Community

We Are Not Alone

Naomichi Masaki
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The Lutheran Spirituality Series

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Hymnal Key
LSB=Lutheran Service Book
ELH=Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary
HS98=Hymnal Supplement 98
CW=Christian Worship
LW=Lutheran Worship
LBW=Lutheran Book of Worship
TLH=The Lutheran Hymnal
About This Series

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 adult Bible study series 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 truly Himself—God in human flesh.

Written by respected Lutheran scholars in the United States and Australia, this adult Bible study series 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.

The Editor
Participant Introduction

“I’m a spiritual person, but I’m not religious.” Have you ever heard someone say something like this? Perhaps you have had the same thought yourself. Today, many people feel that no organized religion empowers them to be healthy, renewed, or growing human beings—or even Christians! To them, rituals and organizations found in churches are mere empty shells.

Such observations may be well-meant as one seeks a deeper relationship with God from our point of view. After all, we all think of ourselves as the center of the world. We like to choose what is best for ourselves. So we tend to look for a god who may satisfy our desires and wishes. If the Christian God doesn’t deliver or meet our specifications, we seek another option to support and cultivate our own “spirituality.” Further, in a religiously diverse environment, Christians even routinely switch denominational affiliations. They float around, attempting to find a place that they can call home.

Jesus says: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). This little book will expound a Lutheran conviction that we do have abundant life given in the Church. Lutherans confess in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession that the Church is the assembly of all believers “in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.” It answers the questions: “Where is the Church?” and “Where can I find a church home?” Lutherans confess that a true Church is not measured by “my taste” or “my sincerest spirituality”; rather, the Church is where our crucified and risen Lord Jesus lives and gives His abundant gifts.

Jesus, who showed His love at Calvary, bids you come to His Church. Connected with Him, our lives will ever be “full of sap and green” (Psalm 92:14). Discover the richness and joy that is found in the Lord’s Church alone and the life that is lived there together as Christians in community.

To prepare for “Where Christ Is, There Is the Church,” read Acts 1 and 2.
Where Christ Is, There Is the Church

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise up me and all the dead and will give eternal life to me and to all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

Martin Luther, The Small Catechism

For some people, the Church is an institution with a certain hierarchy and distinguished buildings. For others, the Church is a gathering of like-minded religious people. For still others, the Church is a fellowship that works toward a common goal. Martin Luther confessed differently. For him, the Church is believers who have been called, enlightened, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, and the place where our sins are daily and richly forgiven.

1. Among the many denominations and churches in our day, which seem to attract the most people and why? Why do you attend the church that you are attending now?

Jesus Continues His Own Ministry

As a preparation for our inquiry into the New Testament Church, it may be helpful first to see the big picture.

2. Read Acts 1 and 2, then summarize the verses below:
   a. Acts 1:1–2
b. Acts 1:3–5
c. Acts 1:6–11
d. Acts 1:12–26
e. Acts 2:1–13
g. Acts 2:37–41
h. Acts 2:42
i. Acts 2:43–47


4. What do you think is the significance of the cloud in the account of Jesus’ ascension?

5. More than half of Acts 1 is devoted to the story of Matthias (Acts 1:12–26). Why was it important to record the filling of the apostolic office vacated by Judas?
6. Concerning the Holy Spirit:
   a. What do we hear about the Holy Spirit according to the following passages: Luke 1:35; 3:16 (Acts 1:5, 2:1–4, 38); 3:22; 4:18; 24:49?

   b. John tells us more about the works of the Holy Spirit. What are the things that the Holy Spirit rejoices in doing (14:26; 15:26; and 16:13–14)?

   The ascension of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit are followed by Peter's preaching on behalf of the Twelve.

   7. Read Acts 2:14–37. How would you summarize the content of Peter's sermon? Why were his hearers "cut to the heart"?

   8. Read Acts 2:38–41. Where did the hearers end up? What do we learn about Baptism according to this passage?


    **Forgiveness Achieved and Distributed**

    Luther wrote, “We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us” (AE 40:213). To see how this is accomplished, we look
to the ascension of Christ, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the life of the Early Church.


Acts 1:1 (or Luke 1:1)–2:13 describes how Jesus accomplished salvation (forgiveness achieved), while Acts 2:14–47 shows how Jesus actually bestows the salvation (forgiveness distributed) that He won on the cross.

11. How does Jesus distribute His forgiveness today? Is this similar or dissimilar to what Christians today may think about how we receive Christ’s forgiveness?

**Where Christ Is, There Is the Church**

In Acts 2, the life of the congregation was characterized by the inexpressible joy of the newly baptized, the simplicity of faith clinging to the apostles’ doctrine, the awe of their hearts before the wonders of the Spirit, the brotherly love that was ready to offer everything, the prayers, the celebrations of the Sacrament of the Altar, and the praise of God.

12. Apply this picture of congregational life in the Early Church to the blessings God is giving you and others in your congregation. What are they?

13. Ignatius of Antioch was a Christian pastor who lived immediately following the apostles. He wrote, “Wherever the bishop [pastor] appears, there let the multitude [congregation] be; just as wher-
ever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic [universal] church.” According to Ignatius, where should we look for Jesus today?

**Spiritual Exercises**

- Be comforted by the fact that, even when we are tempted by Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh, we may still say with Luther, *“Nevertheless, I am baptized”* (Large Catechism IV 44, 77–78). During the week, pray one stanza of “God’s Own Child, I Gladly Say It” (*LSB* 594; *ELH* 246; *HS98* 844) in thanksgiving to God for this precious gift.
- Luther wrote that the Church is like “the mother that conceives and bears every Christian through God’s Word [Galatians 4:26]. Through the Word He reveals and proclaims” (Large Catechism II 37, 42). When you next attend church services, ponder how the Church cares for you through Word and Sacrament.
- Discuss with other participants how Jesus as the Lord of the Church and the Giver of forgiveness and life may be reflected in other areas of congregational life, including the works of various boards and committees in your congregation. Reflect the same also in your daily Christian life and in your family life.

**Point to Remember**

So those who received his [Peter’s] word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Acts 2:41–42.