When applied to study, the word "discipline" has two connotations. The first is that one must apply oneself to study, the second is that study must take place according to the canons and methods of scholarly study of the subject in question. Luther exemplified and argued for the use of the best available scholarly tools and methods of his time. For example, in introducing his lectures on Isaiah in 1527 Luther said that in order to understand the meaning of the prophet it is necessary to know both Hebrew grammar and the historical context in which the book was written. Of these, grammar is more basic, but historical context is more important, so the student who has developed command of the language must move on to the study of history.<sup>21</sup>

While recognizing that the subject matter of theology is the Word of God and life, the theologian is to use the tools of the academic discipline. Conversely, the theologian is to use the tools that scholars have developed, but is also to remember the majesty of the subject matter and not examine the Word as a cow would examine a fence. *Meditatio* is scholarly study oriented toward discovering the Gospel in the midst of *tentatio* in a context of *oratio*.

### *Tentatio*: The Cross

Thirdly, there is *tentatio*, *Anfechtung*. 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 [119], 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. 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 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 become otherwise.<sup>22</sup>

The most crucial element in the formation of theologians is *tentatio*, the cross of Christ experienced as *Anfechtung*. It is *tentatio* that is the reason for *oratio* and *meditatio*. It was, of course, *Anfechtung* that gave rise to Luther's new theology in the first place. He found that the late-Medieval piety and theology which he had learned raised the question of one's own salvation in such a way that salvation became impossible.<sup>23</sup> This led to his development of a radical new twist in the *pietas crucis* of the fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

Luther's Christianity is a theology and practice of the cross in at least two ways. First, the cross of Christ is central to all theology and the entire Christian life. God is revealed, made visible, in the suffering and shame of the cross, so everything the theologian says about God and the way God relates to creation must be subject to the paradigm of the cross. Any theology which attempts to get around the cross or to speak of God apart from the crucifixion of Jesus is a theology of glory which "calls good evil and evil good". Second, the Christian life is lived under the cross. Discipleship means being conformed to the cross of Christ. Through Word and Sacrament and the realities of following Christ in the world, the Holy Spirit conforms the Christian to the crucifixion of Jesus. Being conformed to the cross means experiencing the cross of Christ in one's own life as *Anfechtung*. *Anfechtung* is not only despair at being able to accomplish one's own salvation, but also persecution for the sake of the Gospel which proclaims that salvation is accomplished in Christ. The true church and the Christian both conform to the paradigm of the cross.

For the theologian in formation the necessity of *tentatio* means that suffering—understood as Luther's *Anfechtung*—is a part of one's training for theology, and that the theologian who is being conformed to the cross of Christ through suffering will be a more proficient theologian than the one who is not. Becoming a theologian is arduous not only liturgically

and academically, but especially personally. The call to preach and teach the Gospel is a literal call to take up the pain of the crucifixion. This pain cannot be self-chosen "suffering", of course, for then it becomes works, but only the simple result of being drawn by the Spirit to follow Jesus Christ.

The need for *tentatio* was not just a prerequisite for theology, but was a continuing mark of the theologian's life. Theologians are pastors who have been called to bear the pain of all in the church. The theologian is the front line soldier who must face the attack of *Anfechtung* from within and without. And, "still greater trials follow".<sup>25</sup> God does not send *tentatio* in order to destroy us, but to force us to exercise our faith. Through trouble we learn to pray, to fight sin and the devil, and to see that God transcends the limits of our possibilities. Without *tentatio* we could not learn what faith really is and the meaning of the Word would always be beyond us. If theologians lived at ease in peace, we would all soon cease to be Christians.<sup>26</sup>

The necessity of *tentatio* also means that the theologian in formation must learn to centre all her/his theology on the crucified Jesus as God most visible. Any other centre for theology will only result in a speculative theology of glory. The theologian is to know nothing but Christ crucified. The cross cannot be avoided in life or in doctrine.

### *Faciunt Theologum*: The Formation of Theologians

If, however, you feel and are inclined to think that you have made it, flattering yourself with your own little books, teaching, or writing, because you have done it beautifully and preached excellently; if you are highly pleased when someone praises you in the presence of others; if you perhaps look for praise, and sulk or quit what you are doing if you did not get it—if you are of that stripe, dear friend, then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way, you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears. Then do not spare any expense! Decorate them with golden bells, so that people will be able to hear you wherever you go, point their fingers at you, and say, "See, See! There goes that clever beast, who can write such exquisite books and preach so remarkably well."<sup>27</sup>

What sort of theologians did Luther intend that *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* should produce? Luther hoped that

his students would become practical theologians of grace. In the winter of 1531–1532 at table Luther remarked that true theology ought to be practical rather than speculative. By “practical” Luther did not mean “functional” or the opposite of “theoretical”. For Luther practical theology is theology which enables people to hear the Gospel and to come to faith in Christ. Speculative theology is a theology based on salvation by works. Practical theologians base theology on “Christ, whose death is appropriated to us through faith.” Speculative theologians “cannot free themselves from the notion that those who do good [will be rewarded].”<sup>28</sup>

Why does Luther call a theology based on Christ practical and a theology based on works speculative? A theology founded in Christ is a theology which can be lived; a theology based in works cannot be lived, but only leads to despair or self-righteousness. Luther is not interested in a theology which is only coherent theoretically, but in a theology which enables people to live coherent lives before God and in society. A theology of works is by definition speculative and not practical; it will not enable a coherent life and is probably not even theoretically coherent. A practical theology of grace is a humble theology of the cross which directs the church to hear Christ; a speculative theology of works is a theology of glory which only shows off the theologian’s decorated, yet shaggy, ears.

The new sort of theologian which Luther wished to prepare for pastoral ministry in the church was a practical theologian who could communicate the Gospel to people. Such a theologian would teach and live a *theologia crucis*, which would be developed through *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*.

### The Formation of Theologians after Christendom

If one agrees that Luther’s *theologia crucis* provides a helpful starting point for post-Constantinian theology, it would seem that *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* ought to be equally helpful as the starting point for a *curriculum crucis* for the formation of post-Constantinian theologians. Here are some thoughts about such a curriculum.

## The Cross

I want to begin with the discussion of *tentatio* because a life and doctrine formed by the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth is the hub of Luther's advice. For a modern, democratic, consumer culture the necessity of suffering is also the most problematic element. The problem exists on at least two levels.

The first relates to the question of the starting point of theology. Many contemporary schools of theology want to begin theological reflection with the personal or social experience of the theologian. In fact, since Kant many would say that this is the only possible starting point for theology. While advocating the necessity of the experience of the cross in the formation of theologians might at first seem to confirm such a methodology, there is a potential conflict between theology which begins with personal, social, or cultural experience and a *theologia crucis*. This conflict was made clear in the German Church Struggle of 1933–1945, in which the "German Christian" theology, which began with the experience of the German *Volk*, was opposed by theologians such as Niemöller, Barth, and Bonhoeffer, who maintained that Christian theology must begin with the historic specificity of Jesus of Nazareth, the Scriptures, and the traditional creeds and confessions of the church. The Confessing Church held that only a theology which began with Jesus Christ, not human experience, can be faithful to the Gospel in a time of crisis.

Insofar as Luther saw the crucifixion of Jesus and the humanity of Jesus as the *locus* where God is most clearly revealed and the Scriptures as that which carries this revelation most faithfully to the present, a *theologia crucis* with roots in Luther would have to side with the Confessing Church rather than the German Christians. Excluding experience as the starting point of theology does not exclude the importance of experience in the formation of theologians. Luther also spoke about "the cross" as the experience of suffering and persecution in the life of the church and the Christian. The arbiter of truth is not our experience, but the experience of God in Christ. The experience of the cross is a gift sent from God to help us hear the Gospel more clearly. While the experience of the theologian can never usurp the place of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth as the source and critique of theology, the theologian's own experience of the cross is essential to her/his formation. At least

in part, the Holy Spirit uses our own pain to open our ears to hear the pain of God on the cross.

The second problem with *tentatio* today is the role of suffering in the life of the Christian. Questions about the necessity of suffering arise from at least two sources. For many centuries the powerful who cause suffering and benefit from oppression have used talk of the "positive value" of suffering in order to justify their own position, so those who benefit from abuse tell the abused that God is using their pain for their own good. This is pure ideology and not a theology of the cross. A real *theologia crucis* does not reinforce the reigning ideology but rather calls it into question by revealing the falsehood of its claim to be a word from God. The God of the cross is not the one who imposes oppression or who abuses victims, but the one who suffers as one who is oppressed and abused. To attempt to end the suffering caused by the powers of this world is not an attempt to avoid the cross, but is an affirmation of God's revelation in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Yet not all attempts to put an end to pain and suffering can be affirmed. Some attempts to end some kinds of suffering are rooted in the same ideology which causes oppression and abuse. As the centre of the ideology of consumer capitalism, North American society has become a culture which goes to hideous lengths to avoid anything and everything painful. Some of our criticisms of the necessity of *tentatio* come from this source rather than from the attempt to replace oppression and abuse with justice and affirmation. The consumerist ideology and culture of therapy does not provide a helpful context for the formation of theologians of the cross, and we must recognize that even the culture of liberation is not without its limitations. In a fallen world none of us can be anything we might want to be without exacting a cost from others. A theologian of the cross would never tell an abused person that the abuse was good for building character or some such, nor would a theologian of the cross assist people in the consumerist project of pain-avoidance.

How might suffering contribute to the formation of a contemporary theologian? Perhaps the most helpful contribution of suffering is that, when experienced in the light of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, it breaks through the pretensions of contemporary ideology. Where suffering has been experienced

as the cross of Christ made real today, theological potential is set free. As Stanley Hauerwas has said, "[T]he break with convention can only come when we have the substance to face the agony of human existence which convention is inherently designed to help us forget."<sup>29</sup> One cannot deny that the political and economic suffering of Africa, Asia, and Latin America has given rise to great theological creativity in the past two decades. In North America many theological students are coming to seminary at mid-life having experienced real pain in their prior experience. Some of these are among our best students and pastors. What these theologians and students have experienced is the pain of oppression or abuse or failure—that is, pain which the reigning ideology blames on the victim. Under the cross they have learned that the Gospel is the Good News that God does not try to explain away their pain or the evil that has caused it, but suffers with them to accomplish their ultimate liberation from slavery to the power of evil. While a seminary cannot make suffering a prerequisite for admission, pain and having heard the Gospel in the midst of pain seems to make many people better theologians than they would otherwise be. Thus, the *tentatio* needed for today seems to be an experience of suffering or solidarity with the suffering which has been enlightened by the hearing of the Gospel in the midst of pain.

Such pain can never be imposed, but if one lives long enough as a follower of Jesus Christ, it will probably come. Here again the example of the German Church Struggle is instructive. Those German theologians from the 1930s and 40s whose theology has been judged by history to be the most helpful are not those who based their theology on the experience of the German *Volk* and thereby avoided persecution, but those like Bonhoeffer who confessed faith in Christ against the ideology of the time. Such theologians did not seek out persecution, but neither did they run away from it. Christian theologians cannot impose suffering on others, but the theologians who avoid pain or persecution will probably never realize their potential, and theologies which do not take full account of the reality of human sin and pain will never be very helpful.

### Prayer

There has been much ferment in the past decade regarding the piety of theologians in formation. There has been concern

about a perceived lack of integration of piety and academic study and there have been concerns that the churches' theological and pastoral leaders have a depth of piety that communicates to the laity and the world. These concerns about the formation of young theologians have come as part of a more general interest in "spirituality" among writers in both religion and psychology.

The problem with much of this concern and ferment is that it has served to disconnect too many North American Christians from the economic and political reality of our place in worldwide systems today. Interest in mysticism and Gnosticism in religion and psychology has replaced efforts to end American imperialism or the injustice, hunger, and poverty caused by restructuring the world economy along transnational corporatist lines. A piety which is a retreat from the reality of suffering in the world is not *oratio* which has grown out of the reality of *tentatio*. As has happened too often in the past, our contemporary desire for "spirituality" is not much more than pious desires or spiritual experiences which serve as an opiate to deaden us to the real pains of the world today.

If our prayer is to be the sort of *oratio* envisioned by Luther and is to be something other than introspective individualism, it cannot ever become disconnected from either the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth or the experience of the cross in the world today. *Oratio* is not an escape from reality, but a process whereby the Holy Spirit enables us to see reality from as close to God's perspective as we are capable. The point of prayer is not to send us into a spiritual Never-Never Land, but to draw us into the world in the midst of the contradiction between the world as it is under our rule and the world as it was, is, and shall be under God's rule. *Tentatio*—*Anfechtung*, the experience of the cross—is what Luther called this tension, and it is this tension that makes *oratio* risky and painful in its own right.

*Oratio* is part of the same solidarity with the suffering, the oppressed, the abused which is *tentatio*. Specifically, *oratio* is taking on the pain of the crucified Jesus and the pain of those crucified today as my own pain and lifting that pain up to God as unutterable groans. Here there is no room for Gnosticism or mysticism of either the ancient or modern varieties, for the world's pain does not exist in some realm of Platonic spiritual

good and evil, but in the everyday world of relationships, economic systems, and power structures. Good and evil exist and must be battled against in the concrete forms of the decisions we make about how to spend our money and how to spend our lives.

For the theologian in formation, *oratio* is every bit as much an engagement with real life in its most concrete manifestations as is *tentatio*. The two must be kept in closest relationship or the theologian is in danger of separating the promise of the Gospel from life in the real world. *Oratio* in connection with *tentatio* is a means by which the Holy Spirit pushes the theologian into the world and helps the theologian to try to understand the world from God's perspective. Where Luther can be especially helpful here is in his call to give up concern for our own salvation—however we might currently define salvation—give our destiny into the hands of a gracious God, and direct our concern toward our neighbour. Prayer becomes Luther's *oratio* when it is part of such a turn away from ultimate concern for ourselves toward concern for others.

### Study

What sort of curriculum can be *meditatio* which is linked to *tentatio* and *oratio*? Perhaps the best symbol for such a curriculum is the name that former Seminex professors Edward H. Schroeder and Robert W. Bertram have chosen for their ministry dedicated to theological study for the laity: *Crossings*. The point of the *Crossings* curriculum is to "cross" Scripture and life so as to hear the Gospel in the midst of our daily work and living. This is the point of *meditatio*, study which enables us to hear the Gospel in life and in Scripture. The centre of *meditatio*—the cross of Christ—provides also the model for study.

Luther said that the point of theological study was the development of a practical theology. Remember that what Luther meant by "practical" is not what we tend to mean when we speak of "practical". Many students believe that more courses in specific professional topics or in more current issues would make their seminary education more "relevant", more "practical". According to Luther's definition of practical, nothing could be further from the truth. *Meditatio* is learning—as best

as one can—to distinguish Law and Gospel so that the Gospel can be heard. *Meditatio* is becoming so immersed in both Scripture and life (through *tentatio* and *oratio*) that crossing from one to the other is second nature. *Meditatio* is shaking every leaf on the tree of Scripture and learning where each leaf falls into the life of people who need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A practical theology is not a theology that is up on the latest fad, but a theology that enables people to hear the Gospel and the call to discipleship in the midst of concrete life situations. Thus *meditatio* implies that young theologians experience a much closer encounter with Scripture in its original language and context than is currently possible in the curriculum of most theological colleges.

Perhaps I reveal here my bias as a “curricular conservative”, but it seems to me that Luther’s view of *meditatio* is precisely what is needed to offer a corrective both to the “professional school” and to the “graduate school of religion” models of seminary education.<sup>30</sup> These models are technological in orientation and substitute learning technique for learning the Christian tradition in hope of hearing the Gospel. The primary purpose of the formation of pastors and theologians is not to address every current issue or to train people to conform to the current view of what an ideal professional or professor should be. For the ministry of the church these are far too transitory. Most of what I learned in seminary about preaching, counselling, liturgy, and administration has become completely passe, and I have had to unlearn almost all of it. What I learned of the content<sup>31</sup> of the Scriptures, the creeds, the confessions, and the great theologians has all remained relevant for the formulation of a theology and practice of the cross at the end of the twentieth century. What needs to be added to such study is a focus not on technique, but on crossing the tradition of the church into our actual lives. The point of seminary education is to form theologians, that is, people who have the Gospel coursing through every vein in their body and who have the depth and the insight to communicate the Gospel in the context of whatever latest fad.

For *meditatio* to happen languages and history remain essentials of the theological curriculum. The theologian remains dependent on the Scriptures as the primary place where the Gospel is learned, and the Scriptures are best understood in

their own language in the context of their own times. The history of the church is still the best place to learn how different people at different times in different cultures have understood and communicated the Gospel. Our contemporary, television-formed culture makes studies which require extended attention spans difficult for many of us, but the necessity of communicating the Gospel demands no less. If such study is to be *meditatio* the connection with *oratio* and *tentatio* cannot be lost. *Meditatio* is study motivated not just by scholarly curiosity (though some of that is essential) but by the reality of the cross and carried out in a context of prayer.

## CONCLUSION

*Oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* seemed to Luther to be the essentials for the formation of theologians in the sixteenth century. He hoped that prayer, study, and *Anfechtung* would produce theologians who could effectively teach a Gospel-centred theology of the cross to the next generation of Christians. If one can believe the complaints against theologians registered by Spener and many others in the seventeenth century, Luther's advice was not followed and *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* were soon replaced among many theological students by concern for acclaim and a secure living. It is precisely these concerns, now expressed through the forms of the ideology of consumer capitalism, which press us back to Luther's *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*.

## Notes

- 1 Abbreviations used in this article: LW = *Luther's Works: The American Edition* (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955ff.). WA = *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.).
- 2 For examples, cf. Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church: Where Are We Headed?* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1989), and Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).
- 3 E.g., Edward Farley, *Theologia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
- 4 E.g., the current emphasis on "globalization" in the Association of Theological Schools.
- 5 E.g., programs directed at "spiritual formation" at various seminaries initiated in the 1970s and 80s.

- 6 E.g., cf. Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); Kazoh Katamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (ET Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965); and Jürgen Moltman, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (ET London: SCM Press, 1974).
- 7 LW 34:283–288; WA 50:657–661.
- 8 LW 34:285; WA 50:658–659.
- 9 Luther would have seen no difference between a pastor and a theologian. The person who was called to preach was called to teach and vice versa.
- 10 LW 28:219; WA 26:6.
- 11 LW 34:285–286; WA 50:659.
- 12 LW 25:364–365; WA 56:375–376.
- 13 LW 14:60; WA 31–1:96–97.
- 14 LW 28:219; WA 26:6. From the lectures on 1 Timothy.
- 15 LW 34:286; WA 50:659.
- 16 LW 10:17; WA 3:19.
- 17 LW 11:431 and 433; WA 4:317–319.
- 18 LW 11:434; WA 4:319–320.
- 19 Though historians such as Joseph Lortz complain of the scepticism and cynicism of certain circles of German scholars; cf. Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, (ET London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1968) I:70–72.
- 20 LW 28:217; WA 26:4.
- 21 LW 16:3; WA 31–2:1.
- 22 LW 34:286–287; WA 50:660.
- 23 Cf. Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Late-Medieval Theology*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967); and Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) 41–42.
- 24 LW 31:40–41; WA 1:354. Cf. LW 31:52–55; WA 1:361–363.
- 25 LW 28:219; WA 26:5.
- 26 LW 14:60; WA 31–1:95–96.
- 27 LW 34:287–288; WA 50:660–661.
- 28 LW 54:22.
- 29 Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*, Reprint Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 3.
- 30 For an excellent discussion of how the formation of our culture since the Enlightenment influences these issues see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), and *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991).
- 31 This should not be read as an endorsement of ahistorical methodologies of “liberal”, “Post-liberal”, or “Fundamentalist” bent. It should be read as a critique of an over-emphasis on the latest methodology, whatever that might be.