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The Gospel and the Spiritual Life of the Pastor

JOHN S. DAMM

After God, through the Holy Spirit in Baptism, has kindled and wrought a beginning of true knowledge of God and faith, we ought to petition him incessantly that by the same Spirit and grace, through daily exercise in reading his Word and putting it into practice, he would preserve faith and his heavenly gifts in us and strengthen us daily until our end. Unless God himself is our teacher, we cannot study and learn anything pleasing to him and beneficial to us and others.¹

These words from the Formula of Concord speak directly to our topic: The Gospel and the Spiritual Life of the Pastor. These words still inspire a Lutheran seminary professor to assert: "There can be no question of the centrality of prayer and reading in the minister's life."²

And yet, though the requirements of this biblical and confessional call to a life of personal prayer and meditation have not changed, the circumstances of contemporary life apparently make it difficult for today's busy pastor to fulfill these requirements. William Hulme suggests that it is often embarrassing to question a person about his prayer life. "Well, it's not what it should be" is the usual response.³

¹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, 16, *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 523.

² *Minister's Prayer Book*, ed. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, n. d.), p. xi.

³ William E. Hulme, *Your Pastor's Problems*

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In a study conducted in the spring of 1968, David A. Wood concluded that the pressure of time was among the most important factors which hinder a pastor's spiritual growth.⁴ There was a time at which the Formula's daily exercise of prayer and devotional reading consumed a large portion of the pastor's day. Now his time is preempted by organizations—parochial, ecclesiastical, and secular. And the hours a busy pastor does find for reading must be spread out over a number of different areas, indicating how diversified his reading material has become.

The multiplicity of challenges addressed to today's pastor further complicates the situation and makes it difficult for him to understand his role. At times there is a painful hiatus between what he wants to do and what he has to do, between what he expects of himself and what the congregation and community expect of him, or what he *thinks* they expect of him. This conflict can cause a pastor to develop what Hulme calls "a professional front,"⁵ and he may find it difficult to dispense with this front when he prays privately. "His public prayers are part of his professional activity and for this the front is no problem. But when he attempts to pray privately these artificialities seem out of place . . . and even repulsive."⁶

(Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 118.

⁴ David A. Wood, "The Spiritual Life of the Pastor" (Senior Research Paper, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, March 1968).

⁵ Hulme, p. 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The pastor now finds it easier to make excuses for himself. He assumes that since he is always handling sacred things, his own spiritual life will be nurtured. His study for sermons and classes substitutes for his personal pondering of the Word of God until it addresses him individually. He is able to pray with others but becomes insensitive to his own need for prayer. He can recommend devotional literature but does not know it himself.

Wayne E. Oates is persuaded that such a totally professional attitude toward prayer and meditation can so affect the relationship between a pastor and his people that gradually he is relegated either to the familiarity of all the rest of their social companions or to the atmosphere of an interviewer-client relationship.⁷ Increasingly, men engaged in pastoral theology and psychology and concerned laymen admit that the personal spiritual life of the pastor is not what it should be.⁸

Can we assume that today a pastor still subscribes to the centrality of prayer and meditation in his personal daily schedule and is not satisfied with the present state of his spiritual life? If he recognizes the need for a deep, rich spiritual life, why doesn't a pastor do something about it? Normally people find the time to do what they consider essential and necessary to their style of life. What is the problem?

In part, perhaps, it can be traced to a lack of proper training. If a pastor is to be a man of prayer, then the seminary he attended must be a school of prayer. If he is to engage in Luther's triad of *meditatio, tentatio, oratio*, then he must be taught

how to listen to the Word of God prayerfully, thoughtfully, and receptively as it speaks out of Scripture and other witnesses, how to examine himself as he is searched, challenged, and brought to decision by the Word of God, and how to pray in response to this Word that confronts him.

A recent study⁹ revealed that in most Protestant seminaries theology is treated as an academic discipline, and spiritual and devotional considerations seldom are given significant attention. The author of the study was favorably impressed with the spiritual development at Roman Catholic seminaries where the educational philosophy is different. Worship permeates every area of the seminarian's life. The study concluded with the suggestion that Protestant seminaries begin to grasp the depth and scope of the spiritual formation at Roman Catholic seminaries and see its effectiveness. "Because it is expected to be a part of the student's life and is formally implemented as a foremost part of the educational process, there is a greater chance that it will become meaningful for the student."¹⁰

In 1966 the Sealantic Fund, through the administration of The Fund for Theological Education, extended a grant to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., to support a project seeking to develop the spiritual and devotional life of theological students and seminary communities.

Sparked by his own long-standing interest and concern, Alfred O. Fuerbringer encouraged the application for the funding of such a project. He appointed George

⁷ *The Christian Pastor* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 122.

⁸ Wood, *passim*.

⁹ Walter D. Wagoner, *The Seminary: Protestant and Catholic* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), p. 51.

¹⁰ Wood, p. 15.

W. Hoyer to direct the project, the focus of which, at this writing, is directed to the seminary's approach to the total development of the student's life as a Christian with particular emphasis on his acceptance of a discipline for growth. The president's continuing encouragement indicates the high priority he places on the implementation of the project in the seminary community.

The project illustrates that to some extent blame can be placed on a seminary for the lack of a disciplined spiritual life in the men it trains. In addition, the lack of time, laziness, an unclear role concept, and the pressures of congregational life along with other pressures make the neglect of strengthening personal spiritual development widespread among pastors.¹¹

Perhaps another factor should be taken into account. Arthur Robinson may have been prophetic in 1902 when he attributed the principal cause of a dying personal devotional life to "the questionings that have arisen in consequence of the scientific teachings which have been specially characteristic of modern intellectual life."¹²

Though old, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* may still be a highly instructive book in this regard. For him religious experience, which is regarded as a pure fact of immediate experience, can only be reached after a threefold process of excision has been undertaken. To begin with, the social or institutional element must be eliminated, for there has to be a drastic separation between inner

religion and corporate religion. The latter is simply an accretion artificially added on and petrified. For James any kind of orthodoxy ends inevitably in a mere external observance. In this view, any genuine religious experience is a strictly individualistic affair.

Then, within this inner religion, the intellectual element must be eliminated, for it is obviously secondary and derivative. Intellectual imagery is fundamentally nothing more than the development of a deeper reality, which is to a great extent artificial and contains a strong tinge of the social element. Hence one can appreciate the enormous number of divergent and often contradictory variations to which this intellectual apprehension has been subject throughout the whole field of religious experience.

Finally, any sort of clear and definite relationship with God must be eliminated, for any such relationship would demand clear and definite ideas about God, some sort of affirmation about Him as a person. God Himself becomes secondary in religious experience. He is reduced to the stature of an unknown quantity who exists solely that we may live. We do not serve Him; we make use of Him, James says. This deliberately utilitarian conception, the complete negation of any genuine God of religion, ends in the most thorough anthropocentrism. Ultimately our relationship with God, which is an essential part of religion, becomes for James a movement that takes all its meaning and reality from below, from the state of exaltation it induces in human beings. It is a pleasant feeling that is experienced, and the center is always the excitement of a

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 17—18.

¹² Arthur W. Robinson, *The Personal Life of the Clergy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), p. 61.

higher kind of emotion, in the presence of which no exertion of volition is required.¹³

Essentially, therefore, James's point of view necessitates reducing religion to the level of the immediate experience of the repercussions of a particular attitude and thus to the level of a purely empirical experience. The social aspect of religion is rejected because society is held to be an entirely external affair compared with the person's private life. The intellectual element is rejected because any real knowledge about the transcendent world is considered impossible. The actual relationship with God Himself is rejected in favor of a biological relationship because it is believed that biological functions are the only genuine realities.

The more one reflects upon it, the more he seriously begins to wonder about the extent of James's influence on a pastor's spiritual life. Could it be that behind the generous, sometimes overgenerous, good nature of his accommodating psychology there lies hidden a positive metaphysic of the spiritual life that has subtly influenced us? In conversations with seminarians one hears repeatedly that chapel services, devotional exercises, private prayers and meditations often are not very helpful for them. They are frequently "turned off" by a particular form; a devotional exercise is appealing only if it "grabs them"; they seldom "experience" a mood of exaltation when they pray; nothing "happens" to them.

Though seminarians may be confronted by their particular problems in this area,

¹³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Gifford Lectures, 1901—02 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1952), p. 46.

ministers express similar concerns. Though they still affirm intellectually that God is a person, they are uneasy about using devotional patterns that express this affirmation. The pressures of the times make it difficult for them, even under the best of circumstances, to remain in communion with a transcendent world beyond their empirical experience. Constantly urged to accept biological relationships as the only genuine realities, any actual relationship with God is hard to envision, much less attempt to make real in worship.

To be helpful, however, this article must move beyond a description of the problem to a discussion of some of the resources available to the man who wants to grow and mature as a man of God. The clue, of course, is found in the word "gospel."

The pastor's spiritual life is first of all a movement to Christ and the Father by the power of their Spirit within the church, and consequently a movement directed by the Father, accompanied by the Son in the power of their Spirit, from within the church toward men. It is a movement that began at the moment of Baptism, a movement endlessly repeated and growing ever deeper, a movement that is spiritual and hidden because it takes place by grace through faith. It is a movement that defines the spiritual life because it defines existence itself as received in Baptism. Baptism buries a man into Christ's death and raises him to newness of life. Living in the present with Christ, the baptized Christian is constantly thrown back by the inner dialectic of his faith into the past, to the life-giving death from which he derives his life, into which he was baptized, and which he is called upon to imitate, and he

is directed to the future, the glory in which Christ lives as He calls His own to Him.

The Morning Prayer and accompanying ritual suggested by Martin Luther in the Small Catechism daily summarize this gospel movement for every Lutheran. A pastor whose spiritual life flows from this prayer will find the rhythm of this gospel movement repeated continuously.

Because the Savior lived, died, and rose again for him, access to the heavenly Father is assured. The incarnation of the Son of God built the bridge that spans the chasm of man's separateness from God. Christ's death destroyed the final power of the enemy. His resurrection made Him the living fountain of life.

All this is given. No one is called upon to try to find his own way to God. The bridge is built; the way is clear. The call is to cross the bridge and to walk the way by faith.

Thus the time a pastor sets aside to walk the way becomes a time of high privilege for him. To be able to come before God in worship during the time of personal meditation is a gift to be desired earnestly and to be used joyfully. During this time of worship a pastor not only consciously acknowledges God for who He is and what He does for men, but he also becomes more acutely aware of who he is as an individual: a man who needs God. This worship particularizes the relationship of a son to his heavenly Father. This worship makes it possible for the pastor to embrace the gift God offers in the gospel: life through His Son.

It is during these moments of private devotion that the pastor begins to understand more fully God's efficacious signs in the Scripture and in other witnesses. Be-

ing alone with the Word he more and more appropriates its meaning for him personally as he deepens his insights into the plan of God for him in the redemptive action of Christ as it is set forth in the Word. He has the opportunity to struggle with a particular text until it begins to say something to him about his life and his calling.

There is no hint of the utilitarian during these moments. This struggle and search are not for clearer insight in expounding a text to others in sermons or classes. These moments are for God to speak directly and personally to the pastor as a person. This may not always happen with ease or speed. Often the pastor comes to these private periods of meditation burdened with concerns and thoughts that get in the way of God's speaking to him clearly. For this reason many manuals on private meditation urge the pastor fervently to invoke the presence of God the Holy Spirit, for it is the Spirit working through the gospel who reveals God's saving plan and enlightens the seeker.

Guided as he is by the Spirit, the pastor need not expect that these periods of private meditation will be characterized by novelty and unique discovery. This kind of excitement may only divert him from the real purpose of these moments. It is sufficient if the Word, as it is read and understood, penetrates and dwells within the seeker. As the Blessed Virgin Mary pondered in her heart the things that were told by the shepherds, so in meditation the pastor allows God's Word to enter in and remain with him.¹⁴ It may well be that what enters in at this moment will remain

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1954), p. 73.

throughout the day and will do its work, often without the pastor's being conscious of it.

Even more important is the warning that a pastor should not expect any sudden or extraordinary experiences or prolonged pleasant feelings during these times of meditation. They may occur, but if they do not, it is not a sign that the period of meditation is useless. Generations of Christians schooled in the practice of private meditation assert that there will be times when a person experiences a great spiritual dryness and apathy, even an aversion, to meditation. Perseverance and faithfulness are required during these periods. Bonhoeffer's observation that a person should not take these thwarting experiences too seriously is helpful at this point.¹⁵ For it is precisely here that vanity and one's illicit claims upon God may creep in by a pious detour. So often a man at prayer assumes that it is his right to have nothing but elevating experiences.

Another aspect of the pastor's private spiritual life is the self-examination which is the necessary concomitant of meditation. Guided by the word of the Scripture, he is moved to examine himself and pray on the basis of that word. In this way he does not become the victim of his own narrowness. Having asked the Spirit to enlighten him, to make him ready and willing to receive and appropriate God's Word, he now asks God to direct him to accept it in his own personal situation, to recognize those particular sins and obstacles that prevent his growth in holiness. Even though he handles the Word of God daily in so many different situations, it is liable to be misunderstood. As he attempts to address that

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

word to new problems, it is possible that he compromises it. Because the Word is channeled through his particular mentality, it is subject to dangerous provincialism and hardening processes.

Hence on the basis of his meditation and subsequent self-examination the pastor prays for God's clear Word of the forgiveness of his sins. He asks for preservation from continued sin, for growth in personal holiness, and for faithfulness in using the Word of God's forgiveness in the situations of the day. Here the pastor may pray with certainty, trusting the promise of his faithful God. God's promise finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and every prayer that conforms to that promise is certainly heard and answered in Jesus Christ.

The domain of private prayer always includes more than prayer offered for oneself only. It moves out from self toward others in intercession. There are many intercessions a pastor will want to offer on behalf of others that cannot be offered in corporate worship or during family devotions. In many cases the particular needs and concerns of people committed to his care require attention in solitary prayer. Every pastor has the names of people who have requested him to make intercession for them, or he knows of people for whom he should pray especially.

Through personal petition the pastor places himself in the presence of God and asks for the forgiving word of pardon and peace. In intercessory prayer he brings other people into the presence of God and places them under the cross and asks for mercy upon them. And when the pastor sees a person standing there under the cross, just as he stands under the cross, then he is moved to compassion. He recognizes

the need to help that person share in the mercy of God, and he is impelled by love to serve that person in his particular need. This kind of intercessory prayer is a daily service that a pastor owes to his people. To neglect this aspect of ministry is to deny them a part of that very Christian service a pastor is called upon to offer.

The whole experience of this kind of a personal spiritual life involves a pastor in a living relationship with the Lord who heals; it helps the pastor and moves him to be a healer and helper of others. The gospel initiates this relationship, and it sustains this relationship. On the one hand this occurs in the private recesses of the pastor's devotional life, in meditation, examination, prayer, and intercession. On the other hand this relationship finds its fulfillment in the company of the people of God in the celebration of the mystery that proclaims Christ's death until He comes. (Although it is not the purpose of this essay to develop this thrust, it is important to remember that all private worship ought to eventuate in public worship, in the great assembly in which Christians together speak and do the gospel to each other in Word and Sacrament and thus continue the very work begun in private worship.)

Finally, this relationship expresses itself in service to others. The activity of service is the natural expansion and completion of the movement that began with private worship and moved on through corporate worship to a committed life of service for others. The movement toward God, which

is personal and corporate worship, always ends up as a movement of brotherly love and service, extending if necessary to the point of sacrifice. To disregard *either* one is to do serious violence to the natural rhythm of the Christian life. These two movements, taken together, equip a pastor for a more excellent ministry.

A Postscript

Lutherans take seriously the freedom that is theirs in the gospel. Sometimes this freedom is interpreted to be a freedom "from" instead of a freedom "to." Since the nurture of the pastor's spiritual life is essential to his growth as a Christian and as a Christian pastor, he is not really free "from" the requirements such nurture places upon him. He is only free "to" decide how and when such nurture will take place.

To make this decision and to carry through on this resolve require discipline. "Worship will never be, this side of glory, a completely voluntary thing. The old man must be drowned and die, and the combination new man-old man must be disciplined."¹⁶ This is not legalism; it is orderliness and faithfulness. For today's pastor the nurture of his spiritual life is an indispensable obligation to himself and to the people God has placed under his pastoral care.

¹⁶ "Toward a More Excellent Ministry," *Matins at Concordia Seminary*, ed. Richard R. Caemmerer, Robert R. Bergt, and Arthur Carl Piepkorn (Dec. 9, 1964), p. 9.