

# Dogmatics And Piety

[An Introduction to Johann Gerhard's *Meditationes Sacrae*]

By John F. Brug

The great dogmatician Johann Gerhard, usually ranked third among the theologians of the Lutheran church after Luther and Chemnitz, could also make a claim for a ranking as one of the most excellent writers of pious devotions. He published his *Meditationes Sacrae* (*Sacred Meditations*) in Latin in 1606, at the age of 20, while he was still a student of theology at Jena.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these meditations, Gerhard penned two additional devotional books. *Exercitium Pietatis Quotidianum* appeared as early as 1612. The 1629 edition was translated into English by M. C. Harrison and published by Repristination Press in 1994 as *The Daily Exercise of Piety* (WLQ, Summer 1996, p 233) and republished by Concordia in 2003 as *Meditations on Divine Mercy* (WLQ, Spring 2004, p 159). *Schola Pietatis* (1623), does not seem to be currently available in English. Of similar devotional value is Gerhard's *Manual of Comfort*, reviewed in WLQ, Spring 1997, p 144.

The Latin version of Gerhard's *Meditationes Sacrae* reached England within months. At least four English editions of the *Sacred Meditations* appeared between 1611 and 1632. This publication of Gerhard's initial effort at devotional writing was followed by at least seven English editions of *The Daily Exercise of Piety* between 1627 and 1640. Helen White, a scholar of English devotional literature, called Gerhard the writer who was "most popular in England for works of pure devotion."<sup>2</sup> Among the Lutheran dogmaticians, Gerhard was not the only one whose material for laypeople quickly appeared in English translation. A meditation of Martin Chemnitz on the Lord's Prayer, published by Concordia in 1999, seemingly has survived only in Elizabethan English, but not in the original Latin or German.

The two devotions presented below are from a new translation of *Sacred Meditations* by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary student Wade Johnston, undertaken as a personal project following up on Latin translation which he began as part of the dogmatics class at the seminary. This is not the first translation of *Meditationes Sacrae*. The first was the aforementioned translation published by R. Winterton in the 1600s. The second, by C. W. Heisler, was originally published in 1896 and republished by Repristination Press. Heisler's translation retains the flavor of Jacobean English, which is not familiar to many modern readers. The translation excerpted below attempts to use more modern English but at the same time to stay quite close to the Latin text, leaving Gerhard's words to stand for themselves, with little explanation or interpretation. The footnotes to the translator's manuscript retain references to difficult Latin expressions and to variant readings in the Latin versions. Most of these notes have been removed from the excerpts which follow. The full manuscript, which is still a work in progress, can be obtained from the essay file of the WLS library web site under the translator's name and the title *Sacred Meditations*.<sup>3</sup> The manuscript consists of 51 meditations, the author's dedicatory preface, and the translator's preface. The translator's preface provides further information about the translation.

Gerhard's meditations are as personal and heartfelt as anything produced by the Pietists, but they reflect a much deeper piety because they are based on a truer understanding of the nature of sin and grace and are closely tied to the power of all of the means of grace, including the sacraments. Referring to Gerhard's comprehensive knowledge and deep understanding of Scripture, which was based on careful study of the original text, the translator's preface states, "In a day and age where any appreciation for the study of language, especially classical languages, is fast disappearing, one can appreciate such devotion and faithfulness to the

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<sup>1</sup> Since Gerhard's date of birth is regularly given as 1582, he would have been 24 when the dedication of *Sacred Meditations* was written in 1606. There are several discrepancies in the published information about the dates and the editions of Gerhard's devotional writings. Perhaps the *Sacred Meditations* were written at age 20 and published at 24, or the age of twenty for the writing is simply a mistake in some of the sources.

<sup>2</sup> *English Devotional Literature (Prose) 1600-1640*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1931, p 94. See also an article in *LOGIA*, Reformation 2003, concerning possible influences of Gerhard on English religious poetry.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Authors/g/GerhardSMeditations/GerhardSMeditations.htm>

original. Gerhard serves as a fine example for all who aspire in our own day to the office of pastor or professor. It is precisely this zeal for the original languages of Scripture and those of our fathers that has preserved true Lutheranism to this day. May this translation, in some small way, make just one of those fathers in the faith more accessible to the modern reader who would not otherwise read this great theologian's work in the original Latin or in Jacobean English."

As a professor and writer of dogmatics, Gerhard practiced what he already knew as a pious student. In his dedication of *Sacred Meditations* he stated his aims as a theologian,

The true goal of the theologian is the regeneration of the inner, spiritual man, which, as the Truth testifies, occurs through water and the Spirit (John 3). Some in the Church attach to the blessed Cornerstone things they have collected from the stone of philosophy, yet, since these are not known by all, nor are they assented to by all, I do not wish to linger in them. The Creator suffices for me, since, by means of my study of theology, I am able to gather that, as is true in medicine, the best theology is practical doctrine, and, in like manner, I am able to perceive that those who contend that the end of theology is speculation (namely, a number of those among the scholastics) are in no way correct in so thinking. Although, indeed, not only practical application but also believing and hoping are proposed in this heavenly philosophy, that fact, nevertheless, does not make that which is said in theology to be less practical or unimportant, for a physician also is occupied with theory of some sorts, yet medicine is not for that reason a theoretical discipline, since the theory itself flows from practical concerns ....

And if theology is practical doctrine, then the goal of theology will certainly not be bare knowledge and subtle theory, but rather practical. "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them," the Savior said to the disciples (John 13:17). "The substance of our religion consists, not in words, but in deeds," says Justin (*Paraen. ad Graec. I.*). "To be a Christian is not only to say but also to do," Ignatius said (*Ad Magn. 4.*). "The height of the Christian religion is to imitate him, whom you worship," Augustine said (*De civ. Dei VIII., 17.*). "What is Christianity? The imitation of God, which has shown itself contrary to the nature of Man," said Basil (*Homil. X. hexaem.*). And if the goal and completion of Christianity is not bare knowledge, but the putting into action of it, how few real Christians may you find in this day! There are certainly many with knowledge but few with conscience. It is certainly most correct that orthodoxy is defended in books, disputations, public assemblies, and in every way, but let the life of the professing correspond to this orthodox teaching by the production of works. "If I have knowledge of every mystery, but have not love, I am nothing," said the apostle (1 Corinthians 13:2)...I attach a quote from a certain famous little book to this point. "All who want to know the words of Christ fully and intimately, must strive to conform their whole life to Him. What good does it do you to dispute with each other about the Trinity, if you lack humility, on account of which you displease the Trinity. If you know the whole Bible and all the dictates of every philosophy, what good do they do you without the love and favor of God? Everything, beyond loving and serving God alone, is vanity, the vanity of all vanities" (*Kempis. Imit. Christ. I. I.*). Why introduce knowledge without the fear of God? If I know everything which is in the world, and I am not in love, what will help me in the presence of God? ...May the theologian so treat this, that all may shrink from and hate sin. Do we dispute without end what distinguishes the Father from the Son, and both from the Holy Spirit, whether the thing or the relation, and who may be said to consist of three, of which one is not the other, while they are yet one essence? How much more appropriate is it that this matter should lead us to worship and adore that Trinity, whose majesty it is not right to scrutinize, with piety and holiness, and to represent as much as possible that ineffable concord, in which we will one day belong and into which we will be received, with our own concord! We dispute how it can happen that the fire, in which the souls of the impious will be tortured, since it is a material thing, can affect an incorporeal thing. How much more was this given for this purpose that it warn all men, lest what is in us be revealed by that fire which consumes us" (*Annot. Ad I Tim. I.*). I repeat yet again, however, that I do not attack the thing itself, but the abuse of the thing. It is right that they are devoted to works and studies for an accurate understanding of the articles of faith. It is right that orthodoxy be defended against heresies, but the height and perfection of the Christian religion is not discerned as consisting in that alone, but also on the basis of its possession of Christian living and love. Where there is no proper belief in God, there is wicked living. True faith is not present internally where works are not apparent visibly. Whoever does not walk in the light is not yet a son of light (Ephesians 5:9). Those who do not lead a life worthy of a Christian are not Christians.

In order, therefore, that I might add to the desire for piety in those further along in the way of the Lord in this age of our world destined for extinction, as others have also in kindness impressed the same upon me, I have in successive hours written this little book of sacred meditation....

Jena, the month of April, the year 1606.

(Signed) M. Johann Gerhard

Quedlinburg

This dedication expresses the spirit underlying the Lutheran dogmatics of the 17th century, a spirit which directed Gerhard as he produced his 23-volume dogmatics between 1610-1622, the same time-span in which he was producing his devotional classics. We hope these two devotions from the greatest practitioner of dogmatics in the Age of Orthodoxy will whet your appetite to take a closer look at the devotional classics produced by the Lutheran dogmaticians.