The Holy Spirit

The Lutheran Difference Series

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About This Series

“Are you filled with the Holy Spirit?”
“Sure . . . well, aren’t all Christians filled with the Holy Spirit?”

As Lutherans interact with other Christians, they often find themselves struggling to explain their beliefs and practices. Although many Lutherans have learned the “what” of the doctrines of the church, they do not always have a full scriptural foundation to share the “why.” When confronted with different doctrines, they cannot clearly state their faith, much less understand the differences.

Because of insecurities about explaining particular doctrines or practices, some Lutherans may avoid opportunities to share what they have learned from Christ and His Word. The Lutheran Difference Bible study series will identify how Lutherans differ from other Christians and show from the Bible why Lutherans differ. These studies will prepare Lutherans to share their faith and help non-Lutherans understand the Lutheran difference.
Student Introduction

Even in our increasingly irreligious society, people continue to talk about God, often in terms of His Fatherhood. The general public recognizes the name, person, and work of Jesus Christ. But what do those outside the church know of the third person of the Trinity? What do those inside the church know about the Holy Spirit?

The Lutheran church is perhaps especially open to the charge of “neglecting” the Holy Spirit. While one will not hear a Lutheran pastor preach even the shortest sermon without proclaiming Christ, Lutheran preaching often does not explicitly mention the Holy Spirit. Though this may be noted and criticized at times, Lutherans can say truthfully—if perhaps somewhat surprisingly—that it is neither an oversight nor an accident. Rather, it is entirely in keeping with Scripture’s depiction of the office and work of the Spirit Himself.

As Jesus proclaimed to His disciples before His departure, the Spirit’s task will be to “remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26) and to “bring glory to Me” (John 16:14). The third person of the Trinity has no desire to draw attention to Himself; He has instead been sent for the purpose of directing our attention to God’s saving work in Christ. In this regard Dr. Martin Luther explained: “That then is the Holy Spirit’s office and work, that He through the gospel reveal what great and glorious thing God has done for us through Christ, namely, ransomed us from sin, death, and the power of the devil, received us into his grace and care, and given us himself wholly and sufficiently” (Auslegungen über den Evangelisten Johannes, Weimar edition, vol. 28, p. 82).

Where Christ is preached, Lutherans rejoice to believe, teach, and confess that the Spirit is always present and active. Far from neglecting the Spirit, Lutherans praise, honor, and glorify Him as God. This occurs not only when they speak about Him, but especially when in humble silence they allow Him to speak to them, to reveal the Savior and proclaim His salvation.
An Overview of Christian Denominations

The following outline of Christian history will help you understand where the different denominations come from and how they are related to one another. Use this outline in connection with the “Comparisons” sections found throughout the study. Statements of belief for the different churches are drawn from their official confessional writings.

The Great Schism

Eastern Orthodox: On July 16, 1054, Cardinal Humbert entered the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople just before the worship service. He stepped to the altar and left a letter condemning Michael Cerularius, patriarch of Constantinople. Cerularius responded by condemning the letter and its authors. In that moment, Christian churches of the east and west were severed from each other. Their disagreements centered on what bread could be used in the Lord’s Supper and the addition of the filioque statement to the Nicene Creed.

The Reformation

Lutheran: On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X wrote a letter condemning Dr. Martin Luther for his Ninety-five Theses. Luther’s theses had challenged the sale of indulgences, a fund-raising effort to pay for the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. The letter charged Luther with heresy and threatened to excommunicate him if he did not retract his writings within 60 days. Luther replied by publicly burning the letter. Leo excommunicated him on January 3, 1521, and condemned all who agreed with Luther or supported his cause.

Reformed: In 1522 the preaching of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, convinced people to break their traditional Lenten fast. Also, Zwingli preached that priests should be allowed to marry. When local friars challenged these departures from medieval church practice, the Zurich Council supported Zwingli
and agreed that the Bible should guide Christian doctrine and practice. Churches of the Reformed tradition include Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

**Anabaptist:** In January 1525 Conrad Grebel, a follower of Ulrich Zwingli, rebaptized Georg Blaurock. Blaurock began rebaptizing others and founded the Swiss Brethren. Their insistence on adult believers’ Baptism distinguished them from other churches of the Reformation. Anabaptists attracted social extremists who advocated violence in the cause of Christ, complete pacifism, or communal living. Mennonite, Brethren, and Amish churches descend from this movement.

### The Counter Reformation

**Roman Catholic:** When people call the medieval church “Roman Catholic,” they make a common historical mistake. Roman Catholicism as we know it emerged after the Reformation. As early as 1518 Luther and other reformers had appealed to the pope and requested a council to settle the issue of indulgences. Their requests were hindered or denied for a variety of theological and political reasons. Finally, on December 13, 1545, 34 leaders from the churches who opposed the Reformation gathered at the invitation of Pope Paul III. They began the Council of Trent (1545–63), which established the doctrine and practice of Roman Catholicism.

### Post-Reformation Movements

**Baptist:** In 1608 or 1609 John Smyth, a former pastor of the Church of England, baptized himself by pouring water over his head. He formed a congregation of English Separatists in Holland, who opposed the rule of bishops and infant Baptism. This marked the start of the English Baptist churches, which remain divided doctrinally over the theology of John Calvin (Particular Baptists) and Jacob Arminius (General Baptists). In the 1800s the Restoration Movement of Alexander Campbell, a former Presbyterian minister, adopted many Baptist teachings. These churches include the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches) and the Churches of Christ.
**Wesleyan:** In 1729 John and Charles Wesley gathered with three other men to study the Scripture, receive Communion, and discipline one another according to the “method” laid down in the Bible. Later, John Wesley’s preaching caused religious revivals in England and America. Methodists, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals form the Wesleyan family of churches.

**Liberal:** In 1799 Friedrich Schleiermacher published *Addresses on Religion* in an attempt to make Christianity appealing to people influenced by rationalism. He argued that religion is not a body of doctrines, provable truths, or a system of ethics, but belongs to the realm of feelings. His ideas did not lead to the formation of a new denomination, but deeply influenced Christian thinking. Denominations most thoroughly affected by liberalism are the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Unitarianism.
Lutheran Facts

All who worship the holy Trinity and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins are regarded by Lutherans as fellow Christians, despite denominational differences.

Lutheran churches first described themselves as evangelische or evangelical churches. Opponents of these churches called them Lutheran after Dr. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century German church reformer.

Lutherans are not disciples of Dr. Martin Luther but disciples of Jesus Christ. They proudly accept the name Lutheran because they agree with Dr. Luther’s teaching from the Bible, as summarized in Luther’s Small Catechism.

Lutherans focus most specifically on the work of the Holy Spirit on particular holidays: Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, Second Sunday of Easter (Quasimodogenti), and Pentecost.

During the service of confirmation, Lutherans publicly confirm the work of the Spirit in a person’s life. The service commemorates the work of the Spirit through Baptism and the Word, leading a person to publicly confess faith in Jesus.

During the service of confirmation, the pastor lays his hand on the confirmand’s head and prays for the sevenfold gift of the Spirit as described in Isaiah 11:2.


During the 1970s Lutheran churches, like most churches, were affected by the charismatic movement. A small percentage of Lutherans claim special gifts of the Spirit. Most Lutherans emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God rather than through specially anointed individuals.

Lutherans worship and pray to the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Holy Trinity.

To prepare for “The Spirit Speaks,” read 1 Corinthians 2:6–16.
Words. Are they really so powerless? Mere scribbles and sound bites can stop a dispute or end a friendship. Words can begin a marriage or begin a war. Stronger even than human speech are the words that proceed from the mouth of God. Thankfully, unlike so many of our words, God’s strong Word was written—and is still preached—for our benefit.

1. What are some of the various reasons, both positive and negative, that people have for speaking with one another? For what reason might God feel it necessary or desirable to verbally speak with those He has created?

Discerning Spirit

2. Read Psalm 33:6 and 2 Peter 3:5. Compare Hebrews 4:12 and Ephesians 6:17. What do these passages say about words that come from God’s mouth? What makes these words do what they do?

God’s Word moves more than molecules of air and stirs more than breath. His Word can move and stir the heart.

The Spirit continued to speak through the words of the New Testament apostles. (See, for example, Acts 1:2 and 1 Corinthians 2:12–13. See especially 2 Peter 3:15–16, which ascribes to the words
of the apostle Paul authority equal to that of the prophets.) As will be discussed below, the Spirit inspired the authors of both the Old and New Testaments to reveal Him who stands at the center of all Scripture—Christ, whose life and death won our salvation.

3. God spoke His creation into being, but divine speech did not end there. Read 2 Peter 1:21 and 2 Timothy 3:16. Who is described as speaking in these passages? To whom does God speak? For what purpose?

4. While rejoicing that God would speak to His creation in human language, Christians also realize that some readers have difficulty understanding the Bible. Read 1 Corinthians 2:14 and 2 Corinthians 3:15–16. What do these passages say about the role of the Spirit in understanding God’s Word?

The Spirit proclaims both Law and Gospel. Though He must convict and condemn, the Spirit’s “proper” work is to proclaim Christ.

5. To understand Scripture—or any literature—requires an awareness of its major themes. Read Nehemiah 9:30 and John 16:7–8. Compare these with Titus 3:5 and John 20:22–23. According to these passages, how is the work of the Holy Spirit related to the biblical themes of Law and Gospel?

So intimately and essentially related are the Spirit and the preaching of Christ, Luther was led to declare in the Large Catechism that “where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Ghost” (“The Creed,” Art. III.45).

7. Though the Holy Spirit speaks and acts through God’s external Word, there are spirits who do not do so. Read 1 John 4:1. What warning and exhortation does the author give? How might this exhortation be observed?

**Word and Spirit**

The Holy Spirit not only inspired the ancient and original authors of the Bible; He works even today through the external Word, continuing to fulfill God’s holy will.

8. How might understanding the emphases and intent of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration of Scripture affect your attitude toward and approach to the study of the Bible?

9. What comfort can you take in knowing that where God’s Word is, there also is the Holy Spirit?

**Sure Word**

Where God’s Word is, there also is His Spirit. Not only is He present; He is active, and powerfully too. Acting through the Word of Scripture, He continually—and convincingly—convicts us of sin. But thanks be to God, He also pardons us for the sake of Christ.

10. How might the way God has spoken to you through His Word affect the manner in which you speak to Him in prayer?
11. How might you respond to a friend who believes that God has spoken—or wonders if God has spoken—to him or her through means other than the revealed Word of Scripture?

Comparisons

**Verbal Inspiration:** The Holy Spirit led the prophets, evangelists, and apostles to write the books of the Bible. He guided their writing, inspiring their very words while working through their particular styles of expression. Therefore, the Bible’s words are God’s Word. Conservative Christian churches hold this view. Many also maintain that the original writings of the Bible were without error (inerrancy) but some mistakes entered the text as the scribes copied, edited, or translated the Scripture over the centuries.

**Partial Inspiration:** Christians affected by theological liberalism hold different views of the inspiration of the Bible. For example, some would assert that the Bible is God’s Word but the authors erred in some factual details. Others would say that the Bible contains God’s Word and the Spirit leads people today to determine which parts of the Bible God wants them to follow. Still others would say that the Bible is one testimony to God’s Word along with writings used in other religions.

**Inspired Translations:** Some churches hold that God inspired certain translations of the Bible. For example, the Eastern Orthodox church holds that the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament was inspired by God. Some English-speaking Protestants hold that God inspired the King James translation of the Bible.

Leader Guide

Leaders, please note the different abilities of your class members. Some will easily find the Bible passages listed in this study. Others will struggle. To make participation easier, team up members of the class. For example, if a question asks you to look up several passages, assign one passage to one group, the second to another, and so on. Divide up the work! Let participants present the different answers that they discover.

Each topic is divided into four easy-to-use sections.

- **Focus** introduces key concepts that will be discovered.
- **Inform** guides the participants into Scripture to uncover truths concerning a doctrine.
- **Connect** enables participants to apply what is learned in Scripture to their lives and provides them an opportunity to formulate and articulate a defense of a key doctrine.
- **Vision** provides participants with practical suggestions for extending the theme of the lesson out of the classroom and into the world.

Also take note of the Comparisons section at the end of each lesson. The editor has drawn this material from the official confessional documents and historical works of the various denominations. The passages describe and compare the denominations so that students can see how Lutherans differ from other Christians and also see how all Christians share many of the same beliefs and practices. The passages are not polemical.
The Spirit Speaks

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, participants will (1) describe the relationship between God’s Word and its divine Author, (2) recognize the common testimony of both Spirit and Word—our salvation in Christ Jesus, and (3) know that where God’s Word is, there also His Spirit is active.

Opening Worship

Sing “God Has Spoken by His Prophets” (LW 343).

Focus

1. Read, or ask a participant to read aloud, the opening paragraph. Discuss the nature and purpose of communication. Why do we communicate? Are some forms of communication better suited than others for certain purposes? Allow participants to offer suggestions regarding the question of why God may have felt it necessary or desirable to communicate with humans and why He may have chosen to communicate by the particular means He has chosen, the external, written Word of Scripture.

Discerning Spirit (Inform)

2. The authors of the Old and New Testaments are in complete agreement: the heavens and the earth were created by God. They are also in agreement regarding the manner in which He created. Out of nothing, God spoke the universe into being. The spoken word of God is a tremendously powerful thing; it is, as the author of Hebrews calls it, “living and active.” How can mere words do such things? Of course, they are not “mere” words; they are God’s own words. They are living and active because the Spirit lives in them and acts through them. They are, in the language of St. Paul, the Spirit’s “sword”—the powerful tool or instrument by which the Spirit carries out His divine work.
3. St. Peter declares that although the prophets spoke and wrote to God’s people, they did not do so of their own accord. They spoke “from God,” being “carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Paul echoes this thought as he writes to the young pastor Timothy, saying, “all Scripture is God-breathed.” Such passages proclaim the doctrine of Scripture’s inspiration. Though Scripture does not explain the precise manner in which it was inspired, it teaches that its words come from God Himself through the Spirit.

4. Our understanding of the written Word of Scripture could not take place without the Spirit’s activity. This is St. Paul’s point when he writes: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit . . . and he cannot understand them.” Writing again to the Corinthians, he further explains by way of illustration. There are some, he says, who read Scripture as though a veil were draped between them and its true meaning. But with the Spirit “the veil is taken away.”

5. Believing that the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture and works through it, the Old and New Testament authors speak also of the Spirit’s work in terms of Law and Gospel. Nehemiah, for example, records a prayer of the Levites in which the Spirit is said to have admonished Israel. Likewise, Jesus announces in John 16 that the Spirit will “convict the world of guilt.”

The work of the Spirit has not only to do with the Law, however. St. Paul assures us that the Gospel is very much the concern of the Spirit. “He saved us,” Paul writes to Titus, “through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” This rebirth and renewal through the forgiveness of sins is, as seen in John 20, the specific purpose for which the Holy Spirit was bestowed upon the apostles.

6. Jesus declared that the Scriptures testify about Him (John 5:39). Likewise, Jesus ascribes this work to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will remind the disciples of all that Jesus has said (John 14:26) and will bring glory to Him (John 16:14).

7. The knowledge that God’s Spirit is constantly working through God’s Word offers great assurance to the Christian. But, as John notes in his first letter, there also exist false spirits, those who are not God’s. Therefore, be on guard, always testing the spirits and those who speak by them. But how? The intimate relationship between the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture provides the basis on which to test the spirits. That is, if a spirit seems to call, gather, or enlighten and yet does so without the Word of God, it is not the Spirit of God. (See page 62.)
Word and Spirit (Connect)

8. Knowing the Holy Spirit’s purpose in revealing God’s Word helps us to properly read and understand it. As Jesus declared, the Scriptures testify to Him (John 5:39; see also John 20:31). Understanding this, we read Scripture knowing that in all its parts it speaks of our salvation in Christ—and our need for salvation.

9. The Scriptures have been written for your salvation. However, this is far from all that Scripture has to offer. It not only speaks about your salvation; it affects your personal salvation. The external Word of Scripture, in which the Holy Spirit is living and active, is the means by which God forgives your sin and declares you to be His child. God promises that His Word “will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

Sure Word (Vision)

10. That God’s Spirit has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified us by means of His Word prompts us, when speaking to Him in worship and prayer, to offer heartfelt praise and thanksgiving. Also, knowing that His Word offers a clear and truthful expression of His holy will, we are often stimulated to worship and pray using His own words, saying back to Him what He has already said to us.

11. Statements such as “I really think God is telling me to . . .” or “I feel that the Holy Spirit has laid it on my heart to . . .” are common expressions in some Christian churches. The problem, of course, is that if one only “thinks” or “feels,” then there can be no certainty that it is God Himself who is speaking. Such certainty only comes when we look for God to speak where He has promised to do so—in His revealed, written Word. One manner in which we might respond to these statements is by simply asking questions: “What is it that makes you feel God is speaking?” “How might you test these thoughts and feelings?” “Is what you’ve heard consistent with what has been revealed in Scripture?” Such questions could be followed by briefly studying together some of the pertinent passages above.