Lutheran Spirituality
LUTHERAN SPIRITUALITY

Life as God’s Child

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Preface

In the West, spirituality is as nebulous as it is popular. Having succumbed to humanism, rationalism, and Darwinism, communities once known for a genuine Christian piety now provide a fertile breeding ground for self-made theologies, Eastern religions, the worship of science and technology, or even a resuscitation of the old pagan gods. In a highly competitive environment, each of these spiritual philosophies seeks to fill the vacuum left by the seemingly departed Christian spirit.

Even among faithful Christians, and at other times and places, spirituality has run the gamut from the mystical to the almost sterile. From the emotional to the pragmatic, the experiential to the cerebral, the all-too-human desire to experience (and control!) the divine has proven to be especially resilient. Influenced by modernism, postmodernism, and whatever comes next, even those who try faithfully to follow Jesus Christ may find defining spirituality, or at least what is distinctively Christian about their own beliefs and practices, a significant challenge.

Do Lutheran Christians have a spirituality? Indeed they do! This book, adapted from the popular Bible study series of the same name, explores the rich depths of a distinctively Lutheran spirituality that begins in Baptism and is founded upon God’s Word. There, the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Lord proclaims His victory over sin, death, and the devil, and from there flows the proclamation of His Gospel and the administration of His Sacraments. It is through these means presented within the liturgy of His Church that Christ communicates not merely spiritual energies, an emotional high, a method of reasoning, or a stringent morality, but He truly communicates Himself—God in human flesh.

Written by respected Lutheran scholars in the United States and Australia, this book emphasizes the Bible, Luther’s catechism, and the
Lutheran hymnal as concrete and integral resources for a truly Lutheran spirituality. May God richly bless those who study His Word, and through His Word may they experience the genuinely enlightening and life-giving spirituality found only in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AC    Augsburg Confession
AE    Luther’s Works, American Edition
Ap    Apology of the Augsburg Confession
FC Ep Epitome of the Formula of Concord
FC SD Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord
ESV  English Standard Version
LC    Large Catechism
LSB   Lutheran Service Book
NASB  New American Standard Bible
NIV   New International Version
NKJV  New King James Version
SA    Smalcald Articles
SC    Small Catechism
Tr    Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope
Our God is a speaking God. Unlike idols made of mute stone or crafted by the imaginations of the faithless heart, the living God has a voice. He speaks and His words are “spirit and life” (John 6:63). By speaking His divine Word, one God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—brought creation into existence (Genesis 1:1–2; John 1:1–3). The Word made flesh is the revelation of the Father (John 14:9–11) and the author of our salvation, for He was sent to suffer and die as our Savior. The Word of our Savior’s cross, the message of reconciliation in the forgiveness of sins, is preached for the creation of faith, because “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The same Spirit given by Jesus to His apostles on Easter evening (see John 20:22) inspired them to put the Word into writing “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31).

Lutheran spirituality is a spirituality of the Word. God’s Spirit ties Himself to His Word. We do not look behind or above the Scriptures to find the Spirit; rather, we listen to the Spirit who speaks to us in Christ Jesus. There is no other Jesus than the one proclaimed by the prophets and the apostles. A nineteenth-century hymn of non-Lutheran origin says: “Beyond the sacred page I seek You, Lord.” However, believers do not look beyond the sacred page of the Scriptures to find the Lord.
The Lord Jesus is wrapped up in the words of Holy Scripture. To hear its words is to hear Him, for He is the very heart and core of the Bible.

This chapter will assist you not only in understanding what God’s Word is and how it functions, but it also will sharpen your skills in listening to our Lord as He speaks in His Scriptures and in preaching that is governed by the Scriptures. To understand the Scriptures is to stand under the Scriptures. It is not so much that we interpret the Scriptures but that the Scriptures interpret our lives. With God’s Law, they convict us of sin, that is, of unbelief. They interpret the story of our inborn failure to fear, love, and trust in God above all things as the root of all sin. But the ultimate message of the Bible is the Gospel, God’s own declaration that He is for us in every way, bestowing on us the forgiveness of sins achieved by His Son’s death on the cross. Any reading of the Bible that does not end up with Jesus Christ crucified and raised for our justification misses the mark, for God’s Scriptures were given “to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). Keep your copy of Luther’s Small Catechism and your hymnal close at hand as you read this chapter, for they are the two most important tools that you have to help you stand sure-footed under the Holy Scriptures.

In these pages you will see the footprints of Martin Luther. He charted a course for us to follow in learning how to listen to the Scriptures. The cloistered monks of the Middle Ages engaged in prayer, meditation, and the reading and copying of Scripture. From Psalm 119, however, Luther the Augustinian friar, amid the struggles that life in the world brings, drew three rules for the study of the Bible: prayer, meditation, and suffering (Latin: oratio, meditatio, tentatio). Scripture is prayerfully read (oratio) as that book “which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness,” meditated upon in faith (meditatio), and held on to for dear life in the face of all that threatens us with physical or spiritual death (tentatio). That is how students of the Scriptures are made. Let Luther’s three rules guide your reading of God’s Word as well, for such a reading promises to yield rich fruit as God’s truth is implanted in ear and heart and lives are tested and made strong under the cross.3

2 AE 34:285.
As noted in the introduction to this chapter, God is a speaking God; He is not silent. In the beginning, God spoke and creation came into being. God spoke to Adam and Eve, telling them how to remain alive in Him. But the deafening clamor of our sinful nature and the subtle accents of the devil’s beguiling speech may drown out the voice of the Good Shepherd for us, just as Adam and Eve grew deaf to their Creator. But the Holy Scriptures testify to Jesus Christ and to His saving work of declaring righteous the ungodly by faith alone for His sake. Certainly we hear this message as we read the Bible, but Christian sermons that are focused on the words of Scripture are the living voice of Christ Jesus. As we develop a regular pattern of the study of Holy Scripture in light of weekly worship with the congregation gathered around preaching and the Lord’s Supper, our faith and trust in our Savior is strengthened.

What stands in the way of establishing this regular pattern of hearing God’s Word? For some it may be a perceived lack of time. For others it may be boredom or a lack of discipline. But Jesus points out in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23) that all these excuses come from Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh, which seek constantly to obstruct the hearing of God’s Word. When distractions and duties overwhelm, Jesus reminds us, as He did Martha, that listening to Him is the only truly necessary thing (see Luke 10:38–42)—and we hear our Savior clearly in His Word.

BY THE PROPHETS ____________________________

God speaks, but it is no random, unattested voice out of nature or out of nowhere. In the Nicene Creed, we confess that the Holy Spirit “spoke by the prophets.” Here the creed echoes such texts as Hebrews 1:1–2 and Luke 24:25–48. These passages testify that the Old Testament writings are the Word of God and that they point to and are fulfilled in

4 LSB 904:1.
Jesus, who came in our flesh to suffer and die for the sins of the world. After our Lord’s resurrection from the dead, He opens the minds of His disciples to understand the Scriptures.

In the Old Testament, God spoke to His people in various ways, including visions (Genesis 15:1), the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–12), and a low whisper (1 Kings 19:9–18). Nevertheless, these instances of God speaking were written down, witnessed in the books of the prophets. In other instances, we are simply told that God spoke (Genesis 12:1–3) or that the Word of the Lord came to the prophet (Jeremiah 1:1–10). For the prophet Samuel, God dramatically called him to service, even though he was still a young man (see 1 Samuel 3:1–18). Although Samuel was initially confused by the voice that he heard in the night, after direction by the priest Eli, Samuel answered the Lord’s call: “Speak, for Your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3:10).

As we have observed in several Old Testament texts, God often used visions as the instrument of His voice to the prophets. According to the opening of the Epistle to the Hebrews, though God at one time used prophets to speak to His people, now He speaks to us by Jesus Christ, “His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world” (1:2). Jesus is God’s ultimate Word to us. We do not rely on dreams or charismatic experiences to discover God’s will for our lives. We listen to the Son, who speaks to us in and through His Gospel. No matter how spiritual the experience may seem or how angelic the messenger may appear, if it contradicts the Gospel, it is to be rejected (see Galatians 1:8).

After His resurrection, Jesus opened the minds of His followers to understand clearly the Old Testament message concerning the Messiah. Jesus had come not to overthrow political powers or to reestablish the temple worship, but because it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem (Luke 24:45–47; Acts 10:43). The author of Hebrews describes God’s Son as the heir of all things and the one through whom the Father created the world (1:2). And the evangelist John makes the connection between Jesus and His participation in the creation by calling Him “the Word” by whom “all things were made” (John 1:1–3; see also Colossians 1:15–17; Genesis 1:3–4).
LISTENING TO THE SON

The transfiguration of Jesus (Luke 9:28–36) demonstrates Jesus’ identity and shows Him to be the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. This event in the life of our Lord comes to a climax as the Father speaks out of the cloud: “This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!” (Luke 9:35). Appearing with Jesus at His transfiguration are two Old Testament prophets. Moses represents the Law and Elijah signifies the prophets. In other words, the Law and the Prophets testify to Jesus. On the mountain, Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about “His departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). The Greek word translated as “departure” is exodon (“exodus”), thus recalling the Old Testament deliverance of Israel from Egypt, a sequence of events that began with the death of the Passover lamb (see Exodus 12).

What does the transfiguration tell us about the origin and use of the Scriptures? Some Christian denominations diminish the place of Scripture by arguing that it is historically conditioned or bound to an ancient culture and so is not applicable to us today. But in his second Epistle, the apostle Peter links the inspiration of Scripture to the incarnation of the Son of God (2 Peter 1:16–21). The apostles, who are the eye and ear witnesses (see 1 John 1:1–4) of the coming of our Lord, testify to His reality. The story of Jesus Christ is not mythology, but factual history in time and space. The apostles testify to the glory of God made manifest in the humanity of Jesus. The Scriptures are to be interpreted in light of their origin. Interpretation is not left to the imagination of the reader because the Scriptures were not the product of human impulses, but Spirit-sent from the Father through the Son.

WHERE DO WE HEAR GOD?

The Holy Scriptures and Christian preaching go hand in hand. Luther called the Church a “mouth house” rather than a “pen house” as a way of stressing the oral character of God’s Word. God caused His Word to be put into writing, and thereby He gave it a fixed and permanent location in order that it might be proclaimed truthfully through all generations. The Bible is not just a book about God, and preaching is not just talk about God. In and through both the Scriptures and the sermon, God is speaking. The aim of His speaking is to bestow the forgiveness of sins, to bring life out of death.
The Divine Service moves sequentially from the reading of texts from the Old Testament (prophet), an Epistle (letter of an apostle), and the Gospel (evangelist) to a sermon preached by the pastor (see Ephesians 4:11). Peter confesses that Jesus has “the words of eternal life” (John 6:68), and this Bible passage is the text we sing in anticipation of the reading of the Holy Gospel in the Divine Service. The proclaimed Word of the sermon that follows almost immediately after the Gospel reading is based on and governed by the written Word of Holy Scripture. Preaching is the living voice of the Gospel as it conforms to Holy Scripture in proclaiming the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake. When we hear such preaching that is faithful to His Word, we are hearing Jesus (see Luke 10:16). The Lutheran Confessions state:

According to this Gospel authority, as a matter of necessity, by divine right, congregations must obey them, for Luke 10:16 says, “The one who hears you hears Me.” But when they teach or establish anything against the Gospel, then the congregations are forbidden by God’s command to obey them.\(^5\)

and

Ministers act in Christ’s place and do not represent their own persons, according to Luke, “The one who hears you hears Me” (10:16). Ungodly teachers are to be deserted because they no longer act in Christ’s place, but are antichrists. Christ says, “Beware of false prophets” (Matthew 7:15). Paul says, “If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:9).\(^6\)

**SPIRITUAL EXERCISES**

- Before worship, read the Scripture texts assigned in the lectionary for the Divine Service. How is God’s Law operative in these texts to unmask your own sin? How is God’s Gospel at work to forgive your sins and comfort you with Christ’s promises?

- Review Luther’s explanation to the Third Commandment in the Small Catechism as part of your preparation for the Divine Service. Luther does not focus on the Sabbath day per se, for the requirement of a specific day for worship has been fulfilled in Christ. Instead, Luther contends that we may not “despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.”\(^7\)

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\(^5\) AC XXVIII 22–23; Concordia, p. 59.

\(^6\) Ap VII & VIII (IV) 47–48; Concordia, p. 151.

\(^7\) Concordia, p. 319.
Pray Psalm 119:33–40 as you ask God to instruct you with His words and confirm in you the promises of His Gospel.

POINT TO REMEMBER _________________________________

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. John 5:24

The Words That Kill and Give Life

I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I lacked nothing before this except that I made no distinction between the law and gospel. I regarded both as the same thing and held that there was no difference between Christ and Moses except the times in which they lived and their degrees of perfection. But when I discovered the proper distinction—namely, that the law is one thing and the gospel is another—I made myself free. Martin Luther

God speaks in two completely different voices in the Scripture. His Law is the preaching of wrath against sin. It is that voice from Sinai’s lofty heights that thunders with condemnation of the sinner and his sin. The Gospel stands in distinct contrast from the Law. While the Law makes demands and threatens punishment, the Gospel makes promises and bespeaks peace with God in the blood of Jesus Christ. The Bible is misused when the Law is not clearly distinguished from the Gospel. The Bible is misused when Law and Gospel are not used together to teach and meditate. If Jesus is transformed into something other than a Savior—perhaps a “new Moses,” a spiritual coach, a teacher of moral precepts, or the pattern for the pious life—the Bible is misused and the Gospel is abandoned. Lutheran spirituality practices the highest art of all: rightly reading the Scriptures so that threat is distinguished from God’s promises in Christ Jesus. C. F. W. Walther, a nineteenth-century pastor and one of the founders of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, writes: “To rightly distinguish Law and Gospel is the most dif-

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8 AE 54:442–43.