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The Devotional Use of the Bible

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OUR topic suggests that there is another use of the Holy Bible. This is the study of Holy Scripture which is traditionally associated with the discipline of theological seminaries and the work of Biblical scholars and ministers. Its technical term is *exegetis* and has as its task to get out of the sacred text what God put into it. To achieve its purpose an exegetical study of Scripture involves knowledge of the ancient tongues. Martin Luther had a high regard for that language study which had as its aim the understanding of the meaning of the Scripture. He said, "As dearly as we love the Gospel, so zealously we must cherish the languages, the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in the Greek." Besides a knowledge of the languages, exegetical work also requires acquaintance with archaeology, history, the questions concerning authorship and date of composition of the various books, and with related literature from extra-Biblical sources.

OUR NEED OF THE BIBLICAL SPECIALIST

It is well that we remember how much devotional use of the Bible owes first of all to the technically trained translator. There is perhaps no field in which the common dependence of Christians upon one another is so apparent as in the exciting world of the Bible translations. Every time a pastor or church member opens the New English Bible (New Tes-

tament) or the Revised Standard Version, or one of the lesser known translations or paraphrases, he is the beneficiary of some of the best and latest knowledge of Biblical specialists, just as the King James Version was also the product of the best scholarship of its time. Denominational differences and divergent points of view on Scripture inspiration all but disappear before a faithful translation of the simple, yet majestic words of the sacred text itself. The Roman Catholic Church may use tradition in order to add to the teachings of the church, but it does not presume to tamper with that original and sacred text which is the common possession of all Christendom. Francis Pieper says in this connection in the first volume of his *Christian Dogmatics*:

We are confronted by the fact that there is not one among the common versions of the Bible in which the Christian doctrine in all its parts is not plainly stated and the opposing errors are not rejected.

This holds true even of the Vulgate of the Roman Catholic Church. . . . Also justification alone by faith without the deeds of the Law is clearly taught in the Vulgate, e. g., Rom. 3:28 and Gal. 2:16. (P. 347)

As we have a firm and fixed Word of God in the original despite the *variae lectiones* [variant readings], so the current versions of the Bible present a firm and fixed Word of God, and this despite the fact that every existing translation contains occasional mistakes and is subject to continuous correction in the light of the original. (P. 349)

We must therefore reserve the right to

disagree with the rendering of some passages in old and new Bible translations. It is also true that every translation is, to some extent, an interpretation. One of the major purposes of our theological training was to enable us pastors to make godly and intelligent judgments also upon the work of Biblical translators and commentators.

Our topic, however, is "The Devotional Use of the Bible." Is it necessary to deal with these questions? Isn't devotional Bible study a practical subject that is far removed from difficult questions of interpretation and introduction which are discussed in dusty commentaries? Haven't all of us felt humble when a member of our parish sheds fresh light on a Bible passage? Theologians have spoken of the "inspired exegesis of the laity."

STERILE STUDIES OF THE BIBLE

In one sense, indeed, profitable devotional use of the Bible is far removed from the work of certain specialists. There are some critical studies of Scripture which are devoid of spiritual power and insight. There is a type of textual study and interpretation which may be learned and highly technical, yet it leaves us cold, uninspired, and even uninformed. It is possible for a scholar to spend so much time on theories, background, and related matters that his work has very limited spiritual value or is even questionable and harmful. Such Biblical studies can only muffle God's Word in the pulpit and deprive many people of the power of the Word for their lives. Good Christian laymen have deplored the fact that their pastor could "tear up" the Bible far better than he could preach it! There have been clergy who were "invisible for six days of the

week and incomprehensible on the seventh."

It is also well to remind ourselves that there is a "pious" use of the Bible which may also be debilitating and potentially dangerous. Obscure or unknown words, mistranslations, and archaic expressions do not provide effective means for the working of the Holy Spirit. The King James Version is a venerable and generally reliable translation. However, it contains many words and passages which not only puzzle faithful Christians but may also hinder regular and joyful devotional use of the Scripture.

A translation of the Bible that clearly and faithfully renders its message into English is the great gift of the Biblical specialist. A good commentary will also prove helpful in shedding light on the meaning of the words of the text. Translation and commentary are aids in a devotional use of Scripture which enrich the spiritual life and thought of the Christian people.

Let us be sure, therefore, that our devotional Bible study is not mere sentimental rumination. The individual's pious thoughts must emerge from the very words of God's Book if there is to be solid devotion. Such study of the Bible strengthens faith in Christ. It imparts wisdom and faithfulness in His service. It sustains Christian prayer and devotion.

A MINISTRY WEAK IN DEVOTION

It is quite generally assumed that ministers today are not devoting enough time to the study of the Bible. Part of this unwholesome situation may be due to the decline of language study in the American church. It is also apparent that the de-

mands of our church organizations (parish, circuit, District, and Synod) are often working against a primary concern with the written Word of God. We should also consider the fact that many pastors today spend hours each week engaged in community and social activities. Is it surprising that many are charging the clergy of our land with being mere "organization men"?

A haunting and disturbing series of observations on the life of modern pastors reads:

There can be no question of the centrality of prayer and reading in the minister's life. And yet the constant confession we hear when ministers grow candid is that increasingly they have no time for prayer and study. Consider the life of a busy pastor in city or country and think of the traffic that runs through his day. Where will the minister, caught in a net of multitudinous responsibilities, find the quietness which will give him strength and give power and authority to his preaching and pastoral care? When will he concentrate upon prayer for the Holy Spirit, who, it is true, bids us be sensitive to the voices of the world, but also liberates us from bondage to them?

Devotional life is not a pseudo-spirituality which is too holy to concern itself with practical things. It is not morbid introspection and preoccupation with self; then it becomes a wretched, soul-destroying narcissism. This is a matter of the inmost, hidden side of a man's ministerial life, a side inaccessible to human sight, known only to ourselves and to Him who sees in secret; but it is the really determinative side. Only when we are completely alone with God do all the masks fall away, do we become utterly honest, stripped to our real and ultimate aims

and ambitions. Prayer reveals whether the inmost direction of my life is really toward God and His Kingdom. This is the hinterland out of which comes whatever richness there may be in a man's ministry. Out of these times of study, meditation, and prayer, of fruitful solitariness, will come the best of our testimony and we can say to our hearers, "I delivered to you that which I also received."

But for many of us still the most haunting text in the Bible is this: "They made me keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard I have not kept."—John W. Doberstein, ed. *Minister's Prayer Book* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), pp. xi, xii

GOD'S ECONOMY OF TIME

In the Collect for the Word we ask the Lord for the grace to "hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Holy Scriptures so that we may be sustained in Christian faith and life. Devotional study of the Bible has always been productive of a frame of mind in the minister that inspires him for true service to God and man. The best and earliest hours of the day have traditionally been devoted to the use and study of the Word and the practice of prayer in the quietness of the study. Luther's long hours spent in prayer and Bible study have inspired pastors for four centuries.

But this takes time! When can the modern minister do this? The phone rings—meetings must be led—programs must be planned—conferences must be held—contacts must be made. All of this, and more, has become part of the ministerial life in the church of our day.

God knows very well how time-consuming Bible reading is. Yet Christ ap-

proved searching the Scriptures. Doesn't the very time that is necessary for scholarly and devotional use of the Bible point to a ministerial economy which has been set by the Lord Himself? Aren't the time-consuming demands of Scriptural study and private prayer indications of the will of the Lord, who has given us His holy Word? Isn't it clear, by now, that the modern church and its ministry have been spending too much time and effort on matters of secondary and peripheral importance? The very primary importance of the Word and doctrine, as taught in the Pastoral Epistles, can never be displaced by the changing exigencies of the times.

When Paul and Barnabas preached in the synagog at Berea, the people "received the Word with all readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). Would the people have done better if they had sent off to Jerusalem with a request for a theological opinion from the doctors of the Law? Or would they have been better advised if they had appointed a committee or called for a conference?

The best time in the pastor's day should be reserved for Bible study and prayer, the time when his mind is fresh and receptive. Such a schedule will give a certain character to his program, conduct, points of view, and emphases. The people of the parish may not understand all the spiritual and professional aspects of this part of their pastor's life, but they will note and feel the power of his preaching and ministry. Such use of the Scripture will also be reflected in the life of the church at large. Like the early church, the church of our day should find its strength and source of unity in Christ and His holy

Word. "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayers." (Acts 2:42)

THE PRESSURE OF THE WORLD

Are we too pessimistic when we suggest that the ministry of many of us does not lead many to believe that Christ and the Bible are our primary concerns? Can we miss the point of the secular criticism which is rising against the church? Do we realize that even the world despises a worldly pastor?

Fairness and honesty impel us to admit that external pressures have been literally foisted upon the church and its ministry in recent years. The "population explosion" has shaken the whole church. Congregations have been forced into new communities. New churches and schools had to be built. Budgets had to be raised all around. Surveys and studies had to be conducted. Thank God that He has supplied the administrators with the necessary wisdom and strength! They deserve our understanding, and they should be mentioned in our prayers.

Nor dare we foster a pietistic or a quietistic form of church life. Surely we in American Lutheranism would not want to be guilty of a withdrawal behind the walls of scholarship or piety. The history of American "activism" is not one of total wrong and loss.

THE INNER MUST SUSTAIN THE OUTER

Nevertheless we plead for a return to the type of ministry which has its strength in scholarly and devotional use of the Bible. The very needs and pressures of the holy calling make it necessary, e. g., for the

pastor to "say his daily office," not in a legalistic way or in the interest of work-righteousness, but because he realizes that the use of some form of an evangelical breviary is also a godly use of the Word and a spur to weak human flesh. A free and regular use of a volume such as the *Minister's Prayer Book* can bring new spirit and life to a sluggish minister and ministry.

It is our candid opinion that we shall not even be able to maintain our plants and organizations unless new spiritual life and incentive appears. There must be heart and soul in every great undertaking, even in the organized church! Where will this power be found if not in Christ, Scripture, prayer, devotion, and service in His holy name? The very existence and expansion of the church depends upon renewed spiritual life and energy. We cannot rely upon a spiritual capital of the past. A worldly church and ministry cannot meet the challenge of our time. Spiritual renewal in the church and in the world is our only hope. A godly ministry is the only ministry that can sustain and lead people in these days.

THE LARGE CATECHISM

The Large Catechism of Martin Luther is one of the neglected classics of the church. It is like the Constitution of the United States in that we all take it for granted. After all, we teach the Small Catechism to our confirmation classes regularly. Isn't the Large Catechism merely an expanded edition of it?

We often forget that the Large Catechism is the one confessional writing of our church which is pointed especially and directly to the clergy. Luther deals with the peculiar problems of the ordained priest, as a class, already in his preface.

The entire section is really a matchless treatment of the very subject of our little paper. Luther sets forth an evangelical concept of the pastor's daily prayer and study of the Bible. He speaks of the chief Christian truths as the "Catechism" of the church. He pleads with us not to neglect daily use of this "Catechism" because of pride, satiety, or sloth. He tells how he made daily use of the chief parts in his own daily prayer and devotion. He says:

Nothing is so effectual against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy oneself with the Word of God, talk about it, and meditate on it. Psalm 1 calls those blessed who "meditate on God's law day and night." You will never offer up any incense or other savor more potent against the devil than to occupy yourself with God's commandments and words and to speak, sing, and meditate on them. This, indeed, is the true holy water, the sign which routs the devil and puts him to flight. . . .

Shall we frivolously despise this might, blessing, power, and fruit—especially we who would be pastors and preachers? . . . Not only do we need God's Word daily as we need our daily bread; we also must use it daily against the daily, incessant attacks and ambushes of the devil with his thousand arts. . . .

Therefore, I once again implore all Christians, especially pastors and preachers, not to try to be doctors prematurely and to imagine that they know everything. Vain imaginations, like new cloth, suffer shrinkage. . . . Let them continue to read and teach, to learn and meditate and ponder. Let them never stop until they have proved by experience that they have taught the devil to death and have become wiser than God Himself and all His saints. . . .

Then in due time they themselves will make the noble confession that the longer

they work with the Catechism, the less they know of it and the more they have to learn. Only then, hungry and thirsty, will they truly relish what now they cannot bear to smell because they are so bloated and surfeited. To this end may God grant His grace! Amen.—Theo. G. Tappert, trans. and ed. *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), pp. 359—361

It may also prove very helpful if the pastor read over his call several times a year and prayerfully considered his ordination vows in the light of his present thoughts, words, and deeds. He should note what God and the church consider the important functions of his calling.

THE REAL WORK OF THE MINISTRY

The Pastoral Epistles set forth the life and work of God's minister. Much of what

occupies the modern church and ministry is not even mentioned in these letters. Much of what *is* taught in the Pastorals has been given scant consideration in our time. The focus is on God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and on works of service and love for Jesus' sake. "Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you. Practice these duties, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:14-16 RSV). Luther sums it all up very well, in his usual manner, when he reminds us of the ancient Latin adage *Oratio, tentatio, meditatio faciunt theologum.*

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