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The Triangle of Tension

An Editorial

“*Tentatio, oratio, meditatio faciunt theologum,*” said Luther as he summarized his philosophy of theological education. In effect, we reaffirm these words in this issue, which we dedicate to Dr. Theo. Hoyer. As a very good historian of the church, he had learned the importance of this motto. Within this triangle of tension every Christian scholar must learn to live. The work of the historical theologian at a denominational seminary provides an excellent example of the effectiveness of this triangular philosophy.

The *tentationes* which beset the historian are manifold and inescapable. He is sorely tempted, for example, to absolutize his interpretation of the past and so to do violence to defensible historical methodology. One might think of those who say categorically that it was the dogmatic orthodoxy which explains the remarkable growth of the Missouri Synod after World War I. This theory may be true, but the historian dare not yield to the temptation to accept it blindly, for it may be only partially true; it may even be completely false.

The church historian is always subject to the temptation to assume that the current practice and teaching of his denomination coincides with the best of its past life. The celebration of the sesquicentennial of the birth of C. F. W. Walther in 1961 opened the eyes of many of us to what Walther really meant by “rightly dividing the Word of truth,” to what he meant when he spoke of the Lutheran Church as the only true church, to his great interest

in sober and responsible ecumenical activity, to his wonderful sense of humor, and to his bold but incorrect stand on questions of the propriety of charging interest and of buying life insurance. (CTM, XXXII [October 1961])

Another temptation lies in the attempt to utilize writings from the past to stabilize a present situation which they were never designed to meet. Many students of the history of our own Synod gave way to this temptation when they sought to absolutize *A Brief Statement*. The careful study of the history of this document was surely one factor which persuaded the delegates at the 1962 Cleveland convention not to take this step, while at the same time they reaffirmed their appreciation of the document itself. (Cf. “The Role of *A Brief Statement* Since 1932,” by Carl S. Meyer, CTM, XXXIII [April 1962])

Thus the educational goal of the department of historical theology cannot be the uncritical transmittal of information about the past. Rather its goal must be to educate men who can wisely learn from the past while also recognizing the temptations which lie in the study and use of history. (The article by Walter W. Oetting in this issue alludes to other temptations which may overtake the church historian).

The curricular requirement for training theological historians, either as amateurs or professionals, is the double path of *oratio* and *meditatio*. The church historian who stops praying for the proper understanding of the church’s past immediately falls prey to temptation. When a historian believes

that all questions relating to the church's past have been solved, when one interpretation of the past has been canonized, then there is little need for *oratio*. Church history then may become a weapon for tearing asunder the unity of the Church Militant rather than for repairing and strengthening it. The *oratio* of the historian takes its beginning with God's self-revelation in Holy Scripture, no less than the *orationes* of the exegetes, the systematicians, and the men in the department of practical theology.

The *orationes* of historians with denominational affiliations must partake of a double character. These men must constantly beseech the Lord of history for a greater understanding and appreciation of the strengths of their own denominations, while at the same time they must ask for the wisdom and courage to commend or disapprove as their studies dictate. Therefore the historian at a denominational seminary must be fully pledged to the public confessions of his body. He must be determined to explain them in their original context so that his students appreciate their full meaning and vitality. But at the same time, the historian must pray for the difficult grace of truly understanding the confessional position of other denominations as well as present practice before passing any kind of judgment. It could be that in the light of his findings he would be disposed to offer the hand of fellowship to members of that group. He must have a clear vision of the grandeur of the *una sancta* as it has manifested itself through the ages.

The church historian must also practice true *meditatio* in his own life and teach his students its importance if we may use

the word in a somewhat different sense from Martin Luther. He must train his students in the difficult art of conversing with many ecclesiastical leaders of the past. He must train his students to listen (preferably in the original languages), not merely to sit in judgment. He must give himself to long and weary hours of research and study on many minor points so that his interpretation of the larger picture possesses validity and truth (see the article by C. S. Meyer on John Colet in this issue as a good example of this kind of *meditatio*). There is a specific historical methodology which must be mastered by the church historian. The amateur practitioner can be as serious a threat in this field as he would be in the field of medicine, for example.

As we reread what we have written about the church historian and the triangle of tension within which he must work, we realize that we have actually been speaking to the question of academic freedom versus denominational control in theological education. In our own Synod the question has been raised more frequently with reference to Biblical exegetes, but it seems to us that the triangle of tension must be maintained in all branches of theological education.

This is true in part because each teacher always takes a double pledge. He pledges himself to be loyal to the Holy Scriptures as they are systematized in his denomination's confessions. But he must also pledge himself to be an honest practitioner of the particular discipline in which he specializes. When there seems to be contradiction between these two pledges, as has happened again and again in the history of the church (and Martin Luther is the classic example of this dichotomous struggle), responsible leaders of the church will have

faith in the living guidance of God's Holy Spirit, in the integrity of the practitioner because they know he is seeking to live faithfully within the triangle of tension, and in the type of supervision which his particular denomination favors.

The opposite of the "triangle of tension" approach to theological education can perhaps be labeled the "molding" theory. Here the goal is conceived to be the preparation of pastors and teachers who will reflect the spiritual and mental image of the "great men of the previous generation," and who will repeat their thoughts and words. History enters one serious *caveat* against this goal: no master has ever been fully understood or wholly correctly perpetuated by his pupils! When students are "molded," in this manner, they frequently remain at the stage of what "our professors taught us back at the seminary" or at the mercy of every new teaching which may be persuasively and glibly put forth in the next paperback. Fanaticism and emotional appeals frequently characterize such men. The educational goal of a theological seminary must rather be to train men who can

judge all things by the inspired Word of the living God, who can say to all men in every condition, "Thus says the Lord," who are like the householder who drew things new and things old out of his sack, to use the words of our Lord's little parable.

The pastor and the professor find that this road of *tentatio*, *oratio*, and *meditatio* is often a lonely and exhausting road. No one discovered this more fully through personal experience than Martin Luther. His courage, however, continually revived because he had anchored it in the Word of the Lord. This conviction is reflected fully in the Flacius "pseudepigraphon" which is included in this issue as a Brief Study. The other road is far more comfortable. But eternal vigilance in the church is also the price of the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. No Biblical theologian, be he pastor, preacher, historian, exegete, systematician, or administrator, will be content with less academic freedom than that which is found within this triangle. Nor will he desire more.

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