

Weller's Luther Guide for the Proper Study of Theology

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The Preface of the Translator

Not unlike other anthologies or compilations of Martin Luther (1483–1546),¹ *Dr. Martin Luther's Guide for the Proper Study of Theology* is largely a work of Luther. Still it is rightly also attributed to Hieronymus [Jerome] Weller von Molsdorf (1499–1572). He recorded the reformer's advice to him and expanded upon it. His additions are most evident by the strong emphasis on the studying of the writings of Luther.

This text helped spur a whole series of Lutheran manuals or introductions to the study of sacred theology.² Such guides reached their climax in the *Methodus Studii Theologici* of Johann Gerhard and the *Isagoges Ad SS. Theologiam* of Abraham Calov.³ Even though this guide is not as comprehensive as those of Gerhard or Calov, it is certainly a unique little text. Weller's introduction offers one of the few sources for Luther's thoughts on how to approach theological study.

This translation of *Dr. Martin Luther's Guide for the Proper Study of Theology* is based upon Georg Schick's German edition. This edition was published as Hieronymus Weller, ed., *Dr. Martin Luthers Anweisung zum rechten Studium der Theologie*, trans. Georg Schick, 2d ed. (St. Louis: Druckerei des Luth. Concordia-Verlags, 1881). Georg Schick was the rector of Concordia College Fort Wayne, Indiana. He issued this little work as a guide for German-speaking American Lutheran students of theology. The purpose of this present translation is to serve that same goal, only now for an English-speaking Lutheran audience.

The Preface of Georg Schick

Hieronymus Weller von Molsdorf was born on September 5, 1499 in Freiberg, Saxony. In the time when Luther began the Reformation, he came to Wittenberg. There he dedicated himself at first to the study of law and for a time led a frivolous life in a bad crowd. But soon he was so frightened in his conscious by the powerful preaching of Luther that he left the way of sin and determined to serve God alone. He then also gave up the study of law and chose instead the study of theology. Luther took him into his home, where he stayed for eight years. It is said that Luther loved him as a son. After he became a doctor of theology, he was called by Duke Heinrich (of Albertine Saxony) as professor of theology at Freiberg and later was also appointed inspector of schools. In these offices, he worked with great blessing for the spiritual formation

¹ For other examples, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

² Marcel Nieden, *Die Erfinden des Theologen: Wittenberger Anweisung zum Theologiestudium im Zeitalter von Reformation und Konfessionalisierung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

³ Johann Gerhard, *Methodus Studii Theologici Publicis praelectionibus in Academia Jenensi Anno 1617 exposita* (Jena: Steinmann, 1620); Abraham Calov, *I. N. J. Isagoges Ad SS. Theologiam Libri Duo, De Natura Theologiae, Et Methodo Studii Theologici, Pie, Dextre, Ac Feliciter Tractandi, Cum examine Methodi Calixtinae* (Wittenberg: Hartmann, 1666).

(*Erbauung*) of the church of Christ until his blessed death on March 20, 1572 in the 73rd year of his life.

He was a learned, mild, and modest man. His great reputation brought him calls from Vienna, Copenhagen, Meißen, Leipzig, and Nuremberg, but he declined them all and wanted rather to bring his life to a peaceful conclusion in his minor position in Freiberg. He is said to have suffered much from spiritual afflictions (*Anfechtungen*) and was also not brought to preach, because he only preached once in Naumberg.

The judgments of the great theologians who lived at that time testify concerning the high respect which he had in the church. (David) Chytraeus calls him an admirable man, the single Lutheran who has become much esteemed on account of his zeal for piety and on account of his purity of doctrine and life. Conrad Porta says that he was the most faithful student and follower of Luther. Lukas Osiander confesses that in his writings the spirit of Christ and Luther lives in the loveliest manner and that his writings are full of true and certain comfort. Nikolaus Selnecker writes of him, "He was a holy man, not merely a scholar, but also a practical theologian, exercised through the cross of spiritual affliction and capable of comforting the souls of those afflicted in the heart and capable of quickening them through the life-giving Word of Christ."

Among Weller's writings there is a letter concerning the manner and way the study of theology is to be arranged. Therein he has written a guide that was given orally from Martin Luther. Since it can only be a blessing for the Germans studying in America if they know and follow the path to a capable theological formation which Luther has shown to his students, it is offered them here in this work in their native tongue so that it may be accessible to all. Would that God would grant according to His grace that indeed many make use of the presented advice in this book of the greatest theologians of the western church for themselves and become so properly capable of the service of the office which preaches reconciliation.

The notes under the text are by Johann Georg Joch, who has published this golden little book in 1727 at Wittenberg.⁴

The Translation of Dr. Martin Luther's Guide for the Proper Study of Theology

Concerning the arrangement of theological studies

Weller passes on Luther's guide for theological studies.

Grace and peace in Christ! It is right and conscientious of you that you asked me to give you a guide on how you should correctly arrange your theological studies. If one does not correctly arrange these studies immediately from the beginning, afterwards one will never be able to practice theology capably and with success for his entire life long as is evident in many theologians of our time. Since I love you, because of your gifts and good attributes, I want to impart to you the guide that I have obtained for the study of theology and preaching from my faithful teacher, the honorable blessed Dr. Luther.

⁴ Johann Georg Joch, ed., *Martini Lutheri Methodus studii theologici* (Wittenberg, 1727). This translator was unable to obtain a copy of this text for review. Note also that Joch's annotations have not been included in this translation.

The Holy Scripture must be read with reverence and with devout prayer.

First, I admonish you again and again that you read the Holy Scriptures entirely differently than secular books; that you read them, namely, with reverence and with deep devotion, not as the words of men or angels, but as the words of the divine majesty, from which a single word should have more power with us than all the writings of wise and learned man together. This reading is accompanied with frequent prayers.

Which times one should use for the reading of the Scriptures.

In the morning when you wake up, set fire to your heart through the reading of the Psalms and the Gospels in prayer. Afterwards spend time in the morning with the reading of the Prophets and the Letters of Paul. Especially acquaint yourself thoroughly with the Letter to the Romans. Whatever remaining time that you have, use for the reading of the writings of Martin Luther and Melanchthon. Plan the afternoon for reading the books of the Old Testament, but above all strive through reading to impress Bible history upon yourself. In addition, include also knowledge of antiquity, i.e., church history. The knowledge of history is necessary for a theologian. One must not so read theological writings that one neglects the study of the sciences and the arts. The sciences and the liberal arts serve the theologian as an aid and an adornment.

The meditation must be directed by the inexhaustible depths of the divine Word.

If you come across an obscure passage in Scripture, do not trouble yourself so much with the examination of the sense of this passage. Rather pass over it until you come to an experienced theologian, whom you can ask for advice concerning it. Furthermore, continue with the reading of Holy Scripture as if you now began to read it for the first time and consider carefully the meaning of each single word and leave it to devout meditation. What will happen first is that you continually draw new instruction or comfort from it. Nothing is more injurious to a theologian than the folly that he understands well and has probed this or that passage of Scripture. The more the Holy Scriptures are read, the sweeter they become, and the richer the comfort they offer to the reader. They are as a well-seasoned plant, which strives to become so much the more fragrant, the more one rubs it. With a word, the Holy Scripture is the inexhaustible source of manifold doctrines and comforts that more and more excites the thirst, the more one drinks out of it, as all afflicted hearts testify. But men, who are sure and drunk on their desires, think they have drawn out of it all the heavenly truths, when they have hardly tasted the Holy Scripture with their lips.

One obtains such an experience in the Holy Scripture through affliction (Anfechtung).

Whoever, as I have said, reads the Holy Scripture in this manner, does not trouble himself on account of the cross and affliction. Satan cannot harm the serious and desirous reading and hearing of God's Word. Therefore, it happens that God-fearing theologians must pass through many and manifold struggles on account of the study and love of the Word of God as I remind myself that I and many others have undergone. Since I began to hear at first the sermons and lectures of Dr. Luther, I felt immediately the poisonous bite of the devil, who sought to fill me with a bitter hatred towards Luther and his teaching, so that I thought several times of leaving his house, while previously I treasured it with complete happiness when I could enjoy the association of this great man. While temptations of all kinds will come upon the

God-fearing theologian, for this reason, he draws the most powerful medicine and the richest comfort against temptations from Holy Scripture. The comfort is far greater than the sadness. The yoke of Christ is gentle for him.

What in particular is observed in meditation.

In addition, I also want to admonish you that you give attention by a thorough reading of a chapter of Holy Scripture, what are the most important passages in this chapter, and then take careful note of the sense and meaning of the words. This care makes a good theologian. "This made me a theologian," Martin Luther once said to me. I do not disapprove of collecting and learning from memory passages of the Scripture, but praise it and admonish all studying theology that they so dedicate themselves as much as possible to the many chief passages of Scripture, so that they are equipped if they want to comfort themselves or others.

Concerning the reading of the church fathers.

Since a student of theology must also read the church fathers, I want to add my judgment and my advice concerning them. Many are convinced that no one can become a solid learned theologian than he who has carefully read the writings of the church fathers—the writings of Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and others. For this reason, they admonish the beginning theologian to often read the works of the same and to read them again, and would not permit that one begins with Luther (*in Disputationen Luther anführt*). They believe that the authority of the church fathers is greater than Luther's authority. Thus, all are accustomed to pass an opinion on what Luther did not completely recognize. I want to show what advice Dr. Luther has given me in this regard. When I turned my attention to theology the man of God admonished me to read several major writings of Augustine, namely his *Confessions*, in addition his books about *Christian Doctrine*, *City of God*, and the like. He also advised me several times to read the writings of Bernard on account of their excellent thoughts, which are abundantly present therein. In addition, he wanted me to read Ambrose for the sake of acquiring knowledge of antiquity. He warned me before the study of Origen and similar authors, because they have turned all the passages of Scripture into allegory. For this reason, it was his opinion that the reading of Origen and those similar to him would corrupt the study of theology. Regarding the style and interpretation of Jerome, he has never approved it. His style is bombastic and he took greater pains for the declamation of Scripture than the interpretation of Scripture. In addition, the writings of Basil the Great he did not praise very much, because he said (his words in order to help me), "They stink so very much like monkery." One should read Peter Lombard for his views, because this same one has collected the opinions of the fathers concerning the chief points of doctrine in his book. Still he preferred that young theologians should read him with caution. I remember that he often said, "None of the fathers has put forth the article of justification except Augustine alone and he put it forth moderately."

The reading of the writings of Luther is advised.

After the Holy Scriptures, read and read again the spiritually rich works of Dr. Luther with care and zeal. No one can be a more capable theologian, who is able to correctly examine the conscience and to comfort, than one who has read the writings of Luther for a long time, often, and has sat day and night in them. I know that there are people who prefer Melancthon's writings more than Luther's writings. They say Melancthon has systematized

all parts of Christian doctrine. This Luther has not done. For this reason, they believe that the writings of Melanchthon are of greater use to the church than Luther's writings. My opinion is this that the writings of Melanchthon are to be diligently read by those studying theology on account of their method, with which he was a wonderful master and on account of his style, which is classical, pure, endearing, fresh, and clear. But the works of Martin Luther should be diligently studied, according to my opinion, because of their rich explanation of Holy Scripture and excellent thoughts. He has interpreted the writings of the apostles and prophets with such great mastery and clarity as no other commentator could ever have done or will do. Only Luther understood the skill of reading and writing difficult things so clearly, plainly, and simply, that even children can understand his writings. He shares this praise with no other exegete. All the chief articles of the Christian faith he has dealt with comprehensively and clearly in his writings, sermons, and lectures. He alone has revealed the bitterest enemy of the church, the Antichrist, and has freed the conscious from snares of human opinion, strengthened the pious and the afflicted in every kind of temptation and deception, and called many back out from hell through his comfort, as it says in Psalm 30:4, 86:13. There is no temptation or deception for which he had not shown the medicine in Holy Scripture. He has taught men of all ages and levels as one who is said to serve God in his call. The worldly authority has adorned him with great honor. He has refuted not only the Papists, but also the Antinomians, the Enthusiasts, Sacramentarians, and the Anabaptists. In addition, he has battled with almost all the devils as his struggles and afflictions testify. I remember that he once said, "There is no temptation with which I have not been afflicted." These sufferings were lessons for him. They drove him with great care and attention to search the Scripture as the great crowds of theologians. Do not permit yourself through perverted opinions of sure, conceited, and imprudent "wisdom" to make errors, which say that Luther has thrown down his writings, not worked them out, and there are many hyperboles and paradoxes (i.e. exaggerations and strangeness) in them. I do not know what these discriminating critics call hyperboles and paradoxes in Luther's writings; except perhaps sweet words of comfort through which he was accustomed to console the hearts wounded by the fiery arrows of the devil. The following is the way, "If you also have encountered so many sins and defects than ten worlds could commit, you should not doubt, but regard it as certain that they are forgiven you by God, if you earnestly repent and believe on Christ; because the merits of Christ conquer all the sins of the world. You should not see your sin in you but in Christ." Or also, "Christ is the greatest sinner and at the same time the righteousness and the eternal life." Likewise another time, "If you want be a fabricated sinner and have Christ for a fabricated savior." If one may call these words of Luther hyperboles and paradoxes, one may also call these passages of Paul such, "Where sin has become powerful, the grace of God has become still more powerful." Or "The law perpetuates only wrath." But confident people, unversed in spiritual battle, do not know what it costs to prop up with comfort a mind contested and a heart bewildered by spiritual darts. We see from a letter of Dr. Luther how he had once comforted the honorable man, Dr. Georg Spalatin, in a temptation, how much he strived to strengthen him. He had gathered together all the reasons for comfort and could still hardly lighten the hurt of this excellent man through them. If the Lord would once in this way "turn to hell" that cheeky critic, in order to serve the word of the Psalm to me (Psalm 9:18), then they will first realize and confess how necessary the "hyperbolic" comforts of Luther are.

Advice concerning the correct manner of preaching. First: concerning the preparation of the sermon.

You have my advice on the subject of the way and manner, how theological study ought to be arranged and I do not doubt that it will be well recognized by you and those like you. But you will recognize it better, once you have begun to preach. Since you once desired to assume the teaching office in the church, I still will set forth some of the virtues of a preacher. There are four main virtues of a preacher. The first virtue of a preacher is that he bring forth a fleshed out, carefully written out sermon, which "arose from the burning of the midnight oil" (welche "nach der Lampe riecht") as one is accustomed to say, and to guard oneself with all diligence that he not become accustomed to extemporized preaching, but that after careful thinking and full preparation, step into the pulpit. He must compose all of his sermons beforehand at home. Preparation produces all kinds of benefits. It brings clarity and order in thought, curbs frivolous invention, corrects and limits the ostentation of the sermon, and works that the preacher speaks considerately, prudently, and carefully, out of fear that he might utter a word in an incautious way, through which the glory of God is injured, the pious heart is offended, or the godless be strengthened in their certainty and insolence. Therefore, it is imperative that all preachers, out of superior piety and learnedness, write down their sermons in the most exact way.

Second: concerning the imploring of the help of the Holy Spirit for the preaching.

The next virtue of the preacher, and in fact the most important, is that he with the greatest fear and trembling, enter the pulpit, i.e., that he call on God that he might give him the Holy Spirit to rule his heart, mouth, and tongue and gives him such a mind, which seeks only of the honor of God and the spiritual formation (*Erbauung*) of the congregation (*Gemeinde*). If when Pericles climbed the speaking-platform he always implored God that no word may be uttered by him through which someone could be injured. How much more proper it is for a teacher of the church, when he climbs the pulpit, on the place where he will not merely have men but even angels and God as hearers, to call on the Holy Spirit, that he rule his mouth and tongue, so that no word be uttered by him, through which the honor of God could be injured or pious hearts be brought to err.

Third: concerning the keeping of vulgarity, oddity, and showing-off out of the sermon.

Third, he should take great efforts that he does not say such a thing by which the masses' ears are itched, which sounds unusual and compels applause, but that he deliver such things which are God-pleasing, useful, and necessary, and thereafter strive with all spiritual powers that he comfort and strengthen the frightened conscience, but frighten with divine threats the stone and iron hearts and humble the unrepentant.

Fourth: concerning the keeping of vanity, witty chaffing, and slander out of the sermon.

Fourth, he should guard against, that it not appear, as if he with spirited and delicate sarcasm or taunts, which Paul calls *eutrapelia* (jokes) (Ephesians 5:4), want to tickle the ears of his hearers, that he also not use heavy slanders or bitter words. If the reproof must be sharp, he should still be without slander and bitterness and the whole of that sort, that one see that it has come out of a friendly and blessed heart. Some preachers are namely not merely all too impetuous, but also bitter, poisonous, and slanderous, when they reprove the people for their faults. Therefore, he should always add moderation to his censure, "Faithful brothers in Christ,

dear friends, God knows that I do not rebuke you somewhat sharply and chastise your vice out of hate or disfavor, but out of genuine zeal and duty of my office." Although Luther was of a heavy and fiery disposition and has chastised vice most sharply in his sermons, he always still refrained from slander and words that are too corrupt.

Fifth: concerning the prevention of just boredom during sermons that are all too long.

Fifth, he should always pay attention that he not preach longwinded sermons and overburden the hearers through the treatment of many points, so that they be filled with boredom of the Word. I remember that Dr. Luther had said to a theologian, who was accustomed to preaching two hours long, "You arouse boredom of the Word." In addition, Melanchthon had once made this remark, which was already spoken by a speaker at the table, "A speaker, both a secular and ecclesiastical one, must speak in a very captivating and lovely manner, in order to avoid the boredom of his hearers, if he speaks longer than a half an hour. None of the senses, he said, will tire faster than hearing." This is excellently spoken about by both Luther and Melanchthon. Just as those are counted as the most skilled musicians, who stop when the song is the most beautiful, in order to make a stronger desire for listening in their hearers, so too those are recognized as the best speakers, who know what is sufficient, i.e., who understand how to begin and stop. No one can do this better than he who observes method in speaking. One cannot say again how necessary method is for teaching. It causes the hearers always to take home something out of the sermon. Although it is of great praise for a preacher to set the subject of his speech in a proper clear light, and to make an impression on the hearts of his hearers, he also cannot still bring this about, if he does not properly apply himself to method as also is evident in the writings of Luther and the greatest speakers. There are still more directions that could be given concerning the virtues of a preacher, which you can hear from others in due course. Therefore, this short list pleases me. He lives well in the Lord who wants to give you his tongue and wisdom both for preaching and confessing Christ. Live well in the Lord.

Freiberg (Albertine Saxony), on September 13, 1561.
Hieronymus Weller, Doctor