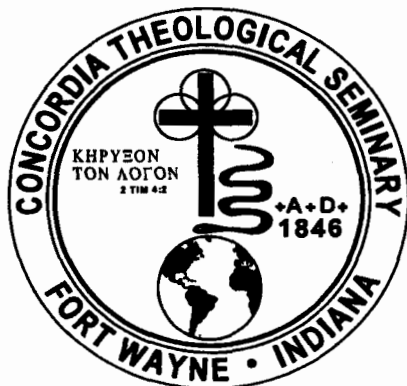


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Table of Contents

Sacramental Hymnody in American Lutheran Hymnals During the Nineteenth Century	
Peter C. Cage	195
Bach and the Divine Service: The <i>B Minor Mass</i>	
Paul Hofreiter	221
<i>Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio</i>: What Makes a Theologian?	
John Kleinig	255
The "Other Gospel" of Neo-Pentecostalism in East Africa	
Annsi Simojoki	269
Books Received	288

Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes A Theologian?

John W. Kleinig

What makes a theologian? Teachers of theology could hardly get a more unsettling question than that. No matter where we came from, people in our churches are increasingly critical of the system of theological training that has traditionally been used in the Lutheran church.¹ We know this system well, for we are all, in some way, products of it. While the actual curriculum differs from church to church, it always follows the same basic pattern. The three academic disciplines of biblical, historical, and systematic theology lead to the practical discipline of pastoral theology. First we deal with the theory; then comes the practice of theology.

Those who teach theology may be happy with that system of study, but many members of our churches are uneasy with it and the pastors that it produces. You know what they say. Our graduates do not know how to minister spiritually to people. They are out of touch with the modern world and unable to relate to it positively. They are impractical theoreticians who do not know how to deal with real people and their real needs. They are unable to work together with others as part of a team. Worst of all, they lack the basic skills needed to lead congregations, whether it be in administration or organization, leadership or communication, counseling or conflict management, evangelism or church planting.

All these criticisms come to a head in hard times, like now, when money is short and resources are limited. Can we afford to spend so much money on a system of pastoral training that does not produce the right kind of pastors? Do we, in fact, need academically trained pastors? If we do need to have such pastors, should we not revamp the whole curriculum around pastoral theology as the key discipline, or in some other way? Is our way of doing theology inappropriate in our post-modern context?

¹This paper was presented at the ILC Theological Seminaries World Conference: Preparing Lutheran Pastors Today on April 4, 2001.

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Now there is, no doubt, some truth in these criticisms and some value in the counterproposals given. I, however, hold that the problem is far deeper than that. Both we and our critics assume that we humans somehow produce theologians. From this it then follows that, if only we could get the system of training right, we would invariably turn out good pastors. But is that in fact so? What makes a theologian? We all know that the best trained person, with complete mastery of all branches of theology and with all the right pastoral skills, can turn out to be a poor pastor, and a bad theologian — and vice versa! What then makes a pastor?

Luther was a theological educator who thought hard and long about the learning of theology. At various times he touched on it from different points of view. While he, of all people, valued the liberal arts as the foundation for a good theological education, he knew that, by itself, even the best curriculum, taught by the best theologians, could not produce a good pastor. Something else was required. Learning theology was a matter of experience and wisdom gained from experience. To put it in modern terms, the right practice of evangelical spirituality in the church, the practice of the *vita passiva*, the receptive life of faith, makes a theologian.² In theology, as in life, we have nothing that we have not received and continue to receive (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Luther developed this insight in a number of different ways. In a lecture on Psalm 5:11, from around 1520, he asserted, rather bluntly, that a theologian was not made by “understanding, reading or speculating,” but by “living, no rather by dying and being damned.”³ Later in his table talk from 1532, he added that like medicine, theology was an art that was learned only from life-long experience. He refers to himself as a pastor and claims:

I did not learn my theology all at once, but had to search constantly deeper and deeper for it. My temptations did that for me, for no one can understand Holy Scripture without practice and temptations. This is what the enthusiasts and sects lack. They don't have the right

²Luther's use of this term and its implications have been investigated by Christian Link, “Vita Passiva,” *Evangelische Theologie* 44 (1984): 315-351; Oswald Bayer, *Theologie* (Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), 42-49; and, most comprehensively, Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things. Theology as Church Practice*, translated by Doug Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

³Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 58 volumes (Weimar, 1883-), 5, 163, 28-29. Hereafter abbreviated as WA.

critic, the devil, who is the best teacher of theology. If we don't have that kind of devil, then we become nothing but speculative theologians, who do nothing but walk around in our own thoughts and speculate with our reason alone as to whether things should be like this, or like that.⁴

There you have it, as starkly and offensively as only Luther could put it: "the devil is best teacher of theology." He turns a pastor into a true teacher of theology in the school of life, the university of hard knocks. No, I must correct myself. That is not quite right. He turns students of theology into proper theologians by giving them a hard time in the church. Theological training therefore involves spiritual warfare, the battle between Christ and Satan in the church. Conflict in the church is the context for learning theology.

In 1539, Luther developed these insights most fully and powerfully in his famous *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition* of his German writings.⁵ In this preface he outlines "a correct way of studying theology," a way that he himself had learned from much practice in it, "the way taught by holy King David" in Psalm 119. Despite his language, Luther does not, as we would expect, propose a theological curriculum, or even a method for the study of academic theology. Rather, he describes his own practice of spirituality that he himself had learned from singing, saying, and praying the Psalter. Yet even that is misleading. He does not advocate a particular method of meditation, but outlines the actual dynamics of spiritual formation for students of theology. This involved the interplay between three powers, the Holy Spirit, God's word, and Satan. Luther claimed that the dynamic interaction between these three forces was so powerful and effective that those who submitted to it, "could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils."⁶

As Martin Nicol has shown, Luther distinguished his own practice of spirituality from the tradition of spiritual foundation that he experienced as a monk.⁷ This tradition followed a well-timed, ancient pattern of

⁴WA 1, 147, 3-14; *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 54: 50. Hereafter abbreviated as *LW*.

⁵WA 50, 657-661; *LW* 34: 283-288.

⁶*LW* 34:285.

⁷Martin Nicol, *Meditation bei Luther* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984), 19, 91.

meditation and prayer. Its goal was 'contemplation,' the experience of ecstasy, bliss, rapture, and illumination through union with the glorified Lord Jesus. To reach this goal, a monk ascended in three stages, as on a ladder, the ladder of devotion, from earth to heaven, from the humanity of Jesus to His divinity. The ascent began with reading out aloud to himself a passage from the Scriptures to quicken the affections; it proceeded to heartfelt prayer, and culminated in mental meditation on heavenly things, as one waited for the experience of contemplation, the infusion of heavenly graces, the bestowal of spiritual illumination. Four terms were used to describe this practice of spirituality: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

In contrast to this rather manipulative method, Luther proposed an evangelical pattern of spirituality as reception rather than self-promotion. This involved three things: prayer (*oratio*), meditation (*meditatio*), and temptation (*tentatio*)⁸. All three revolved around ongoing, faithful attention to God's word. The order of the list is significant, for unlike the traditional pattern of devotion, the study of theology begins and ends here on earth. These three terms describe the life of faith as a cycle that begins with prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, concentrates on the reception of the Holy Spirit through meditation on God's word, and results in spiritual attack. This in turn leads a person back to further prayer and intensified meditation. Luther, therefore, did not envisage the spiritual life in active terms as a process of self-development but in passive terms as a process of reception from the Triune God. In it self-sufficient individuals became beggars before God.

In this address I will use Luther's preface to the Wittenberg edition to explore what he has to say about the making of a theologian. I think that we have much to learn from him about the spiritual formation of pastors. What he proposes about the study of theology could free us from the straight jacket imposed on us by so many unhelpful, perhaps even false, antitheses. These result in the separation of pastoral theology from academic theology, the separation of systematic theology from liturgical theology, the separation of private spirituality from corporate worship, the separation of subjective spiritual experience from objective revelation, and the separation of the private life of a pastor from his public role.

⁸My understanding of these terms and their significance depends on the careful analyses done by Nicol (*Meditation*, 91-101); Bayer (*Theologie*, 55-105), and Huetter (*Suffering Divine Things*, 72-76).

The Things That Make A Theologian

Prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit

Luther asserts that the study of theology has to do with the gift of eternal life. No human teacher can teach us about that, because no human teacher can give us eternal life. Nor can we gain eternal life for ourselves by using our reason to reflect on our experience of God or even to interpret the Scriptures in the light of our personal experience. In fact, if we attempt to gain eternal life with God through rational speculation and spiritual self-development, we will commit spiritual suicide. Those who use their reason and their intellect to make a ladder for their ascent into heaven, will, like Lucifer, plunge themselves and others into hell instead.

But we have no need to climb up by ourselves into heaven. The Triune God has come down to earth for us. God has become incarnate for us, available to us externally in our senses, embodied for us embodied creatures in the ministry of word. We have access to him through His word. The sacred Scriptures not only teach us about eternal life; they actually give us eternal life as they teach us. We also have "the real teacher of the Scriptures," the Holy Spirit, who uses the Scriptures to teach us the things of God. Luther, therefore, advises the student of theology to give up trying to fabricate a theological system based on human reason and experience. Instead he should learn theology by praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit as his instructor. He says: "... kneel down in your room and pray to God with true humility and earnestness, that through his dear Son, he would give you his Holy Spirit, to enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding."

Two things are remarkable in this piece of advice: the Trinitarian dynamic of this prayer for the Holy Spirit, and the repeated request for the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. As beggars who kneel before our great benefactor, we are drawn into the Triune God and share in His work here on earth.

It would be all too easy to misapply these words of Luther, as some Pietists and Charismatics do, by advocating a method of spiritual exegesis. Luther, however, does not here reject the careful reading, grammatical analysis, and literary exegesis of the Scriptures, in favor of reliance on the direct mental guidance by the Holy Spirit. He does not claim that through prayer and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the

reader receives special insights into the text of the Scriptures, its true meaning. Rather, Luther presupposes that God the Father grants His life-giving, enlightening Holy Spirit through His word. So the student of theology prays for the enlightenment, guidance, and understanding that the Holy Spirit alone can give through the Scriptures.⁹ He prays that the Holy Spirit will use the Scriptures to interpret him and his experience so that he sees himself and others as God does. In this way he trusts in God's word as a means of grace, the channel of the Holy Spirit.

The study of theology, then, is based on prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit turns would-be masters of theology, spiritual self-promoters, into humble, life-long students of the Scriptures. Apart from the Spirit and His empowerment, people know nothing about eternal life. Without His illumination, the teaching of the Scriptures remains mere theory without any reality. Prayer for God's ongoing bestowal of the Holy Spirit through Jesus and the ongoing reception of the Holy Spirit makes a theologian. In short, the Holy Spirit makes a theologian and this is a life-long undertaking.

Now if Luther is right, we teachers of theology need to promote the work of the Holy Spirit and role of prayer for the Holy Spirit in the study of theology. We dare not down play the importance of prayer just because it is not a means of grace, nor dare we dismiss prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit as a Pentecostal aberration. Like the apostles in Acts 6:4, we need to devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word, for the study of theology depends on the ongoing reception of the Holy Spirit through both of these.

Meditation on the written word

Luther claims that in the study of theology, prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit needs to be accompanied by continual meditation on the Scriptures.¹⁰ The reason for this linkage is that "God will not give you His Spirit without the external word." The Scriptures are the God-breathed, inspirited word of God. The same God who inspired them with His life-giving Spirit uses them to inspire and energize us with His Spirit. The word of God is the means of grace, by which God the Father grants

⁹One may see Gunnar Wertelius, *Oratio Continua* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1970) for a discussion on the relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit and the practice of prayer, 285-298.

¹⁰One may see John W. Kleinig, "The Kindled Heart: Luther on Meditation," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 20 (1986): 142-154.

His Holy Spirit through His dear Son. The Holy Spirit is therefore received through meditation on the word. The Spirit comes to us through the word so that He can do His work on us and in us through the word. No word; no Spirit. Likewise, no prayer; no Spirit.

When Luther speaks about "the external word," he criticizes two other kinds of meditation, both of which deny the incarnation.¹¹ On the one hand, he is critical of the method of meditation that he learned as a monk. It used the Scriptures as a kind of spiritual spring-board for the prayer of the heart and the mental or visionary appropriation of heavenly insights. On the other hand, he is equally critical of the enthusiastic practice of meditation on the inner word of the Holy Spirit, spoken in the hearts of God's people. In contrast to both these ways of learning theology, Luther advocates meditation on "the external word." It is the embodied word, spoken from human lips, written with human hands, and heard with human ears. Like the light of the sun, the word is out there, addressed to us by a pastor, written in a book, enacted in the divine service.¹² So, since the focus of meditation is on the external word, it basically involves spiritual extroversion rather than spiritual introversion. It is indeed a matter of the heart, but not only of the heart. The way to the heart is from the outside through the ears. In meditation we hear inwardly what is spoken to us outwardly.

This understanding of God's word as the physical means for His bestowal of the Holy Spirit led to two profound changes in the practice of meditation for Luther. First, whereas he had been taught as a monk to regard meditation as mental act, a state of being marked by inward, silent reflection, he realized that Christian meditation was primarily a verbal activity. The person who meditates speaks God's word to himself and listens attentively to it with his whole heart "to discover what the Holy Spirit means in it." In this he was influenced by his study of the psalms in Hebrew rather than in Latin.¹³ He discovered that all the Hebrew words for the practice of meditation in the Psalter had to do with various

¹¹Luther uses the term "the embodied word" (*das leiblich Wort*) as a synonym for the external word. Oswald Bayer explores the significance of these terms in *Leibliches Wort* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1992), 57-72.

¹²For the close connection between the external word and the ministry of the word, see Norman Nagel's essay on "Externum Verbum: Testing Augustana 5 on the Doctrine of the Holy Ministry," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 30 (1996): 101-110.

¹³One may see Siegfried Raeder, *Grammatica Theologica* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1977), 262-268.

forms of vocalization and sub-vocalization, ranging from speaking to murmuring, chattering to musing, singing to humming, muttering to groaning. A person who meditates therefore listens attentively to God's word as it is spoken personally to him. He concentrates exclusively on it; he speaks it to himself again and again; he reads and rereads it; he compares what it says with what is said elsewhere in the Bible; he chews at it, like a cow with its cud; he rubs at it, like a herb that releases its fragrance and healing powers by being crushed; he concentrates on it, physically, mentally, and emotionally, so that it reaches his heart, his core, the very center of his being. He receives what God says to him and gives to him in His word.

Secondly, in his teaching on meditation, Luther derives the private devotional life of the student from his involvement in public worship. He says:

Thus you see how David constantly boasts in Psalm 119 that, day and night and always, he would not speak, compose, say, sing, hear, and read anything except God's word and commandments. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external word. So be guided by that, for it was not for nothing that he commanded that it should be written, preached, read, heard, sung, and spoken externally.

Luther does not envisage the practice of meditation as an inward, mental activity, but as an outward ritual enactment. As such it was inspired by the liturgy and derived from the enactment of God's word publicly in the divine service. God commands the church to preach, read, hear, sing, and speak His word, so that He could thereby convey and deliver His Holy Spirit to His people. That external proclamation and enactment of God's word determines how the student of theology meditates.¹⁴ Just as the Scriptures are read in the Divine Service, so he reads them out aloud to himself as he meditates on some part of them. Just as the psalms are sung there, so he sings them to himself. Just as God's word is preached there, so he preaches it to himself. Just as God's word is spoken there, so he hears it addressed personally to himself.

¹⁴While Bayer highlights the public character of meditation and its practice for Luther (*Theologie*, 88-92), Hütter (*Suffering Divine Things*, 73), rightly emphasizes its connection with church practices. Both recognize that Luther's practice of meditation was closely connected with the singing and praying of the psalms in public worship.

Luther therefore advocates the practice of liturgical meditation on God's word, the exercise of liturgical piety.

All this has, I hold, important implications for the way that we learn theology in our seminaries. The whole life of a seminary should revolve around daily worship, the be-all and end-all in the receptive life of faith. Both teachers and students need to be disciples of God's word as it is spoken and enacted in worship. How can we have a Lutheran seminary where the curriculum does not issue from the divine service and lead students and teachers back into it? How can we properly model and teach our students the art of meditation except in corporate worship? They will most certainly not become good preachers of God's word unless they have first become meditative listeners of it. The fruit of meditation, as Luther recognized, is the preaching and teaching of God's word.¹⁵

Temptation by Satan

Luther claims that the right study of theology culminates in experience. Both he and his teachers agreed on that. But they disagreed on what they experienced and how. The monastic tradition of meditation held that the proper practice of meditation led to the experience of contemplation, the experience of union with the glorified Lord Jesus. In contrast to them, Luther taught that the receptive study of the Scripture in prayer and meditation led to the experience of God's word, the experience of its efficiency, its creativity, and its productivity. Strangely, the power of God's word, the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through the word, is discovered and experienced most clearly in temptation.¹⁶ Thus Luther says: "Thirdly, there is temptation, 'Anfechtung.' This is the touchstone that teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right and true, how sweet and lovely, how powerful and comforting God's word is, wisdom above all wisdom."

The kind of experience that Luther describes differs quite radically from what we would normally regard as a spiritual experience. It is the experience of the impact of God's word on us and its effect in us. We experience the word of God. While this experience begins with the conscience, it touches all parts of us and integrates the whole person,

¹⁵LW 14,296, 302-303.

¹⁶See Andrew Pfeiffer, "The Place of *Tentatio* in the Formation of Church Servants," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 30 (1996): 111-119, and Steven A. Hein, "Tentatio," *Lutheran Theological Review* 10 (1997-98): 29-47.

mentally, emotionally, and physically. The Spirit-filled word attunes us to God the Father by conforming us to His dear Son. We do not internalize it in us and assimilate it to our way of being; no, it assimilates us and makes us godly. We do not use it to make something of ourselves; it makes us theologians.

In temptation the student of theology experiences for himself the righteousness and truth of God's word with his whole being, rather than just with the intellect; he experiences the sweetness and loveliness of God's word with his whole being, rather than just with the emotions; he experiences the power and strength of God's word with his whole being, rather than just with the body. Temptation is therefore the touchstone for the assessment of any theologian; it reveals what is otherwise unknown. Just as a pawnbroker uses a touchstone to test the presence and purity of gold in a coin or a piece of jewelry, so temptation tests and proves the reality of a person's spirituality.

When Luther speaks of temptation in this preface, he uses the word in a special way. In this case he does not refer to the enticement by the devil to sin, nor even to his condemnation of the sinner. The use of the German word "Anfechtung" indicates that it involves some kind of attack upon the person. Luther makes it clear that this happens in the public domain; it involves public antagonism and opposition to those who are pastors or about to become pastors. It is an attack upon the ministry of the word. The devil does not attack the office of the ministry as such, because it can serve his interests if it operates apart from God's word and His Holy Spirit; his concern is for the source of empowerment in the office, the operation of the pastor by faith in God's word and the power of the Holy Spirit. That he will not allow at any cost, for it is his undoing.

As long as any pastor, or any student of theology, operates by his own power, with his own intellect and human ideas, the devil lets him be. But as soon as he meditates on God's word and so draws on the power of the Holy Spirit, the devil attacks him by stirring up misunderstanding, contradiction, opposition, and persecution. The attack is mounted by him through the enemies of the gospel in the church and in the world. All this happens to stop the work of God's word in the student of theology. As soon as God's word is planted in his heart, the devil tries to drive it out, so that he will not be able to operate by the power of the Holy Spirit. The large number of laments in the Psalter indicate that this is quite normal.

They show how the ministry of the word produces enmity and opposition; it arouses the ire of the enemy.

But paradoxically these attacks are counter-productive. Luther says: "For as soon as God's word shoots up and spreads through you, the devil persecutes you. He makes you a real teacher (of theology); by his attacks (temptations) he teaches you to seek and love God's word."

Thus the attack of the devil on the student of theology serves to strengthen his faith because it drives him back to God's word as the only basis for his work in the church. In the face of an attack by the devil, he cannot rely on his own resources; he cannot depend on the affirmation of his theology by the world or even by the church. His own spiritual weakness and his lack of wisdom make him rely on the power of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God's word, "wisdom above all wisdom." Through temptation the student of theology becomes a theologian; he learns the theology of the cross; more correctly, the spirituality of the cross.¹⁷ He does not experience the glory of union with his heavenly Lord, but knows the pain of union with Christ crucified. He bears the cross together with his Lord and suffering with him in the church.

If we heed what Luther has to say about the role of the devil in the spiritual formation of theologians, we will realize our seminaries are spiritual battlegrounds, contested places, rather than spiritual oases, places of refuge from temptation. We will also be able to help our students understand why they and their families come under such concerted attack at certain points during their course of study. We may even welcome these attacks. They show that God is truly at work with us, making true theologians out of us and our students.

Conclusion

The life of faith is the *vita pasiva*, the receptive life. In it we do not make something of ourselves, God fashions and forms us. This is so also for pastors. We do not make theologians; God does. He creates them by calling them to be ministers of His word, just as He called the apostles. He trains them in His church through what is done to them there and through what they suffer there. He makes theologians through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the power of His word, and the opposition of the devil.

¹⁷One may see Gene Edward Veith Jr., *The Spirituality of the Cross* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999).

While this makes things easier for us in some ways as teachers of theology, it also makes things even more difficult for us, because we will never be able to construct a foolproof system of training for the production of good pastors. Yet that is what is expected of us, and it is all too easy to own that expectation. At best, we can establish a curriculum that is consistent with the divinely instituted dynamic for spiritual formation, foster a community that promotes its operation, and model how to keep on learning by living the receptive life of faith.

What then can we do to promote the receptive life for students of theology? Here are seven brief concluding proposals.

1. The whole curriculum for the theological education needs to revolve around the worship of the community. This must be central to all that is done in a seminary, for in the divine service God's Spirit-giving word is proclaimed and enacted as it is read and sung, preached and prayed, spoken and confessed. In it we should sing and pray the whole Psalter, for it is the divinely inspired manual of Christian spirituality, in which God Himself teaches us how to pray, meditate, and resist the enemy.

2. We would do well to begin all our lectures with a word of God and prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

3. We need to be diligent in our own devotional life and help students to establish the practice of daily devotions, with an emphasis on meditation on God's word, prayer, and spiritual vigilance.

4. A course on Lutheran spirituality as the receptive life of faith could be made part of the curriculum. The accent in this should be on actual experience and personal practice rather than on theory. Any such course should cover the connection of personal piety with public worship, the practice of prayer, evangelical meditation of God's word, engagement in spiritual warfare, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of faith.

5. The study of theology needs to be understood as part of the battle between Christ and Satan in the church. The better we do our work as students of God's word, the greater the opposition will be. That is not a bad thing, provided that we deal with the conflicts in our community and in the lives of our students spiritually as attacks by the devil rather than merely as personal, doctrinal or psychological problems.

6. As much weight should be given to the spiritual formation of students as to their academic development. This happens through their involvement in the community and their acceptance of authority, their participation in public worship and interaction with each other, our pastoral care of them and their pastoral care of each other, our provision of spiritual direction and their practice of spiritual self-appraisal, our readiness to apologize and their willingness to forgive.¹⁸

7. The whole curriculum needs to focus on the use of God's word in worship and life and ministry as the means of the Holy Spirit, for as Luther says, "God will not give . . . his Spirit without the external word." Apart from God's word no one could ever learn theology. That is what makes a theologian.

¹⁸One may see the discussion on spiritual direction by Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 103-131.