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# Loci Communes, A Theologian's Best Friend

## How to Make the Theological Tool of Your Dreams

BENJAMIN T. G. MAYES



PERHAPS THE FIRST THING ANYONE LEARNS about the “Age of Lutheran Orthodoxy” (c. 1580–1700) is that the theologians wrote large Latin dogmatics books. Now and then the question comes up, “How on earth did they do it?” How did men like Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), Abraham Calov (1612–1686), and Johann Andreas Quenstedt (1617–1688) manage to author such enormous tomes on such diverse topics? Their mastery of Latin can be explained by their having attended Latin immersion schools since grade school. But even fluency in a foreign language and a healthy dose of prayer, study, and spiritual trial (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*) do not guarantee the kind of memory needed to marshal the quotations and material presented by these Lutheran fathers in their *magna opera*.

Having realized this, it was with great joy that I came across Quenstedt's *Ratio seu Methodus, Scriptores Sacros & Ecclesiasticos cum fructu legendi, excerptendi, & Locos Communes Theologicos conficiendi* in the Odenwald Library of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Oberursel, Germany. In this little booklet, Quenstedt, like many other Lutheran theologians from the Age of Orthodoxy, suggests that future ministers of the gospel prepare for themselves a blank book in which they can write excerpts from readings, ideas, modes of speech, and the like in an orderly way, in order to aid their memory and simplify future preaching, teaching, and writing endeavors. Such a book is called a *book of loci communes*, “commonplaces.” Quenstedt's suggestions can be used by Lutheran theologians today with great advantage. A theologian who stores up information in his own loci communes will have the fruits of his labors ready for use at all times, like an archer who prepares for battle by putting arrows into his quiver. The following is a summary of Quenstedt's *Ratio* with additional observations. It does not claim to be theology, but will, nevertheless, be an aid to theology.

There are many reasons why a theologian should read and organize his excerpts in an orderly way. The careful scholar prepares for himself an immense treasury of things and words, suited for every situation. He who knows how to prepare his own loci communes can do without many books, since he car-

ries a library with him in one book. Care in excerpting and annotating sharpens the mind. The things which are written stick more tenaciously and are pressed more deeply into the mind. Excerpts and notes guard the labors of many years most faithfully and create aids for the memory.

The highest necessity constrains us to make excerpts and arrange them in loci communes, but the skill of excerpting is impeded by many things including 1) inconstancy, infidelity, and fragility of the memory; 2) lack of a large book budget or the scarcity of certain books; 3) the multitude and variety of tasks and other impediments; and finally, 4) advancing age.

Certain rules of excerpting have proven helpful to generations of theologians:

1. In making excerpts, use discretion and selection.
2. Excerpt only from good authors, and don't read many books at once. Read only one at a time, with care and diligence. On reading and excerpting from many books the proverb applies: *De omnibus aliquid, de toto nihil*, (something from everything, but nothing from the whole).
3. Note the most opportune and necessary things for your studies. Set your scope before yourself. Are you (or will you be) a teacher in a school or a minister in the church? If in a school, what age level and content?
4. Write down not only things you read, but also things you hear, see and think. With things that you think, though, don't immediately write them in your loci communes, but first in your diary. Later you can come back to your diary and if the thoughts still seem important, at that time you can write in your loci communes.
5. Don't just write down things, but also the more elegant phrases such as emphatic expressions, analogies, illustrations, various formulas of commencing, concluding, exciting attention, asking, proposing, refuting, linking, and destroying, and so on.
6. Write your excerpts continuously and uniformly. Let the pen never leave your hand.
7. Do not write down everything so broadly and abundantly. If the book you're reading is easy and the excerpts are not, especially rare, then four, five or even fewer lines can be annotated. Sometimes just a bibliographical reference is sufficient. But if the book is rarer and can't be found just anywhere, then you should be a bit more abundant with your excerpt, so that you won't need to consult the book

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when you want to use the excerpt. Annotate chapters of histories in your loci communes using only three words, with numbers. And in the book itself from which you excerpt, mark the passage excerpted with a dot, so that when you look for the passage the next time your eyes will see it immediately.

8. Build up your excerpts in an orderly fashion, and arrange them well. The chief aid for your memory is order. Place excerpts together with excerpts of the same argument.
9. Do not write down anything without also writing the full bibliographical citation. The first entry needs to be in full; beyond that it can be abbreviated.
10. Do not interrupt your reading to make long notations. When you read, have a sheet of paper at hand, and scribble on it two or three words of passages you would like to excerpt, the page number, and the part of the page. Then proceed with your reading. (The ancients made books of these note-sheets, called *conjectanea*, miscellany.) Other thoughts which come to mind during your reading can also be jotted down in these *conjectanea*, so that your reading is not interrupted. When you read an author, at first glance almost everything seems worthy of recording. But afterwards, you are able to make a more sound judgment as to whether a particular excerpt is worthy of being added to your loci communes.
11. Whatever you write into your loci communes, write with more elegant and neat handwriting. Do not write your letters too small, since in your old age your eyes will not be as strong.
12. Reread frequently and attentively the things recorded in your loci communes, or at least the main things. Do not let your book be more educated than your mind. Read one or two pages of your loci communes every day, to become more familiar with the important things you have written there.
13. Set aside time for certain activities: devotion, reading, writing or notating, and repetition.
  - a. Athanasius set aside the first hour of the day after rising from bed for prayers to God and the praying of the Scriptures. Likewise, he set aside the last hour of the day before going to bed.
  - b. Devote time in the morning to the reading of authors. Do not read continuously for more than an hour, but take a short break whenever you need to, lest you lose concentration and your mind grow feeble. If you never cease stretching your mind, it will become limp and feeble.
  - c. Devote time to writing or making notations two hours after lunch, lest digestion be impeded and you become tired.
  - d. Many assign the hour before sleep to repetition, by which they say that those things are to be ruminated which they read or heard or noted during the day, so that they more firmly retain these things. Others say that after supper all study should cease, or that they should abstain from all work by lamp-light and meditation, and these hours after supper should be devoted to walking or to learned and pleasant conversation.
14. Use your excerpts.

There are certain things to avoid when it comes to excerpting:

1. Do not read anything without excerpting.
2. Those who do not know how to excerpt or are too lazy to do so rightly and yet want to appear learned, do the following: They underline, fold pages, write in the margins, make stars, pointing hands, N.B., and the like. *Haec omnia, si non in vitio sunt, taedium tamen laboris aut ignorantiam excerptendi produnt, Libris et Codicibus injuriam faciunt* (all of these things, if not stemming from vice, are nevertheless tedious labor, produce ignorance of excerpting, and damage books. Furthermore, these things do not help the memory at all).
3. Some rely on the indices of their books to find what they want at the time they have to write. *Verum haec sordida pigritia est, et labor saepe inutilis et frustraneus* (however, this is sordid laziness, and the labor is often useless and in vain. Indices often lack the most important information, they often give incorrect page numbers, the authors of the books often do not make their own indices, and finally many very useful books have no indices).
4. Others take quotations from the loci communes of others. Those who do this often miss the context from which the quotation was taken. Often loci communes do not give quotations in full. Also, the exercise of reading and making your own excerpts produces the best thoughts and stimulates the best patterns of thinking. *Tua ergo et a Te collecta tibi erunt utilissima* (therefore your things and the things collected by you are the most useful).
5. Many sew together huge volumes and large tomes in which they record whatever they read or hear in an arbitrary and tumultuous order. This is a Herculean effort, but it is in vain.

There are various methods of collecting your excerpts into loci communes.

1. Some use three books, others two, others one for the purpose of excerpting.
2. Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) says one book is for Formulas, another for Ornaments, a third for Diction.
3. Jeremias Drexel (1581–1638) says one book is for *Lemmata* (titles, themes), another for *Adversaria*, a third for *Historica*. *Lemmata* are for non-historical things, where only brief bibliographical references are made. *Adversaria* is for non-historical things, where excerpts are made a little more extensively. *Historica* is for historical things and examples. A separate volume of indices is kept, one index for *Lemmata*, one for *Adversaria*, and a third for *Historica*. In the three volumes, no attention is paid to order, but items are written from beginning to end. The index volume, however, is arranged alphabetically and keyed to the entries. The disadvantage of this method is that no locus is found in full in any one place. An advantage would be that space is not wasted in books, and one excerpt can be entered in several places in the index.
4. The method of Christoph Schrader (1601–1680) is similar to that of Drexel. The three volumes are entitled 1) *Enthymematum* (thoughts, arguments), 2) *Historiarum seu Exem-*

plorum, and 3) *Moralium*. In the volume *Enthymematum* are recorded all things which do not deal with virtue, vice, affections, or history. *Exemplorum* records history, stories, examples, and so on. *Moralium* records virtues, vices, all affections of the mind, and whatever pertains to the calming and exciting of the same. There was one index for all three volumes, with M or *pi* written with the number if the quotation was to be found in the *Moralium* or in the *Exemplorum* (Greek: *Paradeigmata*). The index was not, however, in alphabetical order, but new index entries were added as needed, which made it a somewhat confusing system. With a computerized index list which could be reprinted from time to time, this confusion could be easily avoided.

5. The method of Lucas Osiander (the Elder, 1534–1604) was to have one volume for *exempla, argumenta et alia*. Whatever happens to be the first locus you come across, you should write that as the title of the first page. The second you come across write as the title of the second page, etc. The alphabetical index, then, will contain the page number where the particular locus is to be found. If you fill up one of your pages, you write at the bottom of that page where the next page is to be found dealing with this Locus (that is, the next blank page). This is also the method of Leonhard Hutter (1563–1616). The advantage to this system is that it is compact, yet it is not as scattered as Drexel's method.
6. Balthasar Meisner (1587–1626) says that two volumes are to be used: one for *Practicos*, the other for *Theoreticos*. The former contains homiletical material and the latter controversial material. *Practici* should be alphabetically arranged with short bibliographical references. *Theoretici* should have a letter of the alphabet for every four or eight pages. When the four or eight page section fills up, pages can either be inserted, or space at the end of the volume can be used, as with Osiander (number 5).
7. Another method is to use a double index, the first part of the index being arranged according to a catechetical order, the second part alphabetically. Page numbers would then need to be entered into the index twice.
8. Johannes Huelsemann (1602–1661) says the easiest way to arrange an index is to have a mix: partially according to a theological, historical, chronological etc. order, and partially according to the alphabet. For example, "Transubstantiation" is listed under "T" alphabetically, not logically under "Eucharist" or "Sacraments." But "Transubstantiation, nature of; mode of; time of," etc. all appear under Transubstantiation. Likewise, "Pope" appears under "P," not under "Church." But "Pope, name of; episcopal power of," etc. belong under "Pope." Quenstedt followed this method in the arrangement of his index, and I have done the same. One can always add to this index as new loci or other arguments are added.

Titles of loci should be short, one word or two in Latin, up to five in English. They should be short enough that by reading it you quickly know the whole sentence. They should not be too general. "God," "Christ," "Parents" are too general. Titles like these would lead to the necessity of unplanned subtitles, and by then your quotations would be confused on the page. Better

examples are: God, Various names of; God's care for the pious; Christ the Redeemer of the World; Parents are to be honored; Pope is Antichrist; Pope is not infallible, etc.

Titles are like clues we use later to find what we are looking for. Therefore they should be formed with proper and normal words, and they should be written in capital letters, to distinguish them from the excerpts. Titles should be formed with the "head" or "heart" first. Thus, if the main word is victory, the title should not be "From God alone comes victory," but rather, "Victory is from God alone."

Between your excerpt and the next subtitle, leave a space of two or three fingers, so that room is left to add bibliographical citations of other authors, and so that the next subtopic is easily seen as separate. Subtitles (for example, Marriage, efficient cause of; material cause of; formal cause of; things adjunct to; things contrary to; things profitable to; things unprofitable to) are not able to be assigned all at once, but must be added as time goes on and as need occurs. Space should be left for this.

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***Do not let your book be more  
educated than your mind.***

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Excerpts are to be placed under the fitting loci and titles. Do not be overly meticulous about this, but make your excerpts, even if you have not assigned the most convenient locus for them. Nevertheless, unless you put your excerpts under the right loci and titles, no aid for the memory is being created, and the items will be found later only with great difficulty.

The index is the prime way of organizing your notes and excerpts. There are basically two ways of doing this. First, you can arrange them according to a catechetical order. 1. According to the Commandments, list virtues and vices contrary to them for each commandment. 2. According to the Apostles' Creed, list the articles of faith and the errors and heresies opposed to them. This would be analogous to arranging everything according to love and faith, as Luther recommends. An example of this from American Lutheran history is the translation of Conrad Dietrich's *Institutiones Catecheticae* (St. Louis: F. Dette, 1896) from Latin into German. This work is essentially a brief dogmatics in catechism form.

The other way to collect loci communes is to arrange the titles alphabetically. For this method, an index is required to show where each virtue and vice, each article of faith and its opposite error is to be found. Here also an index of authors is needed to give the full bibliographical information of the books from which you make excerpts. In the loci themselves, you use only abbreviated titles. Choose a popularly recognized style of bibliography such as Turabian, MLA, and then stick with it.

Various titles have traditionally been assigned to such self-made books of excerpts. *Adversaria* are little argument books or memory pages, in which for the sake of memory you write

down things worthy of notation on occasion without any particular order. Later you redact them and distribute them to the titles of your loci communes. Other names for excerpt books are *Thesaurus universalis* (universal treasury); *Bibliotheca portatilis* (portable library); *Pandectae* (from the Greek *pan kai dechomai*), that is, books which contain every kind of things and doctrines; *Codicilli Communes* (common books); *Codicilli Reminiscentiae* (memory books), *Memoriae Aerarium* (treasury of memory), *Rerum Sylvae* (forests of things), *Selectorum Sylvae* (forests of selections), or most commonly, *Loci Communes* (commonplaces).

With the advent of the computer, there are various new ways of keeping track of your loci. You can start a word processing file beginning with a list of topics, each preceded by an asterisk. Then, in the body of the document, excerpts can be typed under the topic headings. Topic headings should be in capital letters, preceded by an asterisk. By using the asterisk, you can quickly run a search for a title rather than scrolling through the entire document to find the topic you are looking for. There are both advantages and disadvantages of keeping your loci communes on a computer. First, unless you are able to synchronize your word processing document with a hand-held computing device, it is likely that your loci will not be very portable or accessible. Likewise, computer files are more likely to be ruined

accidentally than is a real book. On the other hand, entering information is often quick on the computer and finding information is much easier. All you need to do is to run a search. My solution is to do both. I keep choice quotations, Bible study, and sermon material in a book, and bibliographical data in a word processing document. I keep a loose-leaf index for both my book and my word processing document. For each topic, the index lists the pages of the book where the topic is dealt with. ("o" is entered when the topic is dealt with in the computer file.) Every six months I type the accumulated index entries into the computer and print off a new loose-leaf index. As the basis for a starting index, you could choose some terms from the index of Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics* or another dogmatics work.

Just as many different theologians of the Age of Orthodoxy used different methods for constructing their loci communes, so also, every student of theology today will find or develop a method that works for him. The important thing is to find a system that aids the memory and allows you to find needed information quickly. If you follow your system consistently, you will soon construct a powerful tool for yourself by which teaching, preaching, and writing assignments will be made easier. This in turn may just allow you more time to devote yourself to prayer (*oratio*), meditation on God's Word (*meditatio*), and suffering patiently the *tentationes* that are sent your way. **LOGIA**

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