

Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for today

by John W. Kleinig
St. Louis, Concordia

Dr. John Kleinig is dean of chapel and head of biblical studies at Australian Lutheran College, Adelaide. He has often been a guest lecturer at LCMS schools in this country as well.

Kleinig draws heavily on Martin Luther's threefold approach to spiritual growth: *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *tentatio*. Kleinig's main point of emphasis throughout is to urge us not to approach spiritual growth as a product of our effort and determination but rather to see it as a gift of God through his gospel.

Because our spiritual life depends on our receiving from God, Christ teaches us to become beggars....This makes it hard, yet at the same time easy, for us to live as His disciples. It is hard because we take such great pride in our own achievements and self-sufficiency. We do not like to ask God, or anyone, for anything. Far better to do without than to become dependent on others! Yet it is also easy because our spirituality does not depend on our performance but on our receiving from God. No one is more or less spiritually advantaged. To change the picture, we must all become as little children, helpless infants that are totally dependent on their mothers (Matthew 18:3; Mark 10:14-15; 1 Peter 2:2). (29)

Therefore in every one of the three areas of focus (*meditatio*, *oratio*, and *tentatio*) Kleinig seeks to help us see clearly the grace of God at work. Just as the chief "service" that takes place on Sunday morning is God serving us through his means of grace, so Kleinig urges us to see our *meditatio*, our time spent pondering the Word, not primarily as our devotion to God but as his devotion to us!

The teaching of Jesus on meditation does not concentrate on what we do but on what He does as we meditate on His Word; the emphasis is on what we receive from Him and His heavenly Father as we let Him and His Word occupy our hearts. By meditating on His Word we receive what He has to give us through it. (107)

In the same way, *oratio* (prayer) is also chiefly receiving. First of all we appropriate Jesus' perfect prayers as that which counts for us. We also learn from God's promises what it is we are to pray for. Finally, we rely on the intercession of both the Spirit and our Lord Jesus who speak up for us even when we are not sure what words to utter.

Even *tentatio* (struggle, testing), although the devil seeks to use it to drive us to pride or despair, must serve as a gracious gift to us as it drives us back to our Savior's Word and to prayer. All of which begins the cycle of gifts and grace all over again (much to Satan's dismay!).

But as worthwhile as this book is for any Lutheran called worker or lay person to read, there are some cautions that this reviewer believes need to be sounded:

- In several places book Kleinig engages in pressing biblical narratives past a point that can be clearly established from the text (see, for example, his use of the dark cloud on Mt. Sinai on pages 33-34). Even when such flights of hermeneutical imagination are pressed into the service of clear biblical points, a troubling pattern of going beyond the point of the text is showing itself. While it would be exaggeration to call what Kleinig does allegory, it is a close cousin. In this reviewer's experience, such pressing of biblical narrative beyond safe boundaries is becoming a more frequent experience in materials that are written by authors in fellowship with the LCMS.
- Other related tendencies seem in some LCMS publications were also noticeable in Kleinig's book. Absolution at times seems to be placed on a level with the sacraments (see page 43, for example) and the Lord's Supper is spoken of in terminology that ventures beyond clear Scripture (see page

- 282 for several examples)., Kleinig seems to imply, if not state, that different (perhaps higher) gospel gifts are to be found in the Supper, rather than seeing the very same gospel gifts communicated through Baptism, Supper, and Word.
- While the concept of mystery is clearly a New Testament concept in that everything of the gospel remains foolishness to man's natural reason, and that much about our "hidden God" remains mystery even to believers as we live by faith and not by sight, yet Kleinig seems to have a fallen just a little too much in love with the concept of mystery. It is perhaps worth pondering the significance of the fact that "mystery" forms a key part of the titles of three of the book's five chapters. In this reviewer's opinion, mystery begins to morph into mystical. See, for example, the suggestion on page 144 that we may expect at times to see vision and hear voices as we meditate on God's Word. Is this an attempt to appeal to a "spiritual" postmodern world in which the more mysteriously spirituality is dressed the more appealing it becomes?
 - A paradoxical problem occurs on page 156 when the author who loves "mystery" appears to seek to solve that which Scripture truly allows to remain a mystery. As Kleinig is discussing prayer, he rightfully seeks to emphasize the fact that prayer is powerful and that God does indeed take into account the prayers of his saints as he governs his world. In making that statement Kleinig rightfully avoids the danger of falling into a Calvinistic type of determinism. Yet Kleinig then seems to fall into the danger on the opposite side as he borrows some ideas from the Quaker theologian Richard Foster. Kleinig to advocate for a concept of an open future in the details of this world and our lives that comes perilously close to some of what is taught by Open Theism (those who teach that God himself does not know many details of the future). Part of what seem to lead Kleinig down that path is pressing biblical anthropopathic language (God changing his mind) beyond its biblical point. Here this reader would encourage Kleinig to allow a true mystery to remain! It is far better to affirm that we are confronted by what appears as a paradox to our minds. God takes into account the prayers of his saints to affect the future of his world and their lives. Consider Hezekiah's prayer in 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 38 which extends his life 15 years. Yet it is also true that "all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:16). Only God knows how that mystery is solved.
 - One final concern can be found on pages 46-48 as Kleinig rightly seeks to counter the Pentecostal misunderstanding of how the Holy Spirit is received ("swallowing him feathers and all" apart from the means of grace). Yet in stressing the importance of the daily receiving of the gift of the Spirit by a daily return to our baptism, Kleinig almost seems to deny the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that has indeed been established by the means of grace. Yes, we certainly must counter the false Pentecostal concept of "possessing" the Holy Spirit apart from the means. Yet there is a true biblical concept of receiving the Spirit through the gospel as a sign and seal guaranteeing eternal gifts yet to come (2 Corinthians 1:22).

All in all, this book is one that can be heartily recommended. It offers a refreshing gospel-centered approach to all matters of spiritual growth. How right Kleinig is to state:

We believe in justification by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, in practice, we all too often fail to live by grace and faith. In our spirituality, in our devotions and praying, we, in fact, all too easily slip back into justification by works and reliance on our own performance. (161)

What a beautiful gospel-centered gift this book presents to us, especially in distinction to so much of what is written about spirituality that urges us to growth by our own strength and determination. Such encouragements often only add to our frustration and sense of guilt about our spiritual life. In contrast, this book, seeks to empower us and draw us to Word and prayer by winning and wooing us with the gospel. What blessings await us when we are won by that invitation!

Give me Your grace and Your strength I pray to face all the issues I may encounter today, with a heart that is willing to pray, "Thy will not mine be done." Help me to be a living sacrifice unto You, which I know can only be achieved as I die to self daily and live moment by moment for Christ "to Whom be all praise and glory, Amen." Give me wisdom in the decision I may be called upon to make and give me a gracious attitude "even in in the midst of those moment of stress and weariness.