

## Luther and Learning

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Yesterday afternoon I shared with you the obligatory citation from Luther on these matters, according to which "Reason is the devil's whore." I went on to suggest that there were nonetheless certain areas of life and certain circumstances under which reason was quite a different animal all together. Luther thus reserved a high place for reason within this world and for illumined reason (ratio illuminata) in the realm of faith itself. At the very least, these remarks should have provided those of you who are students or have ever been students a certain reassurance that you have not been wasting your time--or worse!

I want to begin today with a different quotation from Luther. This one should convince you not only that you are not wasting your time but also that you are in fact spending it in one of the most important activities imaginable: "Learning, wisdom, and writers must rule the world. . . . If God out of his wrath would take away from the world all the learned, people would become beasts and wild animals. Then there would be no wisdom, religion, or law, but only robbery, stealing, murder, and the doing of all kinds of evil. . . ." What Luther intended with this assertion is well illustrated by a view that my colleagues and I who teach freshman Western Civilization at The Ohio State University share. When one of us is on the way to teach this particular course and is asked what they are up to, the common reply is, "I am going to push back the frontiers of barbarism!"

As I did yesterday, I intend to sneak up on this topic by treating it first rather generally and then ever more specifically until we get to the

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heart of the matter. We will thus first look at Luther's general view of learning and education, secondly at its place in the Reformation, and finally at how Luther would have us view learning, education, and culture in our own time. There will be some surprises along the way.

In the first place, Luther was the founder of our systems of public education if anyone was. In addition to many off-hand remarks, he devoted two separate substantial treatises to the subject. In 1524 he wrote To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany on the Founding of Schools and in 1530 a Sermon on Keeping Children in School. Anyone who reads but a portion of either of these essays can have no doubt that Luther was an advocate of public education.

Just a few quotations will suffice. From the first of the two, "In order outwardly to maintain its temporal estate, the world must have good and skilled men and women. . . . Now such men must come from our boys and such women from our girls. Therefore the thing to do is to train our boys and girls in the proper manner." From the second, "it is the duty of the government to compel its subjects to keep their children in school. . . . If the government can compel citizens fit for military service to carry pike and musket, mend the walls, and perform other military services in time of war, how much more can it and ought it compel its subjects to keep their children in school?" One more quotation ought to clinch the matter, should any doubters remain: "We should spend two gulden to educate our children for every gulden we spend on defense, even if the Turks are breathing down our necks!" I don't think there can be much question about where Luther would have stood with respect to current debates about federal budgetary priorities! The military would take a seat way back in the back of the bus.

It is worth noting, at least in passing, that Luther's fundamental point of view about public education became official policy in all Protestant territories with the exception of England. At least on the Continent, when monasteries, convents, and collegiate churches were "secularized," the money did not go into the princes' or city councils' pockets. Instead, it was devoted to a variety of what we would call "social services," among which education was the most common and by far the most expensive. Thus, the income that supported a canon at a collegiate church or a monk or a nun was now diverted to provide the salary of a teacher or professor. In addition, several of these prebends plus special monies were set aside to provide for the living expenses of students from families that did not have the means with which to send their children to school. Several of these foundations even outlived the French Revolution and exist to this day. Here I have in mind the Stift in Strasbourg and the one in Tübingen, where students (and visiting scholars such as myself) can live and eat if not for free, certainly at much less than the prevailing rates in the city. Thus, when in Strasbourg, I have been known to live and eat breakfast at the Stift for about six dollars a day. It is true that rural villages were by no means so well positioned and that education then, as now, had to wrestle with severe financial restraints. A beginning was nonetheless made, and it was made in response to Luther, who even used an old monastic piece of semi-vulgarity to make his point, when he said that "It is a worse sin to leave a young mind untrained than it is to rape a virgin."

The next obvious sub-question is "What sort of education did these schools provide?" The answer depends upon where one looks. Generally speaking--and just as today--Protestant Germany featured a two-tiered

system of primary and secondary education. For most people the Winkel-  
schulen or "corner schools" were enough. There one learned to read and  
write German and to do basic arithmetic. The basic texts were the cate-  
chism and portions of the Bible, and the teacher was frequently enough the  
village pastor or assistant pastor. At the other level, the gymnasium  
held sway. In addition to the Bible and the catechism in Latin or even  
Greek, one studied these languages formally as well as all the other  
liberal arts. This curriculum was clearly preparatory to university  
training.

Here there can be absolutely no doubt but that Luther favored the  
humanistic curriculum as he learned it from Erasmus but above all from  
Melanchthon. Before his marriage, he commented, "if I had children and  
could accomplish it, they would study not only the languages and history,  
but singing, instrumental music, and all the branches of mathematics." To  
his mind, the liberal arts were "invented and brought to light by learned  
and outstanding people as serviceable and useful to people in this life,  
noble and precious gifts of Christ who used and uses them according to His  
pleasure for the praise, honor, and glory of His holy name." He was espe-  
cially devoted to history and once remarked that his one regret in life  
was that he had not spend enough time studying it. Of it he said, "It  
would be most beneficial to rulers if from youth on they would read . . .  
history both in sacred and profane books, for in them they would find more  
examples of the art of ruling than in all the books of law." Of histori-  
ans themselves (a little advertisement here), he declared, "The historian  
must have the heart of a lion."

Above all, Luther was committed to an educational curriculum that was  
based on rhetoric rather than the dialectic of the schoolmen. Over dinner

one night, he explained the difference between the two in these words: "Dialectica says, 'Give me something to eat.' Rhetorica says, 'I have had a hard road to go all day long; I am tired, sick, and hungry, and have eaten nothing. Dear fellow, give me a good piece of meat, a good fried chicken, and a good measure of beer to drink!'"

All by itself, this quotation illustrates why Luther should be so much in favor of rhetoric over dialectic, and it is a point to which I will return at the end of our time together. You see, the purpose of dialectic or logic is to convince someone of the truth of some proposition or another. I suppose the purest form of it today may be found in certain types of higher mathematics--which, let me hasten to add, everyone should be required to study, even if I personally lost it in differential equations. By contrast, rhetoric seeks to convince someone of something and to move the hearer to a decision and, thence, to action. It is thus by no means "mere rhetoric," as we sometimes hear today, but a form of learning that takes the whole human being, body, mind and soul, into account. It is, in a word, human and rightly the lynch-pin of humanistic education.

It should be added (if only as an aside) that the curriculum Luther recommended--on cue from Melanchthon--was then regarded as the very best education a person could receive. Probably the most famous of the schools that was established on this model was the academy at Strasbourg, under the leadership of Johannes Sturm. But it proved to be the model throughout Europe with similar academies as far away as Rostock, Bratislava, Geneva and even in that cultural backwater of the time, England. Indeed, but a glance at the Jesuits' Ratio Studiorum shows that they, too, adopted this curriculum. They of course had a different catechism and their schools, the diocesan seminaries, presented different theological doc-

trine, but the way it was taught and the way students learned to expound it were identical. Luther, and with him an entire age, was very serious about education and learning. They were, after all, engaged in a war for human minds and souls. It can be little wonder that they chose the best weapons they had at hand.

Here, with respect to our second point, I want to reverse the focus. Rather than treating the impact of the Reformation on learning and education, one might well ask what role(s) learning and education played in the Reformation process. Here we turn to two sources, one of them a little unlikely. The likely one is his treatise of 1530 in which, faced with a relatively unified and utterly intansigent Catholic party at Augsburg and the march of the Turks up the Danube toward Vienna itself, Luther's views took on real urgency. On this occasion, six years after the first treatise, he emphasized the need to educate pastors, saying "even those of lesser ability [should be trained] for we need not only highly learned doctors and masters of Holy Scripture, but also ordinary pastors who will teach the Gospel and the catechism to the young and the ignorant. . . ." The second, and less likely, source is the Small Catechism itself. In the preface, which at least my childhood Catechism did not contain, he concluded, "I therefore beg of you for God's sake, my beloved brethren who are pastors and teachers, that you take the duties of your office seriously, that you have pity on the people who are entrusted to your care, and that you help me teach the catechism to the people, in particular to those who are young

In sum, the Reformation quickly became a process of education first and foremost. The problem of when the Reformation became a process of learning and education is most easily resolved with the tools of

biography. For our purposes, the matter is a question of individual biography but one could also illustrate the matter by shifting the focus to other reformers and engage in collective biography. But the key individual is naturally Luther himself.

It is common knowledge that the new churches of the Reformation were created first through the device of visitations by which both secular and ecclesiastical authorities assessed the condition of local churches and then decided what actions they would take. It is less commonly observed that in the late 1520s and early 1530s Luther followed the visitations closely, encouraged them, and even served personally as a visitor. Moreover, his comment once he received first word of the visitors' findings clearly reveals the impact they had upon him. "What miseries we see here," he wrote. This was in 1528. Early the following year, after personally serving as a visitor, he wrote a pastor in Braunschweig, "Just now I have turned to preparing a catechism for the sake of the raw pagans." When his old foe, Duke George of Saxony, died, Luther's first recommendation was that "Mad Duke George's" successor should carry out a visitation, and then abolish the Mass. Contrary to what some of the older literature at least implies, Luther was keenly interested in the organization of the new church. He was therefore a reformer in the activist sense of the term as well as the chief ideological standard bearer of the reform movement.

This interest was, however, only part of a self-conscious effort to do all he could to make certain that his vision of the Gospel endured beyond his own death. It is to be seen in the hymns and catechisms he wrote for the common people, in the care and feeding he gave to young pastors in his charge, and even in an important change at the University of Wittenberg.

Earlier, he and Melanchthon had put an end to disputations on the grounds that they were too reminiscent of the scholastic theology against which they both struggled. But they reinstated disputations in 1533 so that Wittenberg could grant the doctorate and thereby create not just pastors but also professors who would carry on their work.

It is in fact almost impossible to overestimate the impact that the visitations had on Luther's later career. As noted above, he followed them with keen interest. He defended them against John Agricola (who thought they might tyrannize consciences) and repeatedly urged that they be carried out expeditiously and simply. He made his objectives very clear in the preface to the Small Catechism, which appeared shortly: "The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism or statement of Christian teaching. Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people, especially those who live in the countryside, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching." Luther therefore turned to the task himself. In the same preface he made his sense of urgency clear to all: "I therefore beg of you for God's sake, my beloved brethren who are pastors and preachers, that you take the duties of your office seriously, that you have pity on the people who are entrusted to your care, and that you help me to teach the catechism to the people, especially those who are young."

The Reformation therefore became an educational process very quickly and it did so at its very core. But the question is, "What were the reformers and Luther in particular trying to teach?" The others, each of whom learned the Reformation from Luther in one way or another transmitted



his new doctrines and practices, as they understood them, by teaching them to others. Indeed Luther himself may have realized--and about the same time that he discovered how far he had come in his own theological thinking--that the reform must occur in just this way. As noted yesterday, in 1518 while returning from the Heidelberg Disputation he wrote that he was convinced that there would be no reform in the church unless the universities were reformed first. He went so far as to call for abolishing all the old studies and restructuring the entire university curriculum, in theology in particular.

In sum, whenever the reformers, whether Luther or the others, became fully aware of their program, they began to teach it to others. The process commenced in a more-or-less personal way in Luther's own university lectures and in the private lectures, discussions, and correspondence of the others. But then it became an institutional matter. Doctoral disputations were reinstated at Wittenberg in 1533. Strasbourg's Gymnasium was founded at about the same time, and the same years featured a debate about the future of the University of Basel and the "reform" of the University of Tübingen. If only in passing, it must be added that the first edition of Calvin's Institutes--the quintessential "manual" for the new faith--also dates from the mid-1530's. In sum, by about 1535 the Reformation had become a matter of education and learning in an institutional setting. Luther led the way.

What precisely the reformers were trying to teach in this phase of the Reformation occurred on two levels. The first, and most obvious, concerns the new corps of pastors. On the one hand it is true that the Protestant clergy received a thorough grounding, just as Luther insisted, in the best tradition of the studia humanitatis. To illustrate, Johannes Pappus,

the President of the Company of Pastors in Strasbourg had a library of well over 6000 volumes. Of these, more than 40% pertained to languages, literature, history, moral essays, grammars, books of rhetoric and the like. He was of course a highly placed exception among 16th-century Lutheran clergy, but in general these pastors became, as one scholar has put it, "intellectuals . . . close to the people."

On the other hand, there can be even less doubt that Protestant pastors were expected to learn--and be able to teach, expound, and defend--true doctrine. The letters that pastors carried with them--their certificates of ordination, as it were--attest to this central characteristic of their formal educations. Johannes Marbach, who became President of the Company of Pastors at Strasbourg in 1552, was one of Luther's own students. He received the doctorate on February 20, 1543 and with it a letter from Luther that he carefully kept among his papers and that was finally published by a collateral heir in 1684. In it Luther to be sure noted that the young man had good morals and personal habits. But he emphasized that Marbach had studied at Wittenberg for three years and that he taught "the sum of Christian doctrine and the purity of the Gospel."

It should be added that this emphasis upon doctrinal purity, as taught in the classroom, only increased in the years that followed. For example, Pappus, Marbach's successor, achieved his position specifically because he held the doctorate, which, the city fathers noted, compensated for his youth. Of this man another Lutheran professor and pastor remarked at an earlier date, "At his age, a doctor and an ass cohabit in the same person."

The second aspect of the content of education and learning during the

Reformation flows from the pastors' actual conduct of their ministries. Pastors are rather like professors. For the most part, they taught as they were taught. There can be no surprise, then, that in the late 16th century they preached to their parishoners a religion that was at least as much a matter of the head as of the heart. They presented this message--that true religion was something knowable and to be expressed in doctrinal statements--not only in sermons and catechetical instruction but also in hymns and devotional literature. Moreover, those pastors with supervisory responsibilities made certain from the initial examination through the practice sermon and during the annual visitation that all the clergy fully exercised their office as teacher. Personal morality certainly played a role, and the visitors were quick to discipline pastors who were also notorious sinners. In Strasbourg, for example, the President of the Company of Pastors granted that the wife of one of his charges was a shrew, but he added that shouting at her and slapping her were unlikely to improve matters. Nonetheless, if the visitation reports are any guide, the chief cause for dismissing a pastor was doctrinal error or even the inability to teach doctrine effectively. To return to Strasbourg, another pastor had become so old and feeble that he could scarcely teach catechism, and he was eventually pensioned off.

The following can therefore come as no surprise. The central thing that was expected of ordinary parishioners was that they, too, be able to confess true doctrine. The visitation reports are indisputable on this point. Once again, the visitors certainly inquired about problems that may be associated with public morality. They did not favor public drunkenness, brawling in the streets, or (above all) adultery no matter where it occurred. But first and foremost they sought to discover whether

people knew their catechism. Moreover, in this effort pastors all over Germany took their lead from Luther himself and his admonitions to them in the preface to the Small Catechism. Finally, the reports are also quite clear about one other matter. If the visitors found that most people in a particular village could recite the catechism, then they were more or less satisfied. Here again (even if they did not use his catechism but one of their own), Luther's pastors were following the master's lead.

If doctrine was the principle content of teaching and learning in the Reformation, how then did people teach it and learn it? Again, the question must be answered on two levels. Again, just as clergy and laity taught and learned much the same thing, so too they taught and learned it in much the same way.

It was a classical dictum--one stated most forcefully by Aristotle--that the orator's skills were three-fold: memoria, dialectica, and inventio. The entire thrust of Renaissance pedagogy was to emphasize memoria and inventio at the expense of the dialectic that they so despised.<sup>31</sup> Valla's Elegantiae linguae latinae, Erasmus's Adagiae and De copia verborum, and even many of Shakespeare's most treasured rhymed couplets all attest to the humanists' love for memorization of finely turned phrases that derived from folk wisdom. Erasmus's own hope that the plowman at his plow and the weaver at her spindle would sing a psalm to the rhythm of their work turned on the ability of anyone--nay, everyone--to memorize. One humanist scholar expressed the wish that people would go so far as to memorize the Psalms in Hebrew, for then "the truth will pour into you most liberally, and from the purest sources."

The point is simple. The reformers took Renaissance pedagogy--the best that they could find--and turned it to their own purposes. It is

certainly true that Valla, who could make the most trenchant doctrinal observations in his Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum, and Erasmus, who could do the same, had little interest in doctrine. Erasmus in fact despised doctrinal arguments on the grounds, at least in part, that they detracted from the necessary reform of learning and morals. Here the reformers parted company with their Renaissance forebearers. But they continued to regard humanistic methods as essential, even to the point that one of the earliest historians of the Renaissance and Reformation declared that Renaissance humanism was God's divine work to prepare the way for the Reformation.

The reformers adopted Renaissance pedagogy in two ways. As background, it must be understood that those who were professors in the new (or newly) Protestant universities were in the business of training pastors and new professors. For them, teaching was therefore an intensely practical matter that served immediate needs. It was not an abstract process of passing on general cultural values from one generation to another. They therefore insisted that their charges learn the ancient languages, rhetoric, grammar, history, and the remainder of the liberal arts. But these were preparatory studies. The piece de resistance was doctrine, and here too they chose the methods of Renaissance humanism. They taught the essential doctrine by the loci method, which was based on the techniques of rhetoric rather than dialectic.

Here one critical assumption that underlies the loci method is of special importance. It is this: every good or useful essay or oration in a particular area of learning will treat the principal loci or topoi of the field in question. Naturally, these loci will differ from subject to subject, but within discrete subjects important works will cover all the

important topics. The conclusion is again simple: according to the reformers, the Scriptures were authoritative in all matters essential to salvation. Therefore, the authors of the Scriptures treated all the loci of theology. Hence, one not only could and should compose loci communes, as did Melanchthon, Calvin, Beza, Vermigli, and many, many others, but one also could and should find in the biblical texts how the authors of the Scriptures treated these loci. Thus, just as Melanchthon could turn Luther's lectures on Galatians into a treatise on the freedom of the will, so too both he and one of his students could turn lectures on the Gospel of John into a disquisition on the subject of predestination.

It must be granted that the loci method, as practiced by the professor, is not quite the same thing as rote memorization. But the process must also be imagined from the point of view of the student. What does someone who wishes to become a pastor or even a professor of theology gather from this method of teaching? By no means is everyone clever enough to discern theological topoi by themselves, just as most people cannot derive differential equations on their own. What then do they do? They do what less able students the world over do. They memorize them.

When seen from this perspective, there is therefore no essential difference between how most pastors and churchmen were taught and how they taught the laity. It is clear that knowledge of true doctrine was central to the training, selection, and placement of the clergy, that they in turn took it as their task to teach true doctrine to their parishioners, and that they did so by using catechisms whose basic content was doctrine. In addition, the main event in the annual visitation was calling the children (and sometimes the adults, too) together and grilling them on the catechism. With respect to the common people, the central issue, therefore,

is the pedagogical character of Reformation catechisms.

Obviously, a successful visitation featured many children and some adults who could repeat the catechism from memory in the presence of the visitors. But the entire process amounted to the humanist curriculum and educational method at the popular level. Moreover, the same assumptions prevailed. Why else should catechisms--at least Protestant catechisms--use as their texts the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed? These were and remain the principle texts of Christianity. Surely they, of all texts, spoke to the topoi of the Christian faith. Surely, anyone who could explain them had a grasp of the faith and therefore the means with which to persevere unto salvation. As an addendum, memorizing certain Bible verses that treated civic duties would help people live upright lives in the here-and-now.

It should therefore be obvious that catechetical instruction is by no means an example of the obscurantism and pessimism about human nature that some scholars so frequently attribute to the Reformation at the popular level. It is also not quite just the opposite. The reformers were well aware that peasants and day laborers had their intellectual and spiritual limitations. Luther himself once commented that the workers he knew kept time not by a clock or the movement of the sun but by the number of empty tankards lying about them. Nonetheless, the structure of the catechisms and the enormous effort expended to teach them amount to an affirmation of the power of the gospel message to transform human lives, if it is properly understood. In sum, we hear in this program a ringing declaration that human beings--even the "simple laity" for whom Luther wrote an Explanation of the Lord's Prayer as early as 1519--could comprehend its faith in an effective manner.<sup>37</sup> The reformers' pedagogy had an extra-

ordinary optimism at its base. Learning and education won the day.

I am well aware that our times feature many Christians who disparage learning and education or at least have deep suspicions about the world of the learned and the educated. I am also deeply aware that many of the learned and the educated give many Christians good reason to be suspicious if not hostile to this world. Luther none the less took it seriously (so too, did St. Paul, who spoke of the "renewal of the mind"), and I will conclude by suggesting that we should as well.

In the first place--and here I refer to the notion of "calling"--Luther spoke of us a "co-creators with God" of our culture, that is, of the ways in which we think and behave. For Luther there was nothing either specifically Christian or unchristian about human culture. It was none the less a fact of life from which there was no escaping. Of the ancient languages he wrote, "Although the Gospel came and still comes to us through the Holy Spirit alone, we cannot deny that it came through the medium of languages, was spread abroad by that means, and must be preserved by the same means." Looking at his own time, he feared that unless people dedicated themselves to restoring learning and education, "the time will come when we will be unable either to speak or to write a correct Latin or German sentence."

The quotations one could cull from Luther on this matter are almost without number. But rather than continuing on with more, I ask you to consider the following. A number of <sup>ca</sup>years ago I gave my standard lecture in our Western Civilization course on Old Testament history--yes, it gets one lecture in a one-quarter survey. I quite naturally made the point that the Old Testament was written by and large from the point of view of the Exodus; Moses obviously figured prominently. After the hour was over,



something truly appalling happened. One faithful and reasonably bright student came up to me and said, "Who's this Moses guy you were talking about?"

Maybe this much is to be expected at an institution like The Ohio State University that is so secular that it systematically believes absolutely nothing. On the other hand, a colleague and friend who is professor of church history at the University of Heidelberg reports that his theology students (who are what we would call graduate students) have not read the Bible! I would simply add from my experiences in higher education that we find ourselves addicted to flabby thinking that closes questions before they have even been opened and that certainly refuses to think its way through them. Of course, speaking, writing or reading correct Latin is by and large out of the the question. But reflect now on what has happened to our ability to speak, read, and write correct English. Finally, if you still don't think we have some work to do, some God-given work, in re-co-creating our culture, ask yourselves this question: shall we leave the proclaiming of the Gospel and the strengthening of Christian faith to the tele-evangelists, to the Bakkers and Swaggerts of this world? If we don't get to work, that's exactly what will happen, and we will end up in a world filled with 20th- and 21st-century indulgence sellers.

The next time you are weary of your studies and find yourself thinking that maybe it doesn't matter anyway, consider the alternative.