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Theology as *Habitus Practicus Theosdotos*: A Lutheran Emphasis

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THE theologians of the 17th century distinguished between the abstract and the concrete use of the term "theology." Only in an abstract, accidental, and relative sense did they call theology "doctrine . . . or even a book or a system exhibiting theology."¹

However, in a concrete sense, they viewed theology as a God-given, practical aptitude. This is evident from the following two definitions suggested by Quenstedt and Gerhard:

Theology, taken concretely and as a *habitus*, is the God-given, practical aptitude of the mind which the Holy Ghost bestows upon a man through the Word concerning the true religion for the purpose of leading sinful man through faith in Christ to God and to eternal life.²

Theology, viewed as a *habitus* and concretely, is a divinely given discipline, bestowed upon a man by the Holy Spirit through the Word, whereby he is not only instructed in the knowledge of divine mysteries, by the illumination of the mind, so that what he understands produces a salutary effect upon the disposition of his heart and the actions of his life, but also qualified to inform others concerning these divine mysteries and the way of salvation and to vindicate heavenly truth from the corruptions of gainsayers, so that men,

abounding in true faith and good works, are led to the kingdom of heaven.³

Both definitions suggest that *habitualiter*, *concretive*, and *essentialiter*, theology is "the knowledge which is in the mind and inheres in the spirit of man."⁴ The *subiectum quod* of theology is the man of God who has been instructed in the *habitus* of theology. The *subiectum quo* is his mind and intellect.⁵ Weismann adds the thought that theology as *habitus* "designates and requires a soul experienced, exercised, and confirmed in knowing and judging divine and spiritual things."⁶

The word *habitus* serves as a translation of the Greek word *ἕξις* (Heb. 5:14), which means a power acquired by practice or use.⁷ Another New Testament synonym is *ἰκανότης* (2 Cor. 3:5), translated "sufficiency." Another synonym is *ἐξαρτίζω* (2 Tim. 3:17: "thoroughly equipped" for every good work). Hoenecke adds the following synonyms: *Fertigkeit*, *Geschicklichkeit*, *Tüchtigkeit*.⁸

On the basis of the definition of theology as a spiritual aptitude, Gerhard is

³ John Gerhard, *Loci theologici* (Berlin, 1863), I, par. 31, p. 8.

⁴ Quenstedt, Thesis XXXIX, p. 11.

⁵ Ibid., Thesis XXXVII, p. 12.

⁶ Christian Eberhard Weismann, *Institutiones theologiae* (Tubingae, 1739), p. 11.

⁷ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, 1889), p. 224.

⁸ Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee, 1909), I, 248.

¹ Joh. Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica sive systema theologicum* (Lipsiae, 1715), Pars I, Caput I, Sectio I, Thesis XXXIX, p. 11.

² Ibid., Thesis XXX, p. 11.

willing to apply the term to "the Christian faith and religion which is common to all believers, the learned as well as the unlearned, so that in this sense all who know and assent to the articles of the faith can be designated theologians."⁹ However, Quenstedt points out that this *theologia catechetica* is not sufficient for the theologian. He must also possess the *theologia acroamatica*, which "teaches and establishes the mysteries of the faith and refutes the errors contrary to the sound doctrine more accurately and copiously and is the province of bishops and presbyters in the church and particularly of those who teach not Christians generally but the future teachers of Christians."¹⁰

The theologian, then, "is a man instructed in the theological habitude by which he is rendered prepared for explaining and defending the heavenly truth. In a special and more excellent sense a theologian is a reborn man giving immovable assent to the primal truth which reveals the mysteries of the faith and resting upon it with special trust, apt to teach others and to convince the gainsayers."^{10a}

As concerned as the dogmaticians were to point out that the remote genus of theology is the disposition of the soul of the theologian, they were equally concerned to establish the fact that the near (*propinquum*) genus of theology is summed up in the word *practicus*.¹¹ Lest the aptitude required of the theologian be construed to be merely intellectual, quiescent,

and contemplative, they emphasized at great length that

Theology is eminently practical wisdom teaching all things from the revealed Word of God that are necessary, with respect to knowledge, for true faith in Christ; with respect to deed, for sanctification of life; and for the attainment of eternal life by sinful man.¹²

In fact, Calov declares that whatever is treated in theology is proposed for no other purpose than that it be directed to practice; nor is anything revealed in Scripture in order that it should ultimately exist in knowledge alone.¹³ All the conclusions of theology, if not in a formal sense, certainly virtually and ultimately, tend toward practice. Quenstedt points out that while theology certainly requires a knowledge of things to be done, it does not have knowledge for its final purpose, but advances beyond knowledge to practice.¹⁴

The theologians base their argument that theology is thoroughly practical on the following points:

1. Its purpose. The intermediate goal of theology is true faith in Christ, from which naturally follows sanctity of life. The ultimate formal end of theology is the beatific vision and enjoyment of God. The ultimate objective end is God, infinitely perfect and entirely good.
2. Its special object. It is an operative discipline, not speculative. It concerns itself with man, not in a theoretical sense, but insofar as he is the subject of operation, or inasmuch as the sinner, liberated from his own

⁹ Gerhard, par. 4.

¹⁰ Quenstedt, Thesis XVIII, p. 9.

^{10a} David Hollaz, *Examen theologicum acroamaticum*, 4th ed. by John Henry Hollaz (Stockholm, 1725), Cap. I, Quaestio 18, p. 14.

¹¹ Abraham Calov, *Systema locorum theologicorum* (Wittenbergae, 1655), Caput I, par. 4.

¹² Hollaz, Quaestio 1, p. 1.

¹³ Calov., loc. cit.

¹⁴ Quenstedt, Caput I, Sectio II, p. 16.

misery, is transferred to a most blessed state.

3. Its means. The theologian uses the most efficacious means of salvation, the Word and the sacraments, which have been directly ordained for the practice of faith and piety.
4. Its general object. Everything in theology is finally reducible to practice.
5. The proper function of theologians. The work of theologians is practical: they exhort, they admonish, they console, they absolve the penitent and administer the sacraments; they exercise church discipline. These are all practical functions.
6. Its principle. The principle of theology is divine revelation. All things in Scripture are designed for a practical end. If the end of divine revelation is practical, so must theology be practical.
7. The analytical process of theology. Whatever discipline is analytical is practical. Theology is analytical because the goal is first established.
8. The requirements for the study of theology. The requirements for theological study are practical, namely, *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*, all of which are practical.¹⁵

In addition to demonstrating that theology is an eminently practical aptitude, the 17th-century theologians devote considerable attention to answering objections to this definition. Hollaz lists and answers the following objections to the thesis that theology is a practical kind of wisdom (*sapientia practica*):

1. The Scholastics define theology as doctrine. Answer: In a secondary sense it is doctrine; in a primary sense it is the practical *habitus*.
2. Not all the requirements of wisdom are met by theology. To this Hollaz replies: "Theology rules as queen over the inferior disciplines, reducing them, together with the intellect of man, to the obedience of faith and taking captive every thought, as Paul declares 2 Cor. 10:5. . . . All the orders you will come upon in the humble hut of metaphysics, the same also, and far more sublime, you will find in the very extensive realm of theology."¹⁶
3. Wisdom is a theoretical *habitus*. Theology is not a theoretical *habitus*. Therefore it is not wisdom. Hollaz asserts that the major premise, hence also the conclusion, is false.
4. Whatever discipline is occupied with the knowledge of God is not practical. Answer: We know God not in a speculative but in a practical sense, in order that we may fix all our trust on Him and be led to the love and worship of Him.
5. In a practical science all conclusions are practical. But in theology not all conclusions are practical. Hence it is not a practical science. Answer: All things which are treated in theology look to practice, if not immediately and directly, nevertheless mediately and indirectly.
6. Archetypal theology (God's knowledge of Himself) is theoretical, hence ectypal theology (our derived knowl-

¹⁵ Calov, *Quaestio V*, pp. 28—30. Cf. Hollaz, *Quaestio 12*, pp. 7—10.

¹⁶ Hollaz, p. 8.

edge of God) is also theoretical. Answer: Archetypal theology is practical, formally considered, for this term designates the practical act of understanding by which God conceives knowledge of Himself, as the form of the other (ectypal) theology to be communicated to creatures.

7. Practical disciplines have to do with things in our power. Answer: We must distinguish between a human practical discipline and a divine. The object of the latter is God and divine matters.
8. The ultimate formal end of theology is the beatific vision of God. This, it is contended, is not something we practice. Answer: The ultimate end of theology is not only the intellectual vision of God but also the enjoyment of God. And this enjoyment is practical.
9. Theology deals with things to be believed and done. It is therefore partly theoretical and partly practical. Answer: Both faith and piety are things we practice. Faith is the application of the promises of the Gospel. Works flow from faith as the ray from the sun and as the rivulet from the source.¹⁷

The thought that theology is a *habitus practicus* is more than a dogmatic truth for Gerhard, because after each locus of his *Loci theologici* he has a section devoted to *usus practicus*.

The dogmaticians further speak of the *habitus practicus* as *theosdotos*, to indicate that this habit is neither innate nor acquired by human reason. Quenstedt de-

clares: "A concreated *habitus* of theology belonged to Adam, but an inborn *habitus* to no one. After the fall theologians are not born but made, namely, taught by God through the written Word."¹⁸

Hence, in an excellent statement, Weismann says:

Theology is a supernatural and divine habit. That is natural which we are able to perceive and acquire by natural reason alone; thus also the theological habit is called supernatural, not only because the principle of knowledge is supernatural, which is divine revelation, or the Word of God, but also because strength and spiritual and supernatural gifts are required for knowing and teaching divine things in a salutary way and according to the evident intention of the revealing God.¹⁹

This statement leads to the consideration of two truths. The first is that the principal efficient cause is the Triune God, or more particularly, the Holy Spirit.²⁰ In the proper study of theology, Weismann reminds us, the Holy Spirit cannot be absent, because He is joined with the Word of God to illuminate, to open the eyes and the understanding.²¹ To substantiate this point the dogmaticians quote passages like James 1:5: "If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God." James 3:17: "The wisdom that is from above is first pure." 2 Cor. 3:5,6: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God, who also hath made us able ministers of

¹⁸ Quenstedt, Caput I, Sectio II, Quaestio III, p. 16.

¹⁹ Weismann, p. 11.

²⁰ Quenstedt, Thesis XXXI, p. 11.

²¹ Weismann, p. 12, n. 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 8—10. Cf. Quenstedt, p. 17.

the New Testament.”²² Accordingly, the *habitus practicus* is also *spiritualis, supernaturalis, theosdotos*.

To the question: How is the Holy Spirit imparted? the dogmaticians are quick to answer, “Not by immediate infusion.” The holy writers were immediately inspired, it is true. Again Hollaz can declare that on Pentecost the apostles were made theologians in a moment.²³ However, apart from these exceptional cases, “The mediate cause of theology is the written Word of God, for we know nothing concerning the divine mysteries except through the divine revelation comprehended in the Sacred Letters. The written Word of God is the incorruptible seed from which the church is born.”²⁴ Hence Hollaz decries the opinion of the fanatics who assert

that spiritual theological knowledge is derived either from the immediate illumination of the Holy Spirit or from the internal light of the soul, or by recollection through introversion into the hidden recesses of the soul, or that this knowledge is only a matter of understanding the mystical sense. We know that the literal meaning (in the logical sense) of the Biblical statements is divinely and immediately intended by the Holy Ghost in the words.²⁵

Only he is a theologian in the proper sense who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and has been given the *habitus* as a gift of grace through the Word. However, in an improper and wide sense, the dogmaticians do call that man a theologian who expounds, confirms, and defends the-

ological truths, although destitute of sincere holiness of disposition.²⁶ To use the categories of Hollaz, he has only external literal theological knowledge, “by which one treats the words of Scripture, insofar as they are analogous to human words, according to the rules of grammar and rhetoric and searches out and extracts something of their meaning thereby.”²⁷ He lacks the internal literal sense, which requires supernatural grace.

Strangely enough, however, Hollaz ascribes to the unregenerate man a Spirit-wrought knowledge:

The knowledge of God and of divine mysteries in the intellect of unregenerate man, who has been enlightened imperfectly and pedagogically by the Holy Spirit through the Sacred Scriptures, is not spiritual in an absolute sense but is literal; this literal knowledge is not natural or carnal, but supernatural and can be regarded as and called spiritual in a way and in some respects.²⁸

Quenstedt agrees that even the unregenerate in a certain way have the assisting grace of the Holy Spirit, although they lack the *gratia inhabitans*.²⁹

A final thought remains. The theological, practical aptitude of the soul, divinely given, is acquired through the use of divinely prescribed means, the Word and the sacraments. All who aspire to the title of theologian have good cause to apply themselves diligently to the means of grace in order that the Holy Spirit may make them more able ministers of the New

²² Ibid.

²³ Hollaz, Quaestio 13, p. 10.

²⁴ Quenstedt, Thesis XXXIII, p. 12.

²⁵ Hollaz, Quaestio 20, p. 15.

²⁶ Ibid., Quaestio 18, p. 14. Cf. John William Baier, *Compendium theologiae positivae* (Sancti Ludovici, 1879), I, 69.

²⁷ Hollaz, Quaestio 20, p. 18.

²⁸ Ibid., Quaestio 21, p. 16.

²⁹ Quenstedt, Sectio II, Quaestio III, p. 16.

Testament. In addition, the dogmaticians urge us to give serious concern to the various theological disciplines, because study and assiduous labor are necessary to give us the *habitus* of the theologian.³⁰ With

³⁰ Hollaz, *Quaestio* 13, p. 11.

Luther we have reason to remember that the Christian life is "*nicht ein Gewordensein, sondern ein Werden.*" We can do no better than to follow Luther in prayer, in study, and in patience under trials.

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