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The Pastor and Secular Literature

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The Pastor and Secular Literature.

"Give attendance to reading," St. Paul admonished the young clergyman Timothy. And what Timothy was told is to be impressed upon every clergyman: *give attendance to reading*. When, after the death of Moses, Joshua assumed leadership over Israel, God told him: "This Book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night." To one who would lead and teach others God addresses these challenging words: "Thou, therefore, which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?" Rom. 2, 21.

Many normal schools have adopted as a motto that passage which I just quoted from Romans: "Thou that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself?" And the clergy, who are told by their Master to *teach men*, may also adopt this motto.

It is but natural that one who is impressed with this fact, that he ought to give attendance to reading, should ask, What shall I read, and what shall I study? And here again God's Word directs him. To Ezekiel it was said: "Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll and go speak unto the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and He caused me to eat that roll. And He said unto me, Son of man, cause thy belly to eat and fill thy bowels with this roll that I give thee. Then did I eat it; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness" (chap. 3, 1—3). That roll which Ezekiel was to eat was God's Word. Of this Word Jeremiah tells us: "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart, for I am called by Thy name, O Lord God of hosts" (chap. 15, 16).

The very first truth, therefore, which we wish to stress when speaking of secular literature and the pastor is this, that no clergyman dare allow any secular literature whatever to interfere with his Bible-study. And one important proper use of secular literature is to have it drive us back into the Holy Book. Let us never forget, the preacher's work is concerned with the teaching of the Bible. God wants every one to do his utmost in that work in which he is engaged. " whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might," Eccl. 9, 10. And the preacher cannot do his best unless he continues to study the Bible. The clergyman, moreover, requires a firm faith in order to support him amid the temptations, assaults, and doubts whereby Satan, the world, and his own flesh trouble him. The pastor above all others therefore requires the light, the support, the direction, the comfort, correction, and warning which God's Word provides. And there are so many more reasons which should move a pastor to study the Bible diligently and daily that we could fill the entire space allotted to us by these alone.

However, the pastor should also read those authors who have called attention to the truths of the Bible and to their exact meaning and proper application to present conditions. In reading and studying the Scripture, it is easy to overlook some important matter. God has therefore given us men who point out to us what we are so prone to slight when we read His precious Word. Among these writers on Holy Writ there is none that surpasses Martin Luther. Sad to say, there are still untold numbers of clergymen who do not even understand the a-b-c of the Christian religion as presented in Dr. Martin Luther's Enchiridion. There are thousands of so-called Christian clergymen who still condemn as sins things that are no sins and permit thoughts, emotions, and actions which are strictly forbidden in God's Word.

The reading of Luther's works, especially of his catechetical writings, should prove of utmost value to all clergymen. But the writings of men less able than Luther are also worthy of attention. From the days of Paul to the days of Luther there is no greater teacher of the Church than St. Augustine. But it is chiefly since Luther's day that God gave to His Church no small number of very able writers. Luther blazed the trail, and then what mighty spirits arose to write church history, exegesis, homiletics, religious poetry, hermeneutics, and dogmatics! To these the word of the Lord applies: "To one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit," 1 Cor. 12, 8. And also that other: "Having, then, gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness," Rom. 12, 6—8. I shall not attempt to enumerate the religious authors that should be read. Which of them a pastor is to read most diligently will depend upon the nature of his work, the place, the time, and the people whom he serves. The books on theological encyclopedia and propaedeutics mention the chief writers on the different subjects, and the reviews in our religious press call attention to these modern or contemporary publications which may be of value to a clergyman.¹⁾

1) In his essay *Die evangelisch-lutherische Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden* Dr. Walther submits as his twentieth thesis: "Die ev-luth. Kirche haelt die Gabe der Schriftauslegung hoch, wie sie einzelnen von Gott gegeben ist." In support of this thesis he quotes 1 Cor. 12, 4. 7. 8. 10. 30; 14, 32 and 1 Thess. 5, 20. And then he writes: "Da hiernach die Gabe der Weissagung oder Schriftauslegung zum gemeinen Nutzen der ganzen Kirche gegeben wird, dieselbe aber nicht alle Christen oder Lehrer haben; und da hiernach ferner die Geister der Propheten, das ist, die mit der Gabe der Auslegung Begnadigten, also von Gott gelehrt sind, dass sie nicht allein gehoert sein wollen, sondern andern Propheten oder Auslegern

In concluding this part of my article, I wish to repeat my warning that we dare allow no secular literature to interfere with our study of sound theological productions.

However, it were a serious mistake if a clergyman came to the conclusion that he need pay no attention at all to secular literature. It is positively necessary that a clergyman also give attention to what scientists, poets, historians, politicians, and journalists are saying. The men of God of old gave close attention to the secular learning of their day. Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, Acts 7, 22. He had not neglected those writers though they were pagans. St. Paul was acquainted with the Greek poets. He quotes from them. He reminds the men of Athens of the inscriptions upon their temples. St. Augustine was perfectly at home in the classical literature of Rome and had read much of that of the Greeks, at least in Latin translations. Luther's writings give evidence that he had studied classical literature and could quote from memory many of the sayings of the heathen poets. He was a great admirer of much which the pagans had written. So highly did he value that heathen book *Aesop's Fables* that he translated quite a number of these fables, and in his introduction to them he writes: "Dies Buch von den Fabeln oder Maerlein ist ein hochberuehmt Buch gewesen bei den Aller-gelehrtesten auf Erden, sonderlich unter den Heiden. Wiewohl auch noch jetzund, die Wahrheit zu sagen, von aeusserlichem Leben in der Welt zu reden, wuesste ich ausser der Heiligen Schrift nicht viel Buecher, die diesem ueberlegen sein sollten, so man Nutz, Kunst und Weisheit und nicht hochbedaechtig Geschrei wollt ansehen; denn man darin unter schlechten Worten und einfaeltigen Fabeln die allerfeinste Lehre, Warnung und Unterricht findet (wer sie zu brauchen weiss), wie man sich im Haushalten, in und gegen der Obrigkeit und Untertanen schicken soll, auf dass man klueglich und friedlich unter den boesen Leuten in der falschen, argen Welt leben moege." (St. Louis ed., XIV, 792 sqq.)

untertan sind und gern weichen; und da es hiernach endlich des Heiligen Geistes ausdrueckliches Gebot ist, die Weissagung oder Gabe der Auslegung nicht zu verachten: so gehoert auch dies zu den Kennzeichen einer rechten Kirche, dass sie die einzelnen von Gott sonderlich verliehene Gabe der Schriftauslegung hochhalte." After this he quotes the testimonies of Melancthon, Gerhard, and J. J. Rambach. Rambach's statement is very explicit and helpful: "Dass die Arbeiten und Schriftauslegungen anderer, obgleich sie nicht schlechterdings notwendig sind, wenn man die Schrift auslegen lernen will, nicht zu verachten seien, zeigt nicht nur die Schrift an, sondern lehrt auch die Natur der Sache. So wird 1 Kor. 12, 10. 11 gesagt, dass Gott einigen die Kenntnis von mancherlei Sprachen, andern die Faehigkeit, die Sprachen auszulegen, gegeben habe, daher einer der Gaben des andern gebrauchen soll. Aehnlicherweise wird uns 1 Thess. 5, 20 geboten, die Weissagung oder die Gabe, die Heiligen Schriften auszulegen, welche andern verliehen ist, nicht zu verachten, sondern hochzuhalten und zu unserm Nutzen zu verwenden. Denn es waere in der Tat ein Zeichen gressen Hochmuts von andern gehoert und gelesen sein wollen und doch nicht andere hoeren und lesen wollen."

Luther thought highly of Quintilian and Cicero. Of the first of these he writes to Spalatin: "*Quintilianus vero unus sit, qui optimos reddat adolescentes, imo viros. Hunc rogo ante omnia ne derelinquas, sive Phachus sive Hessus profiteatur, modo sit inter professiones una. Ego prorsus Quintilianum fere omnibus autoribus praefero, qui simul et instituit, simul quoque eloquentiam monstrat, i. e., verbo et re docet quam felicissime*" (De Wette, *Briefe*, Vol. I, p. 385).

Luther was an admirer of Cato. The material for his hymns he took from the Word of God, but the art of German poetry he had learned from secular composers. In fact, *Luther regretted that he had not given more attention to the secular poets and historians.* He complains bitterly that he had wasted his precious time studying the scholastic theologians, who neither understood nor taught theology, but belonged to those who always learned and never came to a knowledge of the truth, 2 Tim. 3, 7, "desiring to be teachers of the Law, understanding neither what they say nor whereof they affirm," 1 Tim. 1, 7.

Of Luther's acquaintance with the classics Dr. O. G. Schmidt writes in his monograph, p. 12, as follows: "Unter den roemischen Prosaikern, mit denen sich Luther schon in Erfurt beschaefigt hat, wird von Melanchthon zuerst Cicero genannt, eine Angabe, die in seinen Schriften volle Bestaetigung findet. Kein alter Schriftsteller wird hier haeufiger erwaeht, weniger zwar in ausdruecklichen Zitaten, als vielmehr in allgemeinen Reflexionen und Urteilen ueber seinen Gedankengehalt und Wert. Waehrend ein neuerer Historiker den letzteren tief herabdrueckt, wird dagegen von Luther Cicero grossenteils mit Auszeichnung behandelt. In ihm sei ein hoher Verstand gewesen, weil er aus und nach der Vernunft geschlossen habe, es sei sicherer, sich auf den Wahn und Meinung begeben, der da haelt, dass ein ewig Leben nach diesem sei, denn dass alles zeitlich und vergaenglich sei, Leib und Seel'. Aristoteles sei ihm zwar an Scharfsinn und Geist ueberlegen. Dennoch uebertreffe Cicero Aristotelem weit in Philosophia und mit Lehren. *Officia Ciceronis* seien viel besser denn *Ethica Aristotelis*. Die feinsten und besten *quaestiones* in der Philosophia habe Cicero gehandelt: ob ein Gott sei, was Gott sei, ob er sich auch menschlicher Haendel annehme oder nicht. Aristoteles sei nur ein guter und listiger Dialecticus gewesen, der den *methodum* und richtigen, ordentlichen Weg im Lehren gehalten hat; aber die Sachen und den rechten Kern hat er nicht gelehrt wie Cicero. Wer die rechtschaffene Philosophia lernen will, der lese Ciceronem. Die tiefe Weisheit und rastlose Taetigkeit des Roemers in der Staatsverwaltung wird von Luther hoch gepriesen. Er wundert sich, dass ein Mensch in so viel grossen Geschaeften und Haendeln so viel hat lesen und schreiben koennen. Waehrend Aristoteles, der muessige Esel, Geld und Gut und gute, faule Tage genug hatte, hat jener in grossen Sorgen, im Regiment gesteckt und grosse Buerde,

Muebe und Arbeit auf ihm gehabt. Nur wer selbst annaeherd Aehnliches geleistet hat, vermag dies zu wuerdigen, ohne jemals auslernen zu koennen. Die Episteln Ciceronis versteht niemand recht, er sei denn zwanzig Jahr in einem fuertrefflichen Regiment gewesen. Wenn Menschenweisheit ausreichend waere, wuerde er den roemischen Staat gerettet haben. Voll Bewunderung spricht Luther von Ciceros feiner Dialektik und blendender Beredsamkeit. Er erinnert an Julius Caesar, welcher sagte: 'Sooft ich des Bruti Schriften lese, so lasse ich mich bedenken, ich sei beredt; wenn ich aber *Ciceronis orationes* lese, so bin ich unberedt und lalle wie ein Kind.' Mit grosser Kunst weiss Cicero die Schwaechen der Sache, die er verteidigt, zu verhuellen, dagegen ihre Lichtseiten hervorzuheben."²⁾

Let us keep in mind that at Luther's time a comparatively small part of the best secular literature had been written; and what had been written and printed could only be read by a few, and by them with considerable difficulty. To-day, however, the matter is far otherwise. There is such a mass of secular literature tossed from the presses that no one can think of reading even as much as one-fourth of it all. The preacher must make a selection. In doing that, he must choose certain important *dailies and magazines*. His people read the dailies and some of the chief periodicals. Their thoughts are found to be colored by the contents of these publications; and if the pastor is not to fight as one that beateth the air, he must know what the people of his time and country are reading. This current periodical literature constitutes a confession, as it were, of the world in the midst of which we are living. With this confession we may confront it. We have a wonderful vantage-point when we can say to a man, These are your own words. This is what you have said; this is what you have written. And there is an immense advantage if we may tell our people: The men and women of this world tell us this of themselves.

A man of judgment and discernment will not require much time to find the articles and the items which offer him the proper material for his animadversions, criticism, comment, proof, and refutation. If the means of a pastor will not permit him to subscribe for important journals, he may join several brethren in subscriptions and then have the periodical circulate. There are, moreover, public libraries which offer an abundance of reading-material.

We hardly think that it is necessary to warn those who are in somewhat backward communities against introducing discussions to

2) *Luther's Bekanntschaft mit den alten Classikern*. Ein Beitrag zur Lutherforschung von Oswald Gottlob Schmidt, weiland Doktor der Theologie, Pfarrer und Superintendent in Werdau. Published by Verlag von Veit & Co., Leipzig. 1883. — If the reader wishes to have further proof on Luther's acquaintance with classical literature, let him read Dr. Schmidt's essay *in toto*.

which their people are entire strangers. At the same time, however, we dare not forget that there are country districts, back in the mountains, the inhabitants of which through club subscription become acquainted with the most modern of magazines.

As to other literature, we would give a prominent place to good histories. History, when it is truthfully and intelligently reported, always supports the claims of God's Word. God's Word tells us, for instance, that the love of money is the root of all evil. Now read the histories of wars and let them tell you what caused these terrible wars. Again and again our *secular* writers tell us that wars will never cease *till the profit in dollars and cents is taken out of war.*

History also offers impressive illustrations for all manner of moral truths. The Funk and Wagnalls Company has published a volume, *Historical Lights*, which contains six thousand incidents of history illustrative of important truths and natural processes. In most cases a theologian has studied and read a number of histories while at school, but he may still profit by rereading those which he has already read and by adding to their number. Carlyle says, "Histories teach by example." There are moreover, especially in English, historians who have excelled in the use of exact diction, felicitous phrasing, easy fluency, interesting varieties of style, and warmth of expression. We will mention but a few: Macaulay, Froude, Hume, Greene, Prescott, Motley, Bancroft, Gibbon, Carlyle. And if one has acquired sufficient ease in understanding the classics of Greece and Rome, he may add Thucydides, Herodotus, Tacitus, Livy, Sallust. When nothing more is wanted than the bare facts in a certain case, the encyclopedia will direct us to these or to the books which supply the information. But for general reading the preacher should select the best writers only.³⁾

The pastor should also be acquainted with the best poetry of the language in which he speaks. Of course, he should be at home in the hymnology of his Church, but there are many other poems of value. We are not telling him when and how he may quote this poetry. But even though he never quote all of it, he ought to know about the best. Longfellow's *Psalm of Life*, Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (at least in parts), Gray's *Elegy*, Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, Rudyard Kipling's *If*, Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, Cowper's *The Task*, George Crabbe's *The Village and Tales in Verse*. Then there are the poems of Burns, Addison, Scott, Browning, and those of our own Americans, too many to mention. A number of Edgar Guest's poems and some poems of anonymous authors are distinctly worth while. The man of discerning vision may

3) Any one who wishes to consult the estimate which a learned historian has given us of nearly all worth-while historical works up to the end of the last century will do well to consult *Manual of Historical Literature*, by Charles Kendall Adams, LL. D., published by Harper & Bros.

find many a stanza that will repay committing to memory or at least careful attention.

Instead of leaving to chance what you may hit upon, it is a good plan to browse through a history of literature. Public libraries have any number of them. In all this reading it is well to remember Luther's advice "*Non multa, sed multum*" and Bacon's counsel "Read not to contradict nor to accept, but to masticate and digest."

And now the question arises, Should the preacher read novels? Even before we answer the question, we may assume that nearly every preacher has read a number of novels. But it is true that it certainly is out of place for a preacher to spend much of his valuable time in novel-reading. However, we would not frown upon a pastor's reading a number of the best novels and plays. The great historical novels are eminently worth while. From such reading a threefold profit may accrue. In the first place, the reader will receive vivid impressions of the historical events with which the novelist deals. He will be able to visualize much that he has stored in his memory. In the second place, some of the best of the writers of historical romance and also other novelists have given us many a splendid analysis of human motive, inner conflict, and mental vacillation. In the third place, every one who reads good authors will have his vocabulary, phrasing, speech, and idiom colored and influenced by what he is reading.⁴ And now the very fact that the romance, novel, or story attracts the reader, holds him, often spell-bound, causes him to absorb the denotation and connotation of words, the turning of a phrase, and the manner of statement without his becoming conscious of it.

Among the writers of drama, the highest and first place belongs to Shakespeare. Much of what he has written has abiding value and has never been surpassed by any secular writer. He is more frequently quoted than any other. Shakespeare has expressed many a natural truth in figure of speech and in turn of language so excellent as to defy all efforts at improvement. Nor need we fear that he is not understood by the rank and file. If he is quoted with good elocution, exact articulation, and the application is pointed, the plain man and woman will understand what is said. Note the following instances: Concerning the dangers of prosperity he has given us this: "It is the bright day that brings forth the adder and craves wary walking" (*Julius Caesar*, 2, 1). That is much more picturesque and impressive than the German "*Der Mensch kann alles vertragen, nur nicht eine Reihe von guten Tagen.*" Shakespeare's lines, moreover, are superior to those of Nepos concerning Conon, "*Accidit huic quod ceteris mor-*

4) Cicero makes one of the characters in his *De Oratore* say the following: *ut, cum in sole ambulem, etiam ego aliam ob causam ambulem, fieri natura tamen, ut colorer, sic, cum istos libros studiosius legerim, sentio illorum tactu orationem meam quasi colorari.* (II, 14, 80.)

talibus, ut inconsideratior in secunda quam in adversa esset fortuna." How wonderfully Shakespeare expresses the devil's tricks when he tells us, "And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, The instruments of darkness tell us truths, Win us with honest trifles, to betray's In deepest consequence" (*Macbeth*, I, 3)! And how exactly he delineates the deceitfulness of sin when he has Macbeth say: "If it were done when 'tis done!" to which he adds: "That but this blow might be the be-all and the end-all!" How pointedly he impresses upon us the truth that *materia medica* contains no specific for a wounded conscience: "Canst thou minister to a mind diseased?" (*Macbeth*, V, 3). But if I begin to quote Shakespeare, this whole article may become an anthology of that great man. Oliver Wendell Holmes has written many good things in his *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* and his *Professor at the Breakfast Table*. Just now there comes to mind his way of saying what Shakespeare said about the instruments of darkness; he tells us: "The rottenest bank has some genuine legal tender," which amounts to saying that it takes a few truths to put a swindle over.

For lighter reading the pastor may choose times when he finds himself weary from arduous labors, the time of a vacation, the time when there must be gradual "running down of the clock" after intense effort. But even at such times he ought not to read that from which he can gain no profit. There are too many good novels which help us to increase our acquaintance with the idiom of the language and which supply material for the profitable study of psychology. There are historical and problem novels which are distinctly informative and thought-provoking. There is Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Mrs. Mulock's *John Halifax Gentleman*, George Elliot's *Adam Bede*, *Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Charles Reade's *Cloister and the Hearth*—but there isn't sufficient space even for the titles of the very best. However, though a pastor has not read *Don Quixote*, by Cervantes, and *Gil Blas*, by Le Sage (translated by Smollet), he should at least know the general plan and purpose of those two celebrated writings. Every Lutheran minister should have read with care *Tale of the Tub* by Dean Swift and *Pilgrim's Progress* by Bunyan.

I have not spoken of the German classics; space does not permit. In fact, I am painfully conscious of the lacunae in this article, but limitations of space demanded brevity.

It is scarcely necessary to say that we are not to approve of all that we read. Luther was a great reader of heathen authors, but he certainly was no yes-man. He exercised fine discrimination when reading Cicero, Terence, or Livy. While it remains true, "All is yours" (1 Cor. 3, 22), the direction is also still in force, "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good," 1 Thess. 5, 21.

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