

Theologia est habitus practicus: What is practical for a Christian?

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A recent symposium held at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary dealt with the topic of Christian Freedom. In the final paper delivered at the symposium, the issue of practical applications was raised. The author, John Braun, acknowledged that he had probably disappointed some of his audience who were expecting him “to get at some of the practical issues Christians face in the exercise of their freedom.”¹ Rather than compiling a list of such practical applications and discussing a Christian’s response in each situation, Braun focused on the struggle with our sinful nature. Braun felt that this was more practical because our sinful flesh struggles each day to drag us back into slavery. His paper dealt with the tools God has given us to build up the Church: law and gospel. In this way he stressed that Christianity is not merely a matter of behavior. He kept the focus on what God has done for us, rather than what we have done for God.²

Braun’s prediction that some would be disappointed with his paper proved correct. In the discussions following the paper and the reaction to the symposium as a whole the criticism was often raised that not enough practical applications were made by Braun or the other presenters. This raises an interesting question: what is “practical” for a Christian? Is the practical limited to the third use of the law, a list of instructions as to how a Christian should live? This seems to be the definition favored by those who criticized the lack of practical applications in the symposium. Braun would favor a broader definition: what is practical is that which aids us in our struggle against our sinful flesh; namely, law and gospel, which show us our sin and our Savior. There is a noted difference between these two definitions of “practical.” Which side is right? How does a Christian define “practical?”

This question can be answered by a study of the axiom, “*Theologia est habitus practicus.*” The dogmatists used this phrase to define theology. Translated, it reads: Theology is a practical aptitude.³ By studying the relevant Scripture passages and the dogmatist’s writings on this axiom, it becomes clear that what is practical for a Christian includes more than the third use of the law. Theology deals with more than a “how-to” book for Christians. It deals with who God is and what he has done. This is practical because it shows us Almighty God who created and redeemed us. Yet at the same time theology is not concerned with merely idle speculation and intellectual knowledge. Theology is not concerned with faith to the exclusion of piety nor piety to the exclusion of faith. The axiom “*Theologia est habitus practicus*” reminds us that faith and piety are not to be separated. Theology is concerned with man’s faith and his actions.

¹ Braun, John. “Christian Freedom: The Struggle to Remain Free.” p.32. Presented at A Symposium on Christian Freedom held at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 24-25 September 2002.

² Ibid. p. 33-34.

³ *Habitus* is a difficult word to translate. In addition to aptitude, other translation possibilities are “faculty,” “ability,” or “skill.” The concept expressed by “*habitus*” covers all these English words.

The dogmaticians define theology as a *habitus practicus*, a practical aptitude.⁴ Calov spells out this definition for us. He defines the broad genus of theology as a *habitus*. This excludes definitions of theology as doctrine or revelation (any abstract collection of truths) as well as a mere knowledge of the truth. He narrows the scope by limiting *habitus* to a *habitus practicus*. This excludes definitions of theology as a science, a theoretical *habitus* or a mixed *habitus*, i.e., part theoretical and part practical. The narrowest genus that Calov uses to define theology is a *habitus practicus* drawn from divine revelation, or a God-given (qeosdoton) practical aptitude.⁵ This three-level definition of theology provides a framework for this paper.

Theology is first limited to a *habitus*: an aptitude, ability, faculty or skill. This is derived from several passages in Scripture which speak of a faculty given to man through the word of God. In Second Corinthians Paul speaks of a fitness or capability⁶ that is given by God to his ministers. In chapter 2:16 he notes that their teaching of Christ is a fragrance of life to some and the smell of death to others. Paul asks who is sufficient (ikanov) for such a task. He answers that question in chapter 3: God's ministers are sufficient, but not in and of themselves. Rather, God has given them the capability (ikanothv) to perform this ministry. This capability is spoken of in the definition of theology as a *habitus*. God does not give his ministers a mere knowledge, nor a mere list of things to do. Instead, he gives them a capability (*habitus*) to carry out his ministry.

Another passage dealing with theology as a *habitus* is 2 Timothy 3:16-17. After listing the uses of Scripture (teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness), Paul relates the purpose of Scripture: "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Here the NIV translation, while capturing the sense of the Greek, omits the Greek word artiov, which in this context means capable or proficient.⁷ Once again, God has not given a mere intellectual knowledge, but a capability to the man of God. We note from verse 16 what the good works are that God equips him for: teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. This list is broad. The man of God is given this *habitus* from God to teach, or to instruct others about God and what he has done. He is to correct doctrinal errors, to rebuke those who have fallen into sin and to instruct them to live sanctified lives. This list supports the broader definition of practical, a definition which includes the strengthening of one's faith as well as the exercise of that faith in one's actions. This list shows that theology is concerned with both faith and piety; the two are not to be separated.

Hebrews 5:14 is another passage from which the *habitus* is drawn. Here the inspired writer describes the mature as those who have their faculties⁸ trained to distinguish between good

⁴Gerhard's definition of theology also places its practical nature at the forefront. His definition shows that theology deals with both faith and piety: "Theology (considered systematically and abstractly) is doctrine drawn from the word of God, by which men are instructed in true faith and true piety unto eternal life. Theology (considered as a *habitus* and concretely) is a God-given aptitude imputed to man through the word by the Holy Spirit. By this aptitude he is not only trained in the knowledge of divine mysteries through illumination of the mind, so that he exercises what he knows in the disposition of the heart and the execution of salutary works, but he also speaks aptly and effectively concerning those divine mysteries. He speaks in order to both shape others in the way of salvation and to defend heavenly truth from corrupt counter-teachings, so that men, shining in true faith and good works, are conducted into the kingdom of heaven." *Loci* I, 8.

⁵Quoted in Baier, *Compendium Theologicae Positivae* I, 32-33.

⁶Paul uses forms of the root ikanov in this section. The adjective can mean "sufficient" or "adequate;" in this case the meaning "competent" or "qualified" fits the context best.

⁷The Greek reads: iha artio~ hlotou qeou ahqrwpo~, pro~ pan efgon agaqon exhrtismeno~, which is literally translated: so that the man of God may be *capable* by being equipped for every good work.

⁸aijsqthron

and evil by constant exercise. Again, we see more than an intellectual knowledge. One's faculties are trained through use to distinguish between good and evil. Yet distinguishing between good and evil is more involved than simply following a "how-to" book for life. It is a matter of making judgments, not merely following instructions. In order to make judgments about good and evil, one must first have a standard for judging. That standard is found in the word of God. Therefore one must be instructed in the word of God before he can judge between good and evil. Both faith and piety are spoken of in this passage.

The purpose of the God-given *habitus* is given in John's gospel. John 20:31 tells us that the Scriptures have been written in order that we may believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name. John 17:3 tells us that God has not given us knowledge about him for the mere sake of knowledge but rather that we might have eternal life through that knowledge of God the Father and Jesus Christ. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:15 that the Scriptures make us wise unto salvation. Thus we see that theology is concerned with the salvation of man, not merely his sanctified life on this earth.

The dogmaticians cite the purpose of theology as evidence that theology is a *habitus practicus*. They cite the passages listed above to demonstrate that the purpose of Scripture is to make men wise unto salvation. Since theology is drawn from Scripture, its purpose is also the salvation of souls. Gerhard writes:

The purpose of theology is either primary and ultimate, or intermediate. Primarily and ultimately the purpose of theology is the glorification of God, for on that account God revealed himself in his word. . . . Intermediately and secondarily [the purpose] is either internal, that is, the informing of men to eternal salvation, or external, that is, the attainment of blessedness or eternal life itself. . . . Therefore whatever does not lead to this goal either directly, or at all events indirectly, either immediately or mediately, does not pertain to theological knowledge [grwms in].⁹

The goal of theology, after the glory of God, is the salvation of man. Therefore all theology works towards this goal. Gerhard approaches the same subject from another angle when he discusses the object of theology:

We said above, that theology is a practical discipline; now in practical disciplines the object or the subject about which is that in which the whole discipline is occupied. That [object] in theology is man, in so far as he is to be led to eternal blessedness.¹⁰

All of theology concerns itself with leading man to salvation, as Gerhard notes. Other dogmaticians also note this purpose of theology. Quenstedt writes:

Theology, viewed systematically and abstractly, is doctrine drawn from the word of God, by which men are instructed in true faith and true piety unto eternal life. . . . Theology, considered as a *habitus* and concretely, is an intellectual, practical, God-given *habitus* granted to man through the word by the Holy Spirit concerning true religion, in order that sinful man might be led through faith in Christ to God and to eternal salvation by its work.¹¹

⁹ Gerhard I, 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹¹ Quenstedt, quoted in Baier I, 75-76.

Quenstedt uses theology in two different senses here. Abstractly, it means the dogmas of the church. Concretely, it means the God-given ability or *habitus*. Either way, its purpose is to lead men to eternal life by teaching them of true faith and piety. Calov argues extensively about the soteriological and practical goal of theology.¹² Pieper also notes that the ultimate goal of theology is the salvation of souls.¹³

The goal of theology (i.e., the salvation of souls) is evidence that theology is a *habitus practicus*. Theology's goal is practical. It strives to achieve the salvation of man, a practical accomplishment. In order to reach this goal, both faith and piety must be worked by theology. If theology is concerned only with faith, without exercising that faith in one's life, it fails to meet its goal. James' epistle reminds us that faith without works is dead; such a faith is not really faith. Since a dead faith does not lead to salvation,¹⁴ a theology that is not concerned with piety fails to achieve the goal of theology. On the other hand, a theology that is not concerned with faith also fails to meet its goal. A theology that focuses on improving man's morality without addressing his more basic spiritual need for a savior will lead only to an outward improvement of man's behavior on earth. Without saving faith, man will not enter eternal life.¹⁵

The dogmaticians note that theology, in order to achieve its purpose, must be concerned with both faith and piety. While their terminology is slightly different, the point is the same. They write that theology begins with a knowledge of God (faith) and is brought to completion in an aptitude or ability. Quenstedt comments on John 17:3:

For eternal life consists in a knowledge of God, not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end [non tanquam in fine, sed tanquam in medio ad finem], without which no mature one attains the end, namely eternal salvation and the enjoyment of God.¹⁶

Hoenecke explains Quenstedt's quotation further by citing Hollaz's comments on the same passage. Hoenecke summarizes his comments: "we are not acquainted with [erkennen] God in order to know [wissen] about him, but in order to place our trust in him."¹⁷ Quenstedt correctly identified the starting place of theology: the knowledge of God. The close relation between the knowledge of God and the goal of theology (eternal life) is shown by John 17:3, which identifies eternal life as knowledge of God and Christ. Yet theology does not end with mere knowledge. Hollaz observes that this knowledge leads us to put our trust in God. In other words, this knowledge works faith in our hearts. Theology first addresses faith in man.

Theology is not satisfied with mere faith, but continues on to put that faith into practice. Calov writes that "in the end, a *habitus* is not able to consist in mere knowledge, but at the same time it extends to practice by its nature." Since theology is a *habitus*, Calov concludes: "Therefore, theology is not satisfied with mere knowledge, but extends to practice."¹⁸ Calov spells out these arguments to show that theology is practical. It does not stop with a knowledge of God, but proceeds to put that knowledge into action. Theology is concerned with practice, or piety, as well as with faith.

¹² Calov's arguments are summarized by Robert D. Preus in his book *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* I, 191-194.

¹³ Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics* I, 104-106.

¹⁴ James 2:14-17.

¹⁵ Galatians 2:15,16.

¹⁶ Quenstedt, quoted in Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelische-Lutherische Dogmatik* I, 250.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁸ Baier I, 33.

The dogmaticians strongly insisted that theology was a practical aptitude. In order to support this statement, they had to answer those who maintained that it was theoretical rather than practical, or at least a mixture of the two. Baier writes that all theology is practical, even that which does not specifically prescribe something to do. All theological principles, if not essentially (*formaliter*) practical are effectively (*virtualiter*) practical.¹⁹ He lists several examples to explain this distinction. Some theological principles directly prescribe action, such as the instructions to call upon God. Other principles, while not essentially practical, are effectively practical, because they lead to practical conclusions. For instance, the truth that God is the source of good things is not essentially practical: it does not simply call for action. However, it does state the reason why we pray to God and gives us cause to do so. In this way it leads to practical conclusions and is effectively practical.²⁰

One of those who identified theology as a mixed *habitus* was Balthasar Meisner. Meisner was a Lutheran who studied and taught at Wittenberg. His interests included logic and philosophy as well as theology.²¹ He maintains that theology is partly theoretical and partly practical. To defend his point, he notes that theology deals first with imparting the knowledge of the truth, then with establishing true worship by putting faith into action. Preus observes that there is no essential difference between Meisner's position and Calov's position that theology is purely practical. Meisner's position is philosophically more precise than Calov's. As Meisner points out, Calov has to expand the meaning of *habitus practicus* beyond its precise philosophic definition to avoid cutting out the knowledge of God and faith from theology.²² While there is no essential difference between the two positions, Calov's position does have the advantage of keeping the focus of theology centered on practical issues: faith in action and ultimately, salvation.

One of the advantages of insisting that theology is purely practical is that this definition excludes all idle speculation from theology. Chemnitz is worth quoting at length on this point.

We must always bear in mind that the Son did not proceed from the hidden throne of the eternal Father and reveal the heavenly doctrine for spreading seeds of controversy by which people might demonstrate their wisdom or play games, but rather that men might be taught the true knowledge of God and all teachings which are necessary for obtaining eternal life. Therefore in the individual topics our chief concern ought to be how and in what way this doctrine can be taught, applied, and used for serious exercise in repentance, faith, obedience, and prayer. For in this way our minds will grow in doctrine and piety at the same time. It is most correctly observed that theology consists more in attitude than in knowledge. Hence God in His own language includes under one concept both the knowledge and the attitudes which follow the knowledge.²³

¹⁹ Baier includes Walchius' explanation of the distinction between *virtualiter* and *formaliter*: "Virtualiter is contrasted with *formaliter* in the Metaphysics of the Scholastics. *Virtualiter* has the meaning that something is said concerning another thing that is not essential in view of its existence and essence, but is only said about it according to its power. For example, the king is everywhere in his land, not *formaliter*, as if he were really in every place, but *virtualiter*, because he has his representatives everywhere, who are there in his place." Baier I, 7.

²⁰ Baier I, 7.

²¹ Preus I, 55.

²² Ibid., 201.

²³ Chemnitz, *Loci* I, 47.

Several points are worth noting in this quotation. Chemnitz clearly includes both faith and piety under theology. He keeps the goal of theology squarely in the center. With this practical goal in mind, he excludes idle games and showing off. Anything that does not lead to an increase of faith and piety and ultimately to eternal life is not subsumed under theology. Chemnitz's admonition fits well with Calov's insistence that theology is purely practical. If Meisner's definition of theology as partly theoretical is accepted, this leaves the door open a crack for idle speculation to creep in. On the other hand, when theology is defined as a *habitus practicus*, it will not lead to any delusions of human theories.²⁴

Gerhard points out another danger in overemphasizing the speculative side of theology. He prefers to call theology more practical than speculative. He cites a number of passages to prove this point. In Luke 6:46 Jesus asks, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and yet you do not do what I say?" I Corinthians 4:20 informs us that "not in speaking is the kingdom of God, but in power." Such passages point out that the practical side of theology is to be emphasized over the speculative. It is possible to pay lip service to Jesus, yet ignore what he says. Paul reminds us that the kingdom of God consists in power, not merely in words.²⁵ If the speculative side of theology is overemphasized, a false theology may develop, a theology concerned only with words and not with actions. Such a theology will only produce hypocrites.

One example of such a theology of mere words is described by August Pieper. He cautions that God's word is not a dogmatics compendium that we merely need to learn exactly. Instead, it contains only practical knowledge for our salvation. Since God's word deals with this one point, the salvation of man, anything that is not related to salvation is not God's word. Even if one were to spell out the doctrine of the Trinity with great precision, but did not speak of this in relation to salvation, he would not be speaking God's word. The communication of attributes is only ballast if it remains solely an intellectual knowledge.²⁶ This danger can be avoided when theology is defined as purely practical. By applying the rule of practicality, the theologian can guard against idle, intellectual speculation.

The dogmaticians most narrowly define theology as a *habitus practicus* *quosdoton*, or a God-given *habitus practicus*. The classic treatment of this is found in Luther's preface to the first edition of his German works, written in 1539. In this preface Luther points out a proper way to study theology, one that he had used. This is not something which he devised on his own; rather he learned it from David in Psalm 119. Luther offers three rules for the study of theology: *oratio*, *meditatio* and *tentatio*.²⁷

First of all, Luther writes, one who desires to be a theologian should pray (*oratio*). Luther notes that the Bible makes the wisdom of all other books foolishness. Therefore the aspiring theologian should despair of his own reason, kneel down and pray that God might grant him the Holy Spirit through his dear Son. The Holy Spirit will enlighten him and give him understanding. Luther next points to the example of David from the 119th Psalm. Repeatedly David prays that God would teach, instruct, lead and show him the truth. Luther observes that even though David knew the Scriptures well, he still prayed that he might have the right master to teach him the truth of Scriptures lest he be left to his own devices and lead himself astray.²⁸ Luther's first rule makes it clear that it is God who makes the theologian. The Holy Spirit

²⁴ Pieper, Francis I, 67.

²⁵ Gerhard I, 3. He also cites Matthew 7:21 & 24-26, John 13:17, and I Timothy 1:5.

²⁶ Pieper, August. "Warum hat unser Predigten nicht mehr Erfolg," 20.

²⁷ Luther *Dr. Martin Luther's sämtliche Werke* I, 3.

²⁸ Luther I, 3-4.

enlightens man and makes him a theologian; it is not man left to his own devices who makes himself a theologian.

Luther's next rule is meditation (*meditatio*). The aspiring theologian should read and reread God's word aloud, with diligent attention and careful reflection. Luther cautions lest one think that, having read Scripture once or twice, he has exhausted the mines of Scripture. Again Luther points to David's example in Psalm 119. David wants to day and night speak, say, sing, hear, read and learn God's word. God's word is important because God does not grant his Spirit apart from the word.²⁹ Again, this rule shows that it is God who makes the theologian. It is God who sends his Spirit through the word to make a theologian.

Luther's third rule is *Anfechtung* (*meditatio*), the trials that serve to strengthen one's faith. These are the touchstone that teaches one not only to know and understand, but also to experience how sweet, lovely and comforting God's word is. When God's word comes to a person, the devil will not be far behind to send trials and hardships into his life. Through these *Anfechtung* God teaches the theologian to seek and to love his word. Here Luther is speaking from personal experience. He thanks his opponents, since it was through the trials they brought him that he was made into a decent theologian. As with the other rules, Luther cites David's example. In Psalm 119 he laments his enemies time and time again.³⁰ By teaching man to despair of his own ability and seek God's word, God makes man into a theologian.

Luther's rules make it clear that the *habitus practicus* is a gift of God. They also give insight into what the *habitus practicus* is. Again we see that both faith and life are included in Luther's rules. One is enlightened by the Spirit through the word and confirmed in the faith through experience. Luther's rules do not concern themselves merely with external actions, but deal primarily with man's total spiritual depravity and need for God to work faith in his heart.

Theologia est habitus practicus. A study of this axiom reveals that in theology faith and piety are not to be separated. Theology is first of all a *habitus*: a skill or ability to apply knowledge. It is also *practicus*: its goal is to effect the salvation of souls and its truths are to be exercised in piety. Finally it is *gratuitum*: it is a gift of God, who makes one a theologian through his word. From each of these points it is clear that theology is concerned with both faith and piety. Theology must be concerned with both if it is to achieve its goal: the salvation of souls. From this study, a definition of what is practical in the realm of theology can be made. In theology, everything that works for the salvation of souls is practical. This includes both that which strengthens man's faith and that which instructs man in true piety. In concrete terms, what is practical includes pure preaching of God's word to strengthen faith as well as admonitions and instructions for Godly living.

The theologian must walk a fine line to address both faith and piety. He must not stress one to the exclusion of the other. History gives many instances of theologians overemphasizing faith (e.g., Orthodoxism), and of theologians overemphasizing piety (e.g., Pietism). In our age it is still our task to walk that fine line, addressing both faith and piety in our theology. It is our prayer that God will work through his word to keep our theology pure, avoiding the pitfalls of excluding faith or piety.

Domine, da mihi nosse te et me.

²⁹ Luther I, 4.

³⁰ Luther I, 4.

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