

Teaching a Mystical Theology—The German Theology [Theologia Deutsch] (14th Century, published in 1516 and 1518)

Abstract

The following passages were taken from *The German Theology* [*Theologia Deutsch*], an anonymous fourteenth-century tract written in vernacular German. The author may have been a priest of the Teutonic Order (Order of the German House of St. Mary in Jerusalem) living in Frankfurt am Main. His text calls for highly spiritualized, mystical piety of a kind that continued through Meister Eckhart and Johann Tauler to Martin Luther and beyond. Luther, who published this text in two annotated editions in 1516 and 1518, remarked that, after the Bible and *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, this book had taught him the most about God, Christ, man, and the world. This work of Catholic piety became a staple text for Anabaptists in the sixteenth century and Lutheran Pietists in later times. Its broad appeal derives from its teaching of a spiritualizing Christianity that is structured as a process but sees helplessness and passive obedience as the proper attitude toward God's bestowal of righteousness. John Calvin called the book "the Devil's poison," and Pope Paul V placed it on the Roman Index of Forbidden Books. More than 190 editions of *The German Theology* have been published in German, English, Dutch, Latin, Swedish, Danish, Russian, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese.

Source

Chapter 11

How the righteous person at this present time is put in hell and cannot be consoled there, and how he is taken out of hell and put in heaven and cannot be distressed there.

Christ's soul had to go to hell before it came to heaven, so the human soul must do the same. This, of course, comes about when a person knows and looks at himself and finds himself so wicked and unworthy of all the good and consolation that can befall him from God and created things, seeing it as nothing but an eternal damnation and perdition, and feeling himself unworthy even of that. Indeed he thinks himself unworthy of all the suffering that may befall him at this present time, and considers it right and proper that all created things are against him and cause him suffering and pain, none of which he is worthy of. Furthermore, he thinks it right that he should be damned eternally and even be a footstool for all the devils in hell, and is unworthy of all this. He is neither willing nor able to desire any consolation or salvation either from God or from created things, but is glad to be left without consolation or salvation. Nor does he bewail his condemnation and suffering, since it is right and proper and is not against God, but it is actually God's will, which he loves and is content with. He is only sorry for his fault and wickedness, for that is wrong and opposed to God, and for this he grieves and feels ill. This is true contrition for sin. Whoever comes into hell at this present time will come after this time into heaven and in this time will gain a foretaste of it that surpasses all pleasures and joy that ever arose or can arise in time from temporal things. As long as a person is in hell in this way, no one can console him, neither God nor created things, as it is written: "In hell there is no salvation." Someone said about this: "Perishing, dying, I live without consolation, condemned outwardly and inwardly. Let no one pray for my salvation."

Now God does not leave the person in this hell, but takes him to himself so that the person is aware of nothing but the eternal good and realizes that all is more than well with the eternal good and is his delight, peace and joy, calm and plenty. Because the person is concerned about and desires nothing else

but the eternal good and nothing for himself, then the peace, joy, delight and pleasure and everything of the eternal good all become that person's, and so the person is in heaven. This hell and this heaven are two good, sure ways for the person in this life, and he is happy who properly experiences them, for this hell passes away, but heaven remains.

The individual should also note, when he is in this hell, that nothing can console him and that he is unable to believe that he will ever be saved or consoled. But when he is in heaven, nothing can distress or upset him, nor does he believe that he can be distressed or upset, despite the fact that he can be consoled and saved after the experience of hell and distressed and upset after that of heaven.

Furthermore, this hell and this heaven come to a person in such a way that he does not know where they come from, and the person can do nothing of himself, by action or avoidance, to make it come. The person can neither give nor take any of this for himself, nor can he create or destroy it except as it is written: "The spirit blows where it will, and you hear its voice" (John 3:8), that is, in the present, "but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going." When the person is in one of these two states it is good for him, and he can be as safe in hell as in heaven. As long as the person is in this present time, he can very often slip from one to the other, indeed equally often by day or night, and all without doing anything himself. But when a person is in neither of these, he is preoccupied with created things and wobbles about and does not know where he really is. Yet he should never forget these two things in his heart.

Chapter 12

What real, true, inward peace is that Christ last of all bestowed on his disciples.

Many people say they do not have peace or rest, but have much in the way of unpleasantness, challenges, pressure and suffering. If anyone wants to look at this and truly assess it, well, the devil too would have peace if things went according to his will and pleasure. This is why we should note and understand the peace that Christ finally bestowed on his disciples when he said: "My peace I leave to you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives" (John 14:27), for the world deceives with its gifts.

What sort of peace does Christ mean? He means the inner peace that would break through and penetrate all challenges and unpleasantness, pressure, suffering, misery, scorn or anything else, making one happy and patient, as it was for his dear disciples, and not only for them, but for all chosen friends of God and true followers of Christ. And so anyone exercising love, diligence and seriousness in this matter should be able to understand, according to his creaturely capacity, the true, eternal peace that God is.

Chapter 13

How a person sometimes takes leave too early from images.

Tauler says: "There are some people at this present time who take leave too early from images", before they have fully extracted the truth of them, and because they set themselves free, they cannot ever arrive at the truth. For this reason, one ought all the time to observe diligently God's works and the demands, pressures and admonitions that he imparts to humankind.

Chapter 14

About three stages that lead a person to perfection.

Now one must know that no one can become enlightened unless he is first cleansed, purified and made free. Furthermore, no one can be united with God unless he is first enlightened. And for this there are three paths: first cleansing, secondly enlightenment, thirdly union.

Chapter 15

How all people have died in Adam and become alive again in Christ, and about true obedience and disobedience.

Everything that perished and died in Adam, arose again in Christ and became alive. Everything that arose in Adam and became alive, perished in Christ and died. What, however, was and is that? I say it is true obedience and disobedience.

But what is true obedience? I maintain that a person should stand and be so completely free of himself, that is, without self-centeredness and selfishness, that he would seek himself and what is his and consider it as little as though he did not exist. He should feel as little of himself and regard himself and what is his as little as though he did not exist, and pay as little regard to himself as to all created things. What is it then that he should be concerned about? It is the One alone that people call God. This is what is true obedience in the truth and therefore in blessed eternity. Then nothing will be sought or considered or loved but the One, so too nothing will be a matter of concern but the One.

Through this one can see what disobedience is. Disobedience occurs when a person has some regard for himself and imagines he is, knows and is capable of something and that he has looked for what is his in things and loves himself and so forth.

Humanity was created for true obedience and owes it to God. This obedience perished and died in Adam and arose and became alive in Christ, and disobedience arose in Adam and lived and died in Christ. In his humanity Christ was and existed entirely free from himself and so free from every created thing and was nothing but a house or dwelling place of God. Everything that pertains to God his humanity laid no claim to, even the fact that it was the same humanity and lived and was a dwelling place of the Godhead. It did not lay claim to that same Godhead whose dwelling place it was, nor anything that the same Godhead desired, performed or refrained from in it, nor anything that occurred or was suffered in that same humanity. But in the humanity there was neither claiming nor seeking nor desire, but only a seeking and desire such as may be sufficient to the Godhead, and it did not lay claim to that. About this sense no more can be written or spoken. It is ineffable, it was never spoken about comprehensively and never will be, since it can neither be spoken of nor written about by anyone except him who embodies and knows it.

Chapter 16

What the old person and the new person are.

Furthermore, it is important to note what is said about a person who is old and about a new person. The old is Adam: disobedience, selfhood, selfishness and the like – but

the new person is Christ and obedience. When people talk about dying, perishing and so on, they mean that the old person has to be annihilated, and when that happens in a true, divine light, then the new person is born again.

People also say that a person should die in himself, that is, the person's selfishness and selfhood must die. St Paul says about this: "Put aside the old person with his activities and put on a new person who is created and formed according to God" (Ephesians 4:22, 24). Whoever lives in his selfhood and according to the old person is really and actually a child of Adam. In so far as he lives fully and fundamentally in this way, he is also a child and brother of the devil. But whoever lives in obedience and in the new person is a brother of Christ and a child of God.

Whenever the old person dies and the new one is born, a second birth takes place. Christ said about this:

“Unless you are born a second time, you will not come into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). St Paul says too: “As all people die in Adam, so they will all become alive again in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:22). That is to say, all who follow Adam in disobedience are dead and will never become alive except in Christ. This is because as long as a person is Adam or a child of his, he is without God. Christ says: “Whoever is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30). Whoever is against God is dead before God. It therefore follows that all Adam’s children are dead before God. But whoever is with Christ in obedience is with God and alive.

It is also stated that sin is the creature’s turning away from the Creator. This again is one and the same, for whoever lives in disobedience is in sin, and the sin will never be atoned for or made good except by a return to obedience. As long as the person lives in disobedience, the sin will never be made good, whatever he does. Disobedience, in fact, is itself sin. If the person returns to true obedience, everything is made good, atoned for and forgiven, but not otherwise. Clearly, if the devil himself were able to attain true obedience, he would become an angel and all his sins and wickedness would be made good, atoned for and fully forgiven. And if an angel could attain disobedience, he would straight away become a devil, even if he did nothing further.

If a person could possibly be so completely and purely lacking in selfhood and everything and were in true obedience, as Christ’s humanity was, that person would be without sin and indeed be one with Christ; that would be so by grace as Christ was by nature. People say, however, that this cannot be so, and they also say no one is without sin. Whether or not this is so, it is still true that the nearer one is to obedience, the less the sin, and the further one is away, the greater the sin. In short, whether a person is good, better or best of all, wicked, more wicked or most wicked of all, sinful or blessed before God, all of that depends totally on this obedience and disobedience. This is why it is also written: “The more selfhood and selfishness, the more sin and wickedness; the less the former, the less the latter.” Furthermore, it is written: “The more my ego, that is selfhood and selfishness, decreases, the more God’s self, that is God himself, increases in me.”

If, then, all people were in true obedience, there would be no pain or suffering but a slight suffering of the senses, which in any case would not be a matter of regret. If, of course, this were so, all people would be one and no one would cause another person pain or suffering. Then no one would live or do anything opposed to God. Where would pain and suffering then come from? Unfortunately, however, all people and the whole world live in disobedience. If a person lived purely and entirely in obedience, as we believe Christ actually did, otherwise he would not have been Christ, the disobedience of everybody would be a miserable, bitter suffering to him, since everybody would be opposed to him. This is because a person living in this obedience would be one with God, and God would himself be that person.

Now all disobedience is opposed to God and nothing else. In truth neither any creature or creaturely work nor anything that one can name or think of is opposed to God or discomforting to God except solely disobedience and the disobedient person. In short, everything that exists delights and pleases God greatly except disobedience alone. The disobedient person displeases him so much and is so repugnant to him, and he laments so greatly about it, that where a person is refractory, conscious of it and full of opposition to him, he would gladly suffer a hundred deaths so that he could destroy disobedience in one person and could give birth to his obedience again. Look, although perhaps no person lives so fully and purely in this obedience as Christ did, it is still possible for a person to approach it so closely that he may be called divine and united with God. The closer a person approaches this and becomes divine and made into God, the more all disobedience, sin and injustice distress him and cause worse pain and are great, bitter suffering. Disobedience and sin are one. There is no sin apart from disobedience and what arises from disobedience.

Source of original German text: Wolfgang von Hinten, ed., *Der Frankfurter ("Theologia Deutsch")*. Critical Edition. Munich and Zurich: Artemis, 1982, pp. 85–93.

Source of English translation: *The Book of the Perfect Life: Theologia Deutsch - Theologia Germanica* (Sacred Literature Series), translated with an introduction and notes by David Blamires. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003, pp. 40–46.

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