

## Christians Question. And They Answer.

Have you ever stopped to think how Martin Luther, when he saw the "pitiable, deplorable, and miserable state" of the church in his day, wrote a training manual composed of questions and their answers? Just in case something was missed, later churchmen added "Christian Questions With Their Answers." You are involved in Classical Lutheran Education, so you should be aware that the reason the catechism is structured this way is because it was a given that the best way to present basic truth for quick learning and apprehension was by utilizing the "Socratic Method." Not only that, it was assumed that the art of asking insightful questions was vital to the cultivation of practical wisdom.

Let us make a fresh start, as it were, and begin with a sketch of this vital aim of classical liberal arts learning, the cultivation of practical wisdom, then let us consider how practical wisdom relates to Christian Liberty, on the one hand, and both dialectic and rhetoric, on the other.

*Phronesis* is the Greek word for practical wisdom, or prudence. I've also seen it translated "intelligence." (Terence Irwin, in his introduction to his translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, has a wonderful, lengthy and trenchant footnote regarding his choice of "intelligence" for *phronesis*.) Aristotle there defines *phronesis* as "doing the right thing to the right person at the right time for the right reason." It has to do with right action with respect to the other, but also, it has to do with heart attitude. The relation of this view to Luther's wonderful exposition of the essence of the Christian faith, "The Freedom of the Christian," could not be more obvious. In our calling to be "little Christs one to another," we are to serve our neighbor, Luther asserts, expecting nothing in return. He then famously observes that we "live by Christ through faith and by our neighbor through love." This is profound. But I haven't the space here to elucidate that profundity, and besides, this little think piece commits us elsewhere. The reader will kindly note that, excellence in practical wisdom, which impinges directly on service to neighbor, requires also the cultivation of an art of deliberation.

All this virtuous action with regard to the neighbor is motivated by our having first been loved by God and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This begs the question, however: How does one determine what is the *right* action, and who is the *right* recipient of a given act, and how on earth are we to determine when is the *optimal time to act* prudently and lovingly toward the other? *In order to excel in loving one's neighbor, one must, therefore, first cultivate the ability to ask the right question of the right person at the right time!* This is a habit of inquiry that is a primary fruit of, you guessed it, classical liberal arts education! One may very well ask the right question of the right person, without having had a liberal arts education, but chances are, if he is like me, the question will form in his pea brain just after having hung up the phone!! Just after turning the corner as he drives away. This is called "delayed intelligence"! So, timing *is* critical!

Here are three keys to cultivating practical wisdom:

- Develop an Active Thought Life
- Learn Topical Logic
- Master Dialectical Inference

I am a professor of rhetoric, so I am obligated, at the outset, to underscore how all three of these keys relate to rhetorical reasoning in one way or another, and I teach all these in Rhetoric I and Rhetoric II right here at Wittenberg Academy. Let me elaborate briefly on the second and third, then conclude by

examining briefly how these 3 keys to cultivating the art of questioning make the Active Thought Life, well, "active."

If you attended CCLE XVII in Cheyenne, Wyoming, you probably remember President Hill talking about "commonplaces." Sir Francis Bacon refers to commonplaces as "promptuary" because, of them he observes that their primary function is to prompt lines of questioning, or inquiry, that lead to the crux of the matter. One can imagine the importance of this habit of mind to excellence in the practical arena, in legal and moral reasoning, where the issue at the heart of tough cases is "clouded" by murkiness of all sorts: prodigious particularity, shady motives, disagreements galore, and all manner of competing viewpoints that must be adjudicated if sound judgment is to be had! This is why Bacon teaches topical logic as an "aid to judgment," and asserts further that, "a faculty of wise interrogation is half a knowledge." This quip, which brings to mind our maxim, "well begun is half done," captures perfectly, in my mind, the value of topical logic to both the exercise of, and acquisition of, practical wisdom.

Interestingly, because it binds together these two keys, Aristotle teaches dialectic in his treatise entitled "Topics." *The Topica* is all about disputation or debate, and Aristotle teaches his pupils there how to push an argument to its conclusion, by asking questions and following implications, by drawing inferences until one arrives at the "seat of the argument" as Boethius calls it. The student was then to apply the Law of Contradiction which is "the most indisputable of all beliefs." This is, in essence, the Socratic Method. However, beyond disputation, Aristotle also points out that the method of dialectical reasoning is profitable also in terms of intellectual growth because it entails a "method of criticism [read questioning] wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries." When one's habit of mind is such that he or she thinks in terms of dialectical inferences one understands, deeply, how various fields of knowledge are related one to another. Unity of knowledge! THIS is one of the greatest blessings of liberal arts education. Why? Because postmodern knowledge is so fragmented. And confusing. The knowledge we believe, teach, and confess is coherent, consistent, and highly integrated. Not so with postmodern knowledge, which breeds confusion with its "questions, questions, questions."

Wait, what? Dr. Tallmon, I thought we were celebrating questions?! Questions for their own sake, arbitrary, boundless, abstract questions—questions that lead only to further questions, but never to answers—this is not the stuff of Socratic Method, of dialectic. The questions with which we have to do are purposeful and are guided by logical inference, by following connections within propositions that lead to the seat of the argument, thus exposing the principles upon which the argument rests. Then, as Aristotle would put it, we have but to identify, then embrace, that proposition which passes the muster of the Law of Contradiction. Once this becomes one's habit, one may extricate contradictions from one's thought life, which leads to clarity of thought (or "perspicuity") which allows one to be secure in one's thought life (which, incidentally, or ironically, allows one to be less threatened by those with whom one disagrees!) These sorts of questions cultivate mental discipline. This promptuary or "heuristic" use of topics is animated, at the end of the day, by an active thought life.

One can wish, all day long, for insightful questions to come springing from one's fertile imagination, but if one has not the material from which to formulate an intelligent question, I am afraid it will be a long wait . . . certainly longer than a day! Again, consider how ill-timed is the question that comes springing from one's lips . . . minutes, or even hours, after the relevant train of thought has left the station! And, in celebration of this excellent metaphor, I would like to add that an active thought life, to be truly fruitful, must also benefit from a well-developed "sanctified" imagination. (Sanctified in the sense that it is brought under the

discipline of God's Word, the Holy Spirit, and Godly wisdom. Unbridled imagination, like the heart, is full of all sorts of wickedness, frivolity, and silliness.)

But I have not yet touched on how, exactly, one cultivates an active thought life. This is common sense. Read great books, think great thoughts, engage great minds, and check these things against the yardstick of the wisdom of ages. Study grammar, study dialectic, study rhetoric. Internalize them. Become habituated to think in the ways suggested here in this essay. Apply those thought processes to the ideas that have engaged great thinkers since the beginning of recorded history. Participate in the "Great Conversation" (please read the essay by that name in Volume I of *The Great Books of the Western World*.) But, not only minds, an active thought life involves the heart as well. Truth, yes. But also, Beauty and Goodness. Allow your "loves" to be formed. Meditate on what you love. Think when it's *time* to think. Do when it's *time* to do. Be when it's *time* to be.

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things (*Philippians 4:8*).

Savor these things. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Now and then, we need to silence the questions. Be still and know that He is God. Only believe.