

Pastoral Care in the Letters and Writings of the Later Luther

Seminar leader: Ninna Jørgensen

Reporters: John T. Pless and William R. Russell

This seminar investigated Luther's pastoral response to those suffering from illness, grief, temptation, and spiritual distress (Anfechtungen). Texts for discussion included select sermons and letters from the thirties, »Eine einfältige Weise zu beten für einen guten Freund«, etc.

Ninna Jørgensen observed Luther's pastoral care through catechesis and preaching. Jørgensen, ala Gerhard Ebeling (1912-2001), notes how Luther used words-shaping them into »memorierbare Glaubenssätze«, which the hearer could grasp. In this way, Luther repeatedly used certain words from catechetical formulas which his audience would already be familiar with, such as the Creed. Luther's Easter sermon of 1532 and his funeral sermon for the Electoral Prince John (1468, 1525-1532) exemplify this. Luther's catechetical language is the language of pastoral care, giving both pastor and hearer access to a common vocabulary. Luther used vivid imagery to overcome fearful pictures of death and damnation. Luther's preaching demonstrates his pastoral skill and the content of his evangelical message.

Michael Plathow investigated the context for Luther's pastoral care. Luther's pastoral work, shaped by the theology of the cross, flows from his confession of the triune nature of God. Christ is the physician / pharmacist of the soul. He dispenses the healing medicine (the gospel) to wounded consciences. Note Luther's hymn, »Jesus Christus, unser Heiland« (the Sacrament is food for the sick). Luther's pastoral care trains consciences to grasp the gospel. Justification by faith is central to Luther's pastoral care.

Gordon Isaac addressed Luther's view of death. In Luther's funeral sermon for Prince John of

Saxony (1532), the »Little« death is physical death. »Spiritual« death is the real death. This happened for Prince John when he made his confession at Augsburg. God puts to death sin and sinner in justification. Luther attempted to establish a vocabulary rather than a methodology for handling death. That vocabulary: »justification by faith.«

William Russell asked why scholars tend to neglect prayer as an important aspect of Luther's program. Although Luther's attention to prayer is significant and consistent throughout his career, scholars have not fully explored this theme. Prayer expresses Luther's theology in a manner that has appeared to be too »pious« and too practical for modern scholarship to take seriously. Russell is currently working on a comprehensive study of Luther's understanding of prayer.

John Pless examined baptism as consolation in select letters and »Tischreden«. As God's efficacious work, Baptism was reliable in the face of satanic assault, doubt, and death. Luther treasured baptism. It brought comfort, based on the benefits of Jesus' death. Note Luther's sermon at the baptism Prince John of Anhalt's son Bernhard VII. (1540-1570) in 1540. Baptismal comfort is also in the 1541 hymn, »Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam«. Baptism was a means of consolation in times of Anfechtungen, physical suffering, and mourning. Baptism draws the believer into Christ's atoning death. Luther uses catechetical themes to comfort the Christian.

Our seminar observed in Luther's Seelsorge, his practical reformation theology. In Luther's pastoral care, he applies his central insight of justification by faith to everyday life.