

The Church Worker and His/Her Spiritual Life

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Personal Note: Anyone who heard this presentation “in the flesh” will immediately recognize that the words that came from my mouth at the conference at times were quite close to this manuscript; at other times, not so much. Nevertheless I offer it for your consideration. If you desire any clarification, you will find my email address at the end of the manuscript.

H L Senkbeil

Your District conference committee is to be commended for focusing on the health and wellbeing of those who work everyday in the trenches, so to speak, of the church’s ministry. And that’s really what church work entails, at its core. Pastors, teachers, and other church professionals are not merely activity directors in religious clubs, but they daily do battle against the devil, world, and flesh. This is the “good fight of the faith” which the apostle urges upon young pastor Timothy (1 Tim 6:11) and everyone who holds the office of the ministry or one of the auxiliary offices in the church is automatically engaged in this struggle. It is a struggle not against human beings – members of our congregations or fellow workers in the church – that would be a “bad fight” – but it is good fight against the spiritual enemies of Christ and His church in which we are daily engaged.

This the context of our topic, and I want to lay it out here right at the start so that we will see what is at stake when we speak about the “Spiritual Life” of the church worker. To be sure, there are other important dimensions to the life of the church worker and they will be addressed here as well. But when we speak about the spiritual life of the church worker we are tackling the center of the matter. Budgets, programs, the recruitment and maintenance of volunteers in ministry – all of these deserve our attention, but when you get right down to it, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. Our main problems in ministry are not financial or social or psychological in nature, but rather our real struggle is with the rulers, the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, -- the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm. (Eph 6:12)

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IN AN AGE OF SPIRITUALITY

Now before we talk about spiritual life in the times in which we live, we need to address the utter fascination of North American culture with all things spiritual. “Spirituality” has become the rage, and talk show hosts and self help books are filled to overflowing with spiritual

matters. When I first started in ministry nearly forty years ago secular culture wouldn't touch anything spiritual with a ten foot pole. For modernists, if you couldn't prove it in a laboratory it wasn't real. But in the present time, the more mysterious and spiritual something is, the more captivating it is. While this presents conservative Lutherans with many opportunities for mission and outreach, it also opens a Pandora's box for spiritualism and the occult and that means that we must be crystal clear to define what we mean by "spiritual" in such a spiritually loaded environment. Otherwise, we come off as just another vendor hawking our wares in the religious marketplace.

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

When we as confessing Lutherans use the word "spiritual" we are not talking about something that is merely non material. Rather, we use the word as it is used in the Scriptures, not with a small "s" but a capital "S" – the word "spiritual" in the Bible is always something connected with and revealed by the Holy Spirit of God.

1 Corinthians 2:12-13 ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit (the *Pneuma*), interpreting spiritual truths (*pneumatika*) to those who are spiritual (*pneumatikois*).

1 Corinthians 2:12-13 ² ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα εἰδῶμεν τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ χαρισθέντα ἡμῖν. ¹³ ἃ καὶ λαλοῦμεν οὐκ ἐν διδακτοῖς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις ἀλλ' ἐν διδακτοῖς πνεύματος, πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες.

According to Scripture and our Lutheran confessions a person is not spiritual because he or she has adopted a certain kind of piety or vocabulary or set of mannerisms, but because that person has received the Holy Spirit by the means which God has ordained. On Pentecost Day St. Peter preached: *Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* ³⁹ *For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.* (Acts 2:38-39) The Holy Spirit is not some blind force or entity, but the third Person of the Holy Trinity, both Lord and Giver of Life. He continues to dispense and give out this divine Life as He imparts Himself in the church through the preached Word and Sacraments administered. As we confess in the catechism, "God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead a godly lives here in time and there in eternity." (expl., Second Petition) The sanctified life is a life of continually receiving the Holy Spirit, Who is never possessed, but continually received each day by Word and by prayer. Jesus asks, *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to*

your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:13)

When we speak of the church worker's spiritual life, then we are speaking of Sanctification. Ever since the days of the pietists, sanctification has made Lutherans nervous. But it ought not be so. For when we speak of Sanctification we are speaking of Jesus, just as we are speaking of Jesus when we speak of Justification. For according to St. Paul our holiness and our righteousness are rooted in and founded on Jesus and His sacrificial atoning death: ⁸ *God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,* ²⁹ *so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.* ³⁰ *He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. (1 Corinthians 1:28-30)* Jesus Christ is our righteousness and our holiness, our justification as well as our sanctification, precisely because He is our redemption, the payment for our sin. Just as we have no righteousness in and of ourselves, so we have no inherent holiness. As our right standing before God consists in an alien righteousness which we have by faith, so our holiness before God is a borrowed holiness which we have by faith. There is nothing good within us, that is, in our sinful nature. Yet there is propitiation for our sin in Christ's blood, which we receive by faith so that we might be justified – declared or considered righteous – by God's grace as a gift. (Rom 3:23-25)

As we are declared righteous by God's grace as a gift, so sanctification is a gift of God's Spirit. Notice that in Luther's catechism, the second article of the Creed is titled "Redemption," not Justification. It is all about the work of God the Son for us and for our salvation. And the third article, quite properly labeled "sanctification" is all about the entire work of the Holy Spirit (including Justification) in calling, sanctifying, and keeping the church of Christ in the one true faith, which revolves around the ministry of the means of grace. The only holiness we know of as confessing Lutherans is a holiness rooted and grounded in the forgiveness of our sins before God for Jesus' sake. Holiness is not to be discovered or cultivated within, but it is found outside of us, in Jesus Christ, who is Himself our sanctification. It is not a matter of achieving our utmost for his highest, but rather growing up into Him who is our head. It is not a matter of living our "best life now," for sanctification is not a matter of fulfilling our own potential. The Christian is not driven, but given. That is, he or she is buried with Christ by baptism into His death and risen with Him by the same baptism into His never-ending life. We ought not conceive of ourselves as "purpose driven," but cross given. That is, having been baptized into Christ, we have put on Christ. It is not we who live, but Christ who lives within us. The life we live in this flesh we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us.

No wonder, then, that the Apostolic Creed centers the work of the Holy Spirit around the forgiveness of sins: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." In his masterful exposition of the third article in the catechism, Dr. Luther teaches us that what the Holy Spirit works for us personally He also works collectively in His church. Though by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or even come to Him, the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts of faith, life, and salvation, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. And what He does for me He does for every believer: "In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

And what is the chief work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying his church? "In this Christian Church He (that is, the Holy Spirit) daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers." We have no holiness of our own; ours is a borrowed holiness as the Holy Spirit continually forgives our sins and then sanctifies us by means of the gospel and sacraments. What He began in us in our baptism He continues day by day in His church: as we were buried with Christ by baptism into His death, so by daily contrition and repentance the old Adam in us is drowned and dies with all sins and evil desires. Daily and richly in His church the Holy Spirit forgives all my sins, the old Adam is put to death and a new man emerges and arises to live before God in righteousness and purity. One day this daily death and resurrection will come to a dramatic halt, when Jesus Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. On that Last Day the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification will cease as He raises me and all the dead and gives eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. But not until then. In the meantime, the Holy Spirit has His work cut out for him.

For sanctification is never a done deal until that Last Day. Holiness is always a work in progress. We all know that from our own bitter experience. Every one of us can testify to the truth of the apostles' confession: "In me there dwells no good thing, that is, in my sinful nature." (Rom. 7:18) There is no special measure of sanctification given out to preachers or workers in the church at their ordination or commissioning into office. In fact, the devil works overtime on those who serve in Christ's church. If he can contaminate the stream at its source, he can pollute the whole river.

SPIRITUAL JEOPARDY FOR THE CHURCH WORKER

Our Lord highlighted the spiritual jeopardy faced by all who serve His holy people with the holy things of God in His high priestly prayer. As He prays to His Father for His apostles, He says: ¹⁴ *I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.* ¹⁵ *I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you*

keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ *They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.* ¹⁷
Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:14-17)

We are growing increasingly aware of the antagonism of a skeptical world toward the Christian gospel, and those who preach and teach the moral precepts of the Bible are branded “intolerant” and accused of “hate speech.” Jesus assumes this goes with the territory in every age. Wherever the Word of the Father is preached, there will be antagonism to be faced, for though God so loves the world that He gave His only begotten Son, the world is no friend of God. The sinful mind is, in fact, enmity against God. Because by nature the world hates God, the world will also hate the messengers of God. I think we’re pretty clear on that kind of antagonism.

But, remember, the real enemy is unseen. We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. And so Jesus also prays that His apostles will be protected from the source of all evil: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” He prays that the Father would *teereo* them, guard them, from Satan, the sworn enemy of God and His church.

PERSONAL STRUGGLE AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

So then I hope we can begin to see that there is more to “the spiritual life of the church worker” than meets the eye. What we need is far more than a few helpful hints and a toolkit for effective devotions. We need a mind and heart that is newly created each and every day in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. That can be done only and solely by God’s own Spirit through His Word. As I move into the application sections of my presentation, I’m going to make a couple of assumptions. First, that many of us (and I include myself here) – perhaps most of us – are not satisfied with our spiritual life. Our spiritual life is a checkered path of false starts, hopeful beginnings, and failed attempts. Now I think you know that the devil lives up to his name – he isn’t called “Satan” for nothing. His name means accuser, and that’s his main game. His strategy is always the same. First he gets you to sin, and then he accuses you. “You’re supposed to be a pastor, a teacher, a worker in the church. And just look at what a miserable failure you are in your spiritual life. Why you haven’t sat down with your Bible for anything but preparing a Bible study or a sermon for months! You pray with other people, but you don’t lead your family in prayer. You rarely pray personally and privately. You’re nothing but a hypocrite! You’re a failure. You shouldn’t be in the ministry.” Or worse – he moves from accusation to condemnation. He gets you to think maybe you’re just going through the motions. Maybe you’re not a Christian! That’s my first assumption: that you’re not satisfied with your spiritual life, and that the devil has been using that to get to you spiritually.

SPIRITUAL CARE FOR THE SPIRITUAL CARE GIVERS

My second assumption then is that the main thing you need for your spiritual life is spiritual care. That is, you need to receive spiritual care before you even have a spiritual life, much less give spiritual care to others. This is something our profession has somehow lost sight of. I don't see many barbers with unkept hair or dentists with teeth decayed and falling out. Yet there are all kinds of pastors and other church workers running around trying to provide the Lord's care to others without receiving it themselves. No wonder we are increasingly witnessing breakdown and burnout in the ministry. If we try to do ministry by personal charisma or ingenuity or human empathy or compassion or organizational skills or programmatic innovation or anything other than the power of God's own Spirit, we rapidly run dry; we hit the wall professionally and spiritually.

Brothers in the ministry who are called to the preaching office, you need to be tended to before you can tend the sheep and lambs of Christ. Brothers and sisters in the auxiliary offices, you need to be cared for before you can care for others.

But who pastors the pastors? Who teaches the teachers? Who cares for the spiritual care givers? There are two answers to this question.

PASTORAL CARE BY OTHERS

First of all, we all need to seek spiritual care for ourselves. Pastors need shepherding, teachers need shepherding, other church workers need shepherding. Too often, we try to 'tough it out,' but we're only fooling ourselves when we try. No one should have to carry on ministry all by themselves. That's not the way Jesus designed His church. "Freely you have received, freely give," He told His disciples. (Matt 10:8) Those who preach and teach the Word should themselves be hearers of the Word. Those who dispense the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ's church should themselves receive those gifts. This happens, to be sure, in the Divine Service, even when you are presiding at that Service, if you are a pastor. The Divine Service of God's Word and Sacrament is the ordinary way every Christian receives spiritual care, including church workers. When we are gathered with fellow Christians around the pulpit and altar we are not with spiritual clients or religious customers, but fellow members of the body of Christ. "Where two or three are gathered together in my Name," says Jesus, "there am I in their midst." (Matt 18:20) In that Word and Sacrament received there in that sacred space, we all are served by Christ our Lord in the rich banquet of His forgiveness, life, and salvation.

But besides ordinary spiritual care, at times we all need extraordinary spiritual care, personalized spiritual care. You all need a pastor, in other words. It's possible you have such a "pastor to pastors and deacons" in your own congregation, but in all likelihood not. Look to

your circuit counselor, look to a neighboring pastor, even though that pastor might be many miles away. Isolation and loneliness are the twin plagues of professional church workers, and it need not be so. Wounded soldiers are never abandoned on the battlefield, and neither should pastors and other church workers be left to struggle on all by themselves with burdens that are all too often overwhelming. We owe it to one another, brothers and sisters, to seek care for ourselves and to offer it to one another. Find a pastor in whom you can confide, confess your sins, receive absolution, express your fears, unburden your heart, receive counsel from God's Word, prayer, and blessing in Jesus' Name. Let no soldier be left behind when it comes to those who labor in the Lord's Kingdom.

SPIRITUAL SELF-CARE

First and foremost, then there is spiritual care by others. Secondly, there is spiritual self care. This is not the same as the faddish "self care" or "self help" we find that is all the rage in our culture. Rather, it is cut from the same bolt of cloth as pastoral care; that is, it stems from God's Spirit through His Word. And this too doesn't happen automatically. We need to consciously and conscientiously provide ourselves with spiritual care from the very tools we use to provide spiritual care to others. No doubt many of you have heard numerous times the flight attendant issue the instructions of what to do when cabin pressure is suddenly lost and oxygen masks fall from the plane's ceiling: "If you are accompanying a small child, first put on your own mask before helping the child." No wonder we so often feel near asphyxiation spiritually speaking; we are trying to survive on the recycled atmosphere of our ministry rather than taking in the bracing oxygen of God's Life-giving Spirit through His Word.

PRAYER STARTS IN GOD HIMSELF

You see, "spiritual life" is not a do it yourself project. It is not something that you do so much as it is something that is done to you, even when are engaged in spiritual self-care. In other words, spiritual life begins and ends in a receptive posture. One of the most practical pieces of advice I ever received regarding personal prayer was from my late colleague, Kurt Marquart. He suggested that the first word out of the Christian's mouth in every prayer should be "You." In other words, prayer doesn't begin with me and my needs, but rather with God and His promises. The prayer book of the bible, the Psalms, and the way of prayer taught by Jesus – though they are certainly rugged and personal in terms of petition – always begin by addressing God, by invoking His Holy Name, by rehearsing His mighty acts, by reviewing and repeating His gracious and merciful promises, before they move toward petition and intercession. All prayer is answering speech, as we are reminded by Eugene Peterson. God always has the first word, first He invites us to believe that He is our true Father and we are His true children, so that we can ask Him openly and freely as dear children ask their dear father. And we learn the

vocabulary of prayer just like little children all over the world learn to speak; by echoing and repeating the words we hear from Him.

One of the most practical and transformative resources I know on prayer is the little tract Martin Luther wrote to his barber, Peter Beskendorf. You can find it among Luther's devotional Works under its title "To Master Peter on Prayer" or you can search for it on the web as "A Simple Way to Pray." If you've never read it, I commend it to you, and if you have, I urge you to revisit it again. In very simple language Luther unpacks his own insight into the spiritual life and a very practical application of his famous formula for the making of a theologian: Prayer, Meditation, and Affliction.

PRAYER AND VOCATION

First off, Luther reminds his friend Peter that prayer and life are interwoven. He urges him to make prayer a matter of daily discipline – the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night: *Guard yourself carefully against those false, deluding ideas which tell you, "Wait a little while. I will pray in an hour; first I must attend to this or that." Such thoughts get you away from prayer into other affairs which so hold your attention and involve you that nothing comes of prayer for that day.*

Still, sometimes the duties of vocation take precedent. Infants need feeding, the sick need visitation, the dying need comforting. At those times, Luther advises, do not let Satan give you a bad conscience because you are neglecting your prayers, rather take comfort in the fact that he who works faithfully prays twice; all work done within your vocation faithfully and well is a prayer which hallows the Name of God, which you bear. On the other hand, he warns his barber that he who works faithlessly also prays, but his work curses and defiles the Name of God.

GOD'S WORD AND PRAYER

Luther is extremely practical and forthright. He admits and acknowledges that the flesh and the devil conspire against prayer. "When I feel myself cool and joyless in prayer," he writes, "I take my little psalter, hurry to my room or to the church *and I say quietly to myself and word-for-word the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and, if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, just as a child might do.*

It is through the oral recitation of the Word of God that the heart is warmed for prayer, Luther insists. And why might that be? Because the Word of God is the sword and instrument of the Spirit. You can't have a spiritual life, you see, without the Spirit of God. And the Spirit of God is always attached to the Word of God. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. (Rom 10:17) Oral speech and recitation are just as important in private prayer as in corporate prayer. The meditation of the heart works best when accompanied by the words of our lips.

And this is the longer collected wisdom of the church. Years ago I thanked Dr. Robert Sauer for his editorial work in producing a two volume devotional resource for pastors entitled “Daily Prayer.” Before he acknowledged my thanks, he said “I hope you’re praying out loud.” This is something that we tend to forget. The collective experience of the church teaches us that although God hears the intentions of the heart just as well as the words of the lips, we human beings are constructed in such a way that heart and mouth go together. Our Lord Himself went frequently out into the fields by himself to pray, and He instructed His disciples to enter into an enclosed space for prayer – not merely so that they could pray undistracted, but so that they could pray aloud. When asked for instruction in prayer, He did not say, “When you pray, *think Our Father who art in heaven*, but rather, say *Our Father who art in heaven*.

CORPORATE PRAYER ALONE

In case we are intimidated by the prospect of a solo conversation with God, Luther reminds his barber that no Christian ever prays alone. He or she always prays as a baptized member of the collective body of Christ. *Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain.* Notice that he says God “cannot” disdain the united prayer of His church, rather than “will not.” It is in the very nature of God that He is bound to hear the corporate prayer of His people, and when we pray from our status as among the baptized, we pray together with the whole church even when we pray alone.

All of this might be intriguing and perhaps even helpful, but as we all know, a framework for prayer without a model for prayer doesn’t get us off and running. How, exactly, does one begin and sustain a life of personal prayer? Once we determine to open up our mouths, what do we say? Here again, Dr. Luther comes to the rescue. He reminds his friend Peter and us that in prayer, Christians speak as they are spoken to. Just like the public prayers of the church, the private prayers of Christians are also answering speech, part of the continuing conversation initiated by the LORD God when He sent forth His eternal Word, begotten from all eternity, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary. Since we serve a speaking God, before we speak to Him in prayer we want to listen to Him so that we can know how to reply. In this way, properly speaking, it can be said that God Himself fuels the pump when it comes to our life of prayer. We should really consider prayer and meditation in the passive mode if we want to become more active in it. That is, in prayer and meditation, God seizes the initiative; He is the actor, we are the acted upon. True, it is something that we do, but in reality it is not so much something we do, but something done to us. An audience, you might say, with the living God.

THE FOUR-FOLD CONTEMPLATION AND PRAYER

But again, what to say in prayer? Though the Father delights to hear whatever is on his childrens' hearts, Luther suggests that our prayers be interlaced with God's own Word. That is, having recited the Word of God so that His own Spirit might warm our hearts to speak as they are spoken to, that we consider that particular text of Scripture in a four-fold manner: as precept or teaching, as thanksgiving, as confession, and as petition. Whether it be the chief articles of the faith like the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments or any other text of Scripture, God's Word itself then becomes a "school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book," says Luther.¹

This requires those of us who live in late modernity to switch gears. We tend to think linearly, and our prayer tends to become a kind of grocery list of needs and wants. Luther's approach to prayer shows how meditation and prayer become partners, so that the oral sound of the Word of God becomes the sole focus, moving the heart to rich contemplation of the many facets of that Word which are given expression and utterance in oral prayer. The genius of his "wreath model," as I call it, is that it is simple enough for any child and yet rich enough to sustain the most experienced Christian.

Luther suggests that prayer be conceived of as an interlaced and interwoven garland of four strands, each strand of which is one dimension of the same word of God. For example, after giving several examples of these four dimensions to prayer, he writes: *If I have had time and opportunity to go through the Lord's Prayer, I do the same with the Ten Commandments. I take one part after another and free myself as much as possible from distractions in order to pray. I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer*²

(Example)

I would like to commend for your further study on the spiritual life the masterful work of my great friend and mentor, Dr. John Kleinig. In his book "Grace Upon Grace: spirituality for today" (CPH, 2008) He has truly wonderful insights into the practicality of a spiritual life rooted in, founded on, and fueled by the Holy Spirit through His gospel and sacraments. Especially helpful are his insights into prayer and meditation. And that's where I'd like to wrap up our

¹ AE, Vol 43, p. 208.

²Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 43 : Devotional Writings II*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999, c1968 (Luther's Works 43), S. 43:200

conversation on the spiritual life. Meditating, if you will, on meditation. Just what is it, and how is it done?

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

Luther's famous dictum regarding the making of a theologian has a certain allure for contemporary ears, fascinated as we are by sound bites and slogans. *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio* - short, concise, and onomatopoeic. There's a strange delight in Luther's formula. Here is our window into a by-gone era. With the mere repetition of this magical phrase, we seem instantly transformed. Anyone who can master those three Latin words at least sounds like a theologian - even while he or she labors to become one. Here we meet a favorite temptation of the devil. The pitfall of seasoned pastors is the temptation to equate formulas with reality. Thus what begins as faithful orthodox confession degenerates into the empty mouthing of pious words. The result is a field day for the devil, who gleefully builds his chapel wherever Christ builds his church, as Luther warned. Whenever shepherds of Christ's own flock are seduced into becoming technocrats and CEO's on the one hand or mere museum keepers of empty tradition on the other, things go very badly for the sheep.

Meditatio is the antidote to all this. For meditation permeates both heart and mind with the living Word of God, which is the Spirit's sword against every aberration outside the church and all heresy within. But meditation demands life-long vigilance on the part of anyone who strives to be a theologian.

Oratio and *Tentatio*, in a sense, take care of themselves. The would-be theologian has no choice regarding them. Affliction [*tentatio*] goes with the territory in this fallen world, the repercussion of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. The cross comes in many sizes and shapes, but it comes surely and inevitably to every Christian.

Prayer [*oratio*] on the other hand, though it does not come naturally, lies close to the heart of the church's life. Every Lord's Day in the liturgy the church pours forth her prayer and praise in the very presence of God. And from the threads of the church's corporate prayer each Christian weaves his personal prayer. It's pretty hard to escape prayer if you're a Christian.

But Meditation another matter. While the Christian can't live for long without being thrust into the arena of prayer or affliction, he can survive quite comfortably - perhaps even thrive very well - without meditation. I say "thrive" because movers and shakers are admired in our world, while contemplatives are scorned.

First a disclaimer. Meditation as practiced among "spirituality" fans has little or nothing to do with biblical meditation. Pop religion and eastern religions are mostly concerned not with transcendent reality as getting in touch with self. The goal is not apprehension, but emptiness; not contemplation of truth, but a blank slate.

Meditation, as Luther practiced and advocated it, is quite another matter. It comes from deeper wells: not merely medieval monasticism, but also the church fathers and - still more profoundly - from the Holy Scriptures themselves. *With practice*, he wrote for Master Peter, his barber, *one can take the Ten Commandments on one day, a psalm or chapter of Holy Scripture the next day, and use them as flint and steel to kindle a flame in the heart.*

The goal of Christian meditation is not an empty mind, but a full heart; a heart filled with the fullness of Him who fills all in all. St. Paul includes it in his prayer for the Ephesians:

...having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe. [Ephesians 1:18ff.]

While Luther's path for spiritual formation was radically different than that of medieval Catholicism, it was rooted solidly in the mainstream of orthodox antiquity. Pastors and deacons at the dawn of the Twenty-first Century would do well to learn that path again, not merely from Dr. Luther, but from the Psalmist before him:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
[Psalm 1]

It is our Lord himself, of course, who is the exemplary Man of meditation. As He declared in the face of Satan's temptation, He found His sustenance not in bread alone, but in every word that proceeded from the mouth of God the Father. Day and night He pondered on the law of the LORD. Like a tree with roots sunk deep into living streams, He bore abundant fruit in this parched and weary world.

But Jesus is more than an example. Grafted into Him by our baptismal bath, we have put on Christ. As it was for Jesus, so it is with us. Planted into Him by faith, we draw water from the wells of salvation and yield abundant fruit. He is the vine, we are the branches. Like Jesus before us, we find our delight in the law of the LORD. Like Jesus, we bring forth abundant fruit - for the Vine always bears fruit in His branches. And one of the fruits He produces in us is meditation.

But here again a *caveat* for the zealous church worker: meditation is not the same as study. True enough, the rigor of work in the church forces every novice theologian to delve deeply into the sacred Scriptures. But meditation is not simply a deeper stage of study, as if by pondering more diligently or thinking harder we arrive at meditation. Study has to do with the mind; meditation is a matter of the heart. The human brain is the organ used for study; meditation is a more visceral activity. “Meditate” [Heb: *Hagah*] is a verb more organic than intellectual; it has connotations of mastication and digestion. The Psalmist invites us to “chew” on the Word of God, to turn it over and over in both mind and heart, repeating it aloud, mulling over it, savoring the rich nutrients placed within that Word by the Holy Spirit of God.

Thus mediation is located squarely between prayer and affliction. The best setting for meditation is not the study, but the sanctuary, the classroom, the sick bed and the prayer desk. At its root, meditation calls for an open ear and an attentive heart. It has to do with learning God’s Word, to be sure. But that learning is by heart, not by rote. Such learning begins with the ear, takes root in the heart, and bears fruit in daily vocation. Thus at every turn the making of a theologian is carried on by the Word of God. What is begun with prayer is shaped by meditation and refined in affliction. These are not steps along the way, but three different aspects of one single path. Our delight is forever fixed on the law of the LORD, and on that law we meditate day and night.

Therefore whoever wants to learn the art of meditation must learn to pray the Psalms. The Psalter teaches us the rhythm of prayer: from God to us and then back again. In praying the Psalms we learn to pray by heart, first listening to His Word and then speaking back to God what He has given us to pray in quietness and in peace.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
 reviving the soul;
 the testimony of the LORD is sure,
 making wise the simple;
 the precepts of the LORD are right,
 rejoicing the heart;
 ...let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
 be acceptable in thy sight,
 O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. [Psalm 19:7-8, 14]

Silence is the place to begin. For most of us, that’s the hardest part. Shunning the fitful pace of our Martha-like lives, we must learn to be more Mary-like instead, sitting quietly before the Lord first to hear, and only then to speak. The Word which God speaks into our ears takes root in our heart and issues forth in prayer and praise. Thus meditation finds both its source and

goal in prayer. What is true for us gathered together around pulpit and altar is just as true when we're alone at prayer:

Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise.
...Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure.
[Introduction, *Lutheran Worship* (CPH, 1982), p. 6]

So Luther's dictum finds timeless application. Sustained with prayer, rooted in meditation, and shaped by affliction, theologians of the 21st century will be as able for the task as those who've gone before. Shifting winds of doctrine can never shipwreck those who fix their course on God's sure Word by these three coordinates: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*.

Life in the parish is often hectic and hurried, but meditation is an anchor for harried souls in every place and circumstance. It is the secret to peace of mind and heart in our present chaotic, troubled times and beyond.

Filling both heart and mind with God's own living Word, we find not merely solace and comfort, but strength and peace as well. For those whose hearts and minds are stayed in Christ Jesus have the lasting peace of God which passes all understanding. I commend that to you as your practice and solace, it's the best summary I know of for what we mean by the "spiritual life of the church worker."

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