the spirituality of the CROSS

The Way of the First Evangelicals

REVISED EDITION

G E N E  E D W A R D  V E I T H,  J R.
Contents

Preface 9

INTRODUCTION:
The First Evangelicals 15

1 JUSTIFICATION:
The Dynamics of Sin and Grace 25

2 THE MEANS OF GRACE:
The Presence of God 41

3 THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS:
The Hiddenness of God 69

4 VOCATION:
The Spirituality of Ordinary Life 89

5 LIVING IN TWO KINGDOMS:
The Sacred and the Secular 117

6 CONCLUSION:
Worshiping God 137

APPENDICES:
The First Evangelicals and Other Churches 145
Resources for the Spirituality of the Cross 159
Notes for the Spirituality of the Cross 169
This book explains a Christian tradition that is rich, historic, and particularly relevant today. Yet hardly anyone outside of “Lutheran” circles—and sometimes not even within them—is aware of it. But in a time when Christianity has become confused with moralism, politics, and what Martin Luther called the spirituality of glory, the spirituality of the cross comes as a liberating, paradigm-shifting alternative.

Many people—from both varied religious backgrounds and from no background at all—have found it so. I am constantly amazed as I hear from or about people whose lives were changed by this book. I find that strangely humbling, an example of vocation, in which God works through ordinary human beings doing ordinary tasks. I was not trying to change anyone’s life when I undertook the writing of this little book, but if it helps people understand who Jesus is, what He accomplished for us, and how He is still present in the world, I have to be glad. If this book helps people know the freedom that comes from Jesus, if it helps people know that Jesus bears their sufferings with them, I can only be thankful.

I wrote the first edition of this book at the end of the last century. Since then, I have traveled even further
Copyrighted Material

along this “way of the first evangelicals” and have a few more things I would like to say about it—hence, this new edition.

I have studied some of these issues—especially the theology of the cross and vocation—in greater depth, and this new edition reflects that. I have also been involved with more churches that are part of the Lutheran tradition. Some of the characteristics that I discussed in the first edition held true for the churches I knew then but not necessarily all of them that I know now. What I said about pastors and congregations, I now know do not describe the practices in all Lutheran churches, which, for all of their unity in following the spirituality of the cross, nevertheless are free to exhibit quite a bit of diversity in their practice. There were other points that I explained unclearly—judging from questions that have been asked me—and so I am taking another stab at them.

I have also included more resources that I have found invaluable in living a life under the cross, resources that are an intrinsic part of this tradition. They include Luther’s Catechism, the Book of Concord, the rite of Confession and Absolution, and the writings of someone I strangely said little about in the first edition—that theologian of the radical Gospel and of life under the cross, Martin Luther. So this new edition should be more complete, more accurate, and, I hope, even more helpful.

Since the first edition was written, I believe that this so-called Lutheran approach to Christianity is now more relevant than ever to our postmodern times. The theologies of glory fail, provoking scorn against Christianity rather
than winning converts. Christianity has become confused with politics, power, and culture. The only Christianity many people know is oppressive and life-denying, a network of rules and moralisms that no one can fulfill. Religions of mere law soon degenerate into hypocrisy, having to do not so much with righteousness as with self-righteousness. Ironically, self-righteousness tends to bear fruit in a very unrighteous harshness, cruelty, and lack of love. In another irony, such law-heavy versions of Christianity, far from attracting people to the Christian faith, instead provoke rebellion against it. To many people, Christianity is dishonest, fake, with nothing to say to the real human condition and to the joys and sufferings of everyday life. But, as Luther himself said, in comparing his understanding of Christianity to others that were current even in his day, “We have a different spirit.”

People today have become cynical, and understandably so. Postmodernist thinkers go so far as to say that all religions, ideologies, and cultural institutions are nothing more than “constructions” designed to impose power over other people. These metanarratives—stories that purport to account for all of reality—are really all about power. But in response, an interesting apologetic for Christianity has arisen. There is one metanarrative that is not about power. It is about the abnegation of power, centering on a powerful God who emptied Himself to become a poverty-stricken, homeless baby in a manger and who was killed by torture as a criminal. And yet, strangely, this death redeems us, as we, too, give up our power and accept His free gift. This one metanarrative is not about power and
so is not a human construction. The other metanarratives are constructions by corrupt human beings asserting their selfish will to power. But this one is so different, it must be true.

The problem is that many articulations of Christianity are about power—of institutions, of politics, of our own power to solve all of our problems—which is why so many people today see them as missing the point. But the kind of spirituality that can bear up to the postmodernist critique and speak most profoundly to the contemporary spiritual condition is precisely the spirituality of the cross.
Many of us are searching for some kind of spiritual life, even though we are not always clear about what that means. We yearn for a sense of transcendence, and yet we always come crashing down to earth. The various mysticisms make grandiose promises of enlightenment and spiritual empowerment, but there is no living happily ever after. Mundane life intrudes. Work, family pressures, practical responsibilities, hurting, and failures all have a way of breaking the spiritual mood.

Churches would seem to be custodians of spiritual reality, but they often do not seem particularly spiritual. They often seem mundane too. The whole round of preachers, sitting in the pew, and going to fellowship dinners can seem so ordinary. One would think that spirituality would be rather more spectacular.

At least that has been my experience. At different times in my life I have embraced liberal theology, accepting whatever is progressive and crusading for social justice, and I have been a raving, miracle-expecting fundamentalist. My liberalism proved spiritually vacuous, while my fundamentalism proved shallow. I have sat zazen, until I found the most that Buddhism promises, namely,
emptiness. Mysticism and activism were both bitter disappointments.

What I needed was a spiritual framework big enough to embrace the whole range of human existence, a realistic spirituality. I needed a spirituality that is not a negation of the physical world or ordinary life, but one that transfigures them.

I found it in Christianity, a religion that is not about God as such, but about God in the flesh, and God on the cross. There are many varieties of Christianity, many spiritual traditions within this one historical faith, but they all hinge around this mystery of incarnation, atonement, and redemption.

C. S. Lewis, a major influence on my faith, wrote about “mere Christianity,” focusing on what all Christian theologies have in common. This lowest common denominator, he said, was like a hallway, a vestibule from the outside into the house of faith. He went on to point out, however, that to actually live in Christianity, one must leave the hallway and enter one of the rooms. “It is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals.” That is to say, Christians must join some church.

This is where some of the frustrations come. In my own case, none of the local congregations I knew quite measured up to the Christianity I had discovered in books. Part of this was sheer immaturity on my part. Many Christians hold to impossible ideals and have an inadequate theology of ordinary life and so are often disappointed in actual churches. As Lewis says elsewhere, new Christians often think of the church in terms of togas and sandals,
Copyrighted Material

rather than everyday human beings like themselves. But it is sometimes true that those “rooms” in the house of Christianity lack fires and chairs and meals.

Each of the varieties of Christianity represents some spiritual tradition, an emphasis or distinctive teaching. It would be naïve to deny that each also has its problems and distortions. This is where the search for Christian spirituality often runs aground.

Another rather ironic problem today is that many of these traditions, however valuable, are now hard to find. The diverse Christian traditions—such as those of Aquinas, Calvin, Wesley—all very different but bracing in their own ways, have been merging into a single generic pop Christianity. It is as if many of Lewis’s rooms turn out to be not different at all, serving the same styrofoam-packed fast food, playing the same Muzak, with the same plastic flowers and shag carpeting. This new popularized Christianity seems bland and one-dimensional, full of good feelings, but rather empty of content. In the meantime, the riches and insights of the historical Christian traditions are all but forgotten.

This book is about one of those Christian traditions, one in which I finally satisfied my own longing for a relationship with God. This book is an introduction to the Lutheran spiritual tradition.

This is a faith particularly centered in the cross of Jesus Christ. As such, it offers a framework for embracing, in an honest and comprehensive way, the whole range of the spiritual life. I have also found that its insights have
Copyrighted Material

a profound resonance in ordinary, everyday life, which is
the realm in which God is hidden and revealed.

**THE ORIGINAL EVANGELICALS**

A better term for “Lutheran” spirituality is “evangelical” spirituality. The term *evangelical* is simply a term derived from the Greek word for “Gospel,” which in turn literally means “good news.” *Evangelical* means someone who focuses on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News that Christ, through His death and resurrection, has won forgiveness for sinful human beings and offers salvation as a free gift.

Today the term *evangelical* is used to refer to a wide variety of more-or-less conservative Protestants. For all of their differences, Baptists, charismatics, Calvinists, Wesleyans, and the various nondenominational “para-church ministries” do stress salvation through Christ and emphasize “evangelism,” so the term is apt. But originally, the word *evangelical* meant “Lutheran.”

In the years following the Reformation, “evangelicals” were those who followed Martin Luther, as opposed to “reformed,” who followed John Calvin. (A later attempt to bring the two factions together resulted in the “Evangelical and Reformed Church,” which became a denomination of its own.) Even today in Europe, churches that follow a Lutheran theology call themselves not “Lutheran”—a term Luther himself hated, not wanting Christ’s Church to be named after him—but “Evangelical.” The American usage of the term for any Bible-believing, salvation-preaching Christian is starting to catch on in Europe also,
but American tourists at times get confused when they go into a German or Scandinavian church with evangelische on the sign, expecting revival songs and altar calls, only to find chorales and liturgy.

Though others are entitled to call themselves “evangelicals,” Lutherans are at least the first evangelicals. Keeping in mind the fact that Christians have always focused on the Gospel, from the New Testament days through the Early Church and even through the Middle Ages—a time when, Protestants contend, the emphasis on the Gospel and its implications became somewhat confused—Lutherans were the first to be called evangelical. They were also the first to emphasize the Gospel to such an extent that it became central to every facet of their doctrine and practice. This evangelical focus, made over against medieval Catholicism, opened the door to every other Protestant expression that came later. But evangelical Lutheranism remains distinct from all of the later Protestant traditions.

As something of a spiritual wanderer—drifting from religion to religion, church to church, from the very liberal to the very conservative—I finally discovered the Gospel. Going deeper and deeper into that Gospel and its implications, I found that I had become a Lutheran. This book is partly a record of that pilgrimage, but only partly. It is mainly an account of what I—as a modern or perhaps postmodern American—have found to be of inestimable help and value in the Lutheran spiritual tradition.

This tradition has been somewhat obscured and is little known today—sometimes, I regret to say, even among Lutherans—but it deserves consideration. Among other
reasons, the teachings of the first evangelicals prove to be particularly relevant to problems that are now vexing contemporary Christianity, and they speak in a powerful way to the needs and cravings of today’s generations.

**SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY**

This book is about “spirituality,” not theology as such. On one level, this is a misleading distinction. Many people today say that they are not interested in religion, with its doctrines, creeds, and institutions, but they are very interested in spirituality. They are in the market for something that will give them a pleasant mystical experience and a sense of meaning and well-being, without making any uncomfortable demands on their minds, behavior, or social position. They want religious experience, without religious belief.

Those who see spirituality in terms only of subjective gratification having nothing to do with objective truth lay themselves open to every kind of superstition and exploitation, to every flying-saucer cult and expensive New Age seminar. The fact is, there can be no spirituality without theology, no religious experience apart from religious belief. Even the flying-saucer cults and New Age seminars are selling not only a mystical jolt but a worldview, implicit assumptions about the nature of reality that underlie their messages.

So by “spirituality,” I do not mean any kind of content-free, theologically vacuous quest for transcendent experiences for their own sake. Rather, spirituality has to do precisely with the content, what fills abstract theology,
mundane institutions, and the everyday life of the Christian with their real substance.

The quest for this kind of spirituality is, I think, genuine and important. Many people today, in our shallow, mass-produced, materialistic culture, yearn for depth, for richness, for transcendence. Many do not even find spiritual substance in their churches, many of which have adopted the slick superficialities and manipulative commercialism of pop culture, mutating into what can only be described as pop-Christianity. Interestingly, many casualties of pop-Christianity are drifting into older faiths that do seem to offer a measure of spiritual substance. A huge exodus is taking place from Protestantism into the Roman Catholic Church and, perhaps even more significantly, into Eastern Orthodoxy.

Now the notion that Protestantism lacks a vital tradition of the inner spiritual life is simply not true. It is true, however, that contemporary culture—especially today’s media-driven pop culture—has made that Protestant spiritual legacy to be nearly forgotten. Exploring an older and far-less Americanized theological and spiritual tradition should prove helpful for Christians trying to keep their bearings. Evangelicals of every kind should profit from going back to their roots, to uncovering the legacy of the first evangelicals.

For some reason, Lutherans tend to be uncomfortable with proselytizing, with “stealing sheep” from one church to another, and this is really not my intention in writing this book. I think any Christian could draw on the spiritual insights of the Lutheran tradition that will be
described here, though of course there will be points of disagreement. But certainly Calvin, for example, has had an influence far beyond the Presbyterian bodies that are formally committed to his teachings, shaping the practice of Baptists and others, many of whom take issue with him on particular points while still acknowledging many of his insights. Luther could similarly be useful to a wide range of church bodies. When Christians today struggle with such issues as the role of the church in politics, the use of Scripture, how to live in a sinful world, and how to deal with suffering, Luther—who addressed these issues with penetrating insights—deserves his say. The full dose of Lutheran spirituality can only, of course, be found within the day-to-day life of a Lutheran church.

It should also be emphasized that I am writing as a layman and am neither a theologian nor a pastor. My approach will be to explain what I have gained from the Lutheran tradition that I have found helpful in my own spiritual life, in terms I hope my fellow ordinary folk will understand. Though the emphasis on spirituality will by no means avoid theology, I will be avoiding most of the technical language, proof-texting, historical analysis, and polemics against other positions that a full-blown work of theology needs to do. I will say little about the life and times of Martin Luther, as fascinating as that subject is. Lutherans are strongly grounded in history, but some people have the impression that this faith rests on Luther rather than Christ. The concepts this book will explore have just as much relevance to the twenty-first century as to the sixteenth century—possibly more, since the spiritu-
al emptiness of our present age gives them an even sharper edge. I do not even plan to argue for these positions, at least not much; nor do I plan to attack the alternative theologies, nor to defend my own. I will simply lay out what Lutheran spirituality is. The reader can take it or leave it, but at least will come away with a clearer view of a great Christian tradition.

To be sure, technical theology, biblical research, and polemical arguments against contrary views are extraordinarily important, even crucial. One of the great strengths of the Lutheran tradition is that theology is taken seriously and has been thoroughly worked out. Sophisticated theology, biblical scholarship, and vigorous polemics are to be found in abundance among Lutherans. I will provide references to some of these rich theological resources for those who wish to explore the points raised in this book more deeply, to see their scriptural foundation and how they engage other views. But this is not my vocation (a notion that will be made clearer later). Above all, those who want to go deeper can consult with a Lutheran pastor, a vocation and an office that can minister the “cure of souls” in a concrete way, which is more than reading any book. Spirituality, after all, must be lived, not merely intellectualized, and its locus is the mysteries taking place in an ordinary local church.
Copyrighted Material
Whether in the world’s organized religions or in the individual strivings of human beings to find meaning in their lives, certain patterns keep emerging. Adolf Koeberle notes three kinds of spiritual aspiration: moralism, in which the will seeks to achieve perfection of conduct; speculation, in which the mind seeks to achieve perfection of understanding; and mysticism, in which the soul seeks to achieve perfection by becoming one with God.  

Though all of these ways contain elements of wisdom, Lutheran spirituality is totally different from them all.

Instead of insisting that human beings attain perfection, Lutheran spirituality begins by facing up to imperfection.
We cannot perfect our conduct, try as we might. We cannot understand God through our own intellects. We cannot become one with God. Instead of human beings having to do these things, Lutheran spirituality teaches that God does them for us—He becomes one with us in Jesus Christ; He reveals Himself to our feeble understandings by His Word; He forgives our conduct and, in Christ, lives the perfect life for us.

We do not have to ascend to God; rather, the good news is that He has descended to us. Most philosophies and theologies focus on what human beings must do to be saved; Lutherans insist that there is nothing we can do, but that God does literally everything.

Human sin and God’s grace are the two poles of Lutheran spirituality. To be sure, these are intrinsic to all of Christianity, but in Lutheranism they are both heightened. They are resolved in the principle by which, it is said, the church stands or falls: justification by grace through faith.

**PATHS TO GOD**

The various approaches to the spiritual life cited by Koeberle deserve more attention, so that the Lutheran perspective can be thrown in higher relief.

The way of moralism seeks to earn God’s favor, or a satisfying life, through the achievement of moral perfection: always doing what is right, avoiding wrongdoing of every kind, keeping oneself under control by sheer willpower and a scrupulous conscience. Certainly, the desire to be good is a laudable sentiment—if it only could be accomplished.
Many people assume that moralism is, in fact, what Christianity is all about. Good people go to heaven, it is thought, while bad people go to hell. Christians are those who live morally upright lives, avoiding “sins” while doing good works. Sometimes this takes the form of rather small lifestyle choices—avoiding alcohol, tobacco, and other petty pleasures—while sometimes it takes the form of working for vast ideals, righting the wrongs of society through political activism and social reform.

It is true that some versions of Christianity do tend toward the moralistic. Certainly, moralism characterizes many of the world’s religions. In Islam, every detail of life—including the food one eats, the details of family life, and the policies of government—is regulated by strict moral rules. Even nonreligious people often follow the path of moralism. Animal rights activists, environmentalists, and political crusaders are often just as zealous, perfectionistic, and all-demanding as the most conservative religionist.

Moralism, however, involves a host of impossibilities and contradictions. People just do not—and, it seems, cannot—live up to their own high standards. We keep failing. Sometimes, our very attempts at moral perfection lead us to immoral actions, as when our strict rules cause us to hate, coerce, and feel superior to others. Other times, our own interior attitudes undermine our virtuous actions. I have done “good works” for which I received praise and acclamation, while inside feeling an unwilling resentment that I knew even at the time took away any pretension that I was “meriting” anything.
The passions, the perversities of the will, the innermost secret desires of the heart, keep thwarting the best moral intentions. Moralists are often tempted to mask their failures with dishonesty or rationalization. This is why moralism is often accompanied by hypocrisy, a show of external righteousness that masks the true story of what is happening inside.

Another way of coping when our moral reach exceeds our grasp is to push virtue out to the periphery of our experience—becoming a matter of voting right or holding the correct social positions or supporting virtuous causes—even while our personal or family lives become a wreck. We define down moral perfection, making it something easier and within our control. In doing so, of course, we generally end up violating the moral obligations that really count, those that have to do with our own behavior and our relationships to those around us.

Another problem inherent to moralism is that righteousness has a way of twisting itself into self-righteousness, a feeling of pride and superiority that undoes the virtue that is achieved. The problem is not only that people of the highest morals slip up. It seems that the very effort to be moralistic tends to breed harshness, pride, and even cruelty, hardly signs of being “a good person.”

Certainly, “being good” is a laudable goal. The problem, if we are honest, is that no one seems able fully to achieve that goal. We don’t really have the willpower or the inner motivation or the inner purity to achieve moral perfection.
This book has barely scratched the surface of Lutheran spirituality. Here are just a few resources for those who would like to go deeper into the subject. Of course, the best treatment of Lutheran theology can be found in the writings of Martin Luther, who is both a profound theologian and a brilliant writer. His works are never academic, abstract theologizing but personal and deeply devotional meditations—filled sometimes with invective to be sure, but also humor, honest accounts of his own struggles, and piercing insights into Scripture. Good starting points would be his Bible commentaries, such as those on Galatians and Romans, his sermons, and—my favorite—*The Freedom of the Christian*.

The primary source for Lutheranism, though, is the collection of creeds and confessions known as The Book of Concord. Particularly useful is the basic, though inexhaustible, primer of Lutheran instruction and reflection, the Small Catechism. The Augsburg Confession is probably the best summary of Lutheran doctrine—stressing its continuity with the historic Church—with the Formula of Concord specifying how Lutheranism is different from the various Protestant sects. Together, the eleven documents that comprise The Book of Concord work out, in a comprehensive and authoritative way, the whole of Lutheran theology.
Lutheran spirituality, though, is not just theology. It is meant to be lived out in vocation and in the sacramental life of a local church. Thus, the Lutheran hymnbook—the latest in my synod being the excellent *Lutheran Service Book*—is a treasure trove of liturgy for diverse occasions, profound and beautiful hymns, useful prayers, and other spiritual resources. Realize, too, that a pastor can tell you much more than I can about all of this. Even more than that, he can, through Word and Sacrament, bring you the forgiveness of sins and the real presence of Christ.

We have discussed worship and the Sacraments, but, in thinking about resources for this kind of spiritual life, I want to draw special attention to one resource that I am learning to appreciate more and more: individual Confession and Absolution. It is possible to confess your sins personally to the pastor, who then, under an absolute seal of confidentiality, applies the grace of God to what you have done and, exercising the apostolic authority from the Holy Spirit (John 20:22–23), acts in the place of Christ to forgive your sins. This is not the same thing as the Roman Catholic practice of confession since it is not necessary to mention all of your sins, nor does the pastor demand works of penance. You need only bring up what troubles your conscience, and the forgiveness, which comes from the cross, is free. I have heard of the power and transformative impact of individual Confession and Absolution in cases ranging from chronic vices—with the person confessing week after week the same sin until suddenly he found release—to what can only be described as demonic affliction. There is a resource for you.
In addition, here are some books that have shaped this book and my own understanding. Any pastor could direct you to more, and he himself would be a valuable resource. But keep in mind that Lutheran theology, though intellectually bracing, is never just abstract ideas or interesting information. Luther said that becoming a theologian of the cross requires meditatio (meditation on God’s Word), oratio (prayer), and tentatio (trials, tribulations, and struggle). Many of these books reflect all three or at least will speak to all three in your own life.
Copyrighted Material

BASIC THEOLOGY

Walther, C. F. W. 1986, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel. Trans. W. H. T. Dau. St. Louis: Concordia. A father of American Lutheranism in the nineteenth century and a founder of the Missouri Synod, Walther also wrote this classic exposition of this characteristically Lutheran distinction; it is not just theological scholarship, but also profound advice for the care of souls, making for illuminating devotional reading.

Mueller, John Theodore. 1951. Christian Dogmatics. St. Louis: Concordia. Here are the proof-texts, the arguments, the controversies, and the systematic treatments neglected in my own book but important in their own right. Mueller draws on the even more exhaustive treatments found in the multivolume dogmatics by Francis Pieper.

Sasse, Hermann. 1984–1986. We Confess. 3 vols. Trans. Norman Nagel. St. Louis: Concordia. These three short booklets—Jesus Christ, The Sacraments, and The Church—are a good introduction to the writings of a theologian who stood up against Hitler and who articulated his faith without compromise in the context of modern times. Sasse’s writings are profound and theologically rich, but they are also devotional, works of spiritual reflection.
Copyrighted Material

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Forde, Gerhard. 1997. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. This book reprints Luther’s own theses on the subject and comments on them, unpacking how radical the theology of the cross really is.


von Loewenich, Walter. 1976. *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*. Trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman. Minneapolis: Augsburg. This is a rich overview of a rich doctrine, of which a number of other valuable books have also been written, such as: McGrath, Alister E. *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough*. London: Blackwell.

VOCATION

Copyrighted Material


THE CASE FOR LUTHERANISM


Parton, Craig. 2003. The Defense Never Rests: A Lawyer’s Quest for the Gospel. St. Louis: Concordia. This is the personal story of a man who, after a long spiritual journey, found the fullness of Christ in Lutheranism.


Preus, Klemet. 2004. The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice. St. Louis: Concordia. This is a practical approach to applying theological truths to situations experienced by pastors and people of God.
Copyrighted Material

INTRODUCTION


CHAPTER 1

2. Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, paragraph 56.

CHAPTER 2

1. Large Catechism, Part IV, paragraph 57.
2. Small Catechism, Part IV, question 3.
3. Large Catechism, Part IV, paragraph 10.
5. Large Catechism, Part IV, paragraph 44.