

The Distinctive Spirituality of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

DAVID P. SCAER



AS IS ALSO THE CASE with other denominations, Lutherans do not include the word *spirituality* in their theological vocabulary. In fact, taken in the abstract, the term would make many Lutherans uncomfortable, because spirituality might suggest an emphasis on the Holy Spirit apart from Christ, or suggest that a planned program of personal, private religious improvement was possible. Programs of private spirituality were most noticeably introduced into Lutheran theology with Pietism at the juncture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with such disastrous results that Lutheranism was hardly recognized as Lutheran any longer.

At the heart of Lutheran theology is the doctrine of the free justification of the sinner before God because of the death and merits of Christ. The emphasis on Lutheran spirituality, if we must use this word, is on what Christ has done for us before God and not what he is doing in us. Thus in a certain sense Lutherans know of only this one doctrine of justification. All doctrines are viewed from the standpoint of justification. The God who condemns the sinner in the law is the same God who fully accepts the sinner as saint in Christ. This is the gospel.

The Christian lives with a dichotomous, yes, even a dualistic or bifurcated awareness of himself as a sinner and saint. When he hears the gospel preached to him, he is led to believe that God regards him as a saint and has given him everything in heaven and earth. When he looks at himself, he sees not a saint, but only a sinner who has totally displeased God in everything he has done. A spirituality or piety may be measured by God, but not by the Christian. This double existence is expressed in Lutheran theology with the common phrase “the law and the gospel.” This does not mean that the Christian was once a sinner, but now he is a saint. Rather, it means that after a person becomes a Christian, he realizes not only what a sinner he once was, but also what he still is. The sinner-saint combination or the law-gospel dichotomy has nothing to do with a sequence of time, of once having been a sinner and now being a saint, but rather it is an explanation of the reality of Christian life from the time of bap-

tism up until death. Lutherans should have difficulty singing in the first stanza of “Amazing Grace” the words “I once was lost but now am found.” That part of me which remains sinner is as unregenerate as is an unbeliever. The condemning law, which threatens unbelievers, those who have not confessed Jesus as the Christ, and forces them to outward conformity, must be preached to the unbelieving part of the Christian as long as he lives. Lutheran spirituality centers around the continued awareness that baptized saints are as much sinners as they were before they were baptized.

This spirituality, centering around the reality encountered by the believer that he is both sinner and saint needing both the law and the gospel, is based on the more profound reality that God’s relation to man and the world is threatened by Satan and sin. To demonstrate that God and not Satan is the Lord over his creation and that he loves the fallen creature in his state of fallenness, God has become man in the person of his Son Christ to atone for the sins of all men. Thus it becomes impossible for Lutheran spirituality to understand God apart from his incarnation in Christ. It is not so much that God reveals himself in Christ—which is, of course, absolutely true—but everything that God is, Christ also is. Everything that God is, is found in Christ. This means that Lutheran spirituality is at all points inherently Christological and hence incarnational and sacramental, since the sacraments are seen as Christ’s real presence and activity in the church. It becomes impossible for a Lutheran spirituality ever to focus inwardly, but always outwardly on Christ—and this means *on the sacraments*. The certainty of salvation rests not in the believer, but in the preached word and in the sacraments, where Christ is present. This does not mean that Lutherans deny the indwelling of Christ and the Spirit in the believer, but it does mean that the Christian focuses on God who incarnates himself in Christ and on this incarnate Christ as he operates personally in his church through the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments. The proclamation of the gospel is sacramental and the sacraments are proclamation. The sermon is not only a report of what God has done or is doing now in heaven, but is what Christ is personally doing now in his congregation. The sacrament is the actual giving of the Christ who is proclaimed in the word.

Since God confronts the condition of the sinner in the preaching of the law and shows him Christ in the preached word and sacraments, Lutheran spirituality is more corporate

DAVID P. SCAER, a contributing editor for *LOGIA*, is Chairman of Systematic Theology and Professor of Dogmatics and Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. This essay was originally presented at the ETS Meeting December 4, 1987, at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts.

than individualistic. At the center of Lutheran spirituality is not private devotion but public worship, in which the word is preached and the sacraments are administered. Thus more and more Lutheran churches celebrate the sacrament at each Sunday service. The focus is on the pastor or minister and the congregation as they gather around the preached word and sacraments. Lutherans speak of the ministry not as a function performed by all Christians, but as an office in, with, and under which Christ works among his people as much as when he was on earth. The minister or pastor pronounces forgiveness in the name and stead of Christ: "Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office as a called and ordained minister of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." The issue here is not sins against one another, but the situation of general sinfulness. The minister preaches God's displeasure over sin, calls the sinner to repentance—that is the law—and as Christ's representative on earth forgives sins. His office is defined according to the preaching and sacramental functions. Thus the clergy have a fundamental part in Lutheran spirituality.

For a liturgy to be Lutheran it must be continually presented as the preaching of the law and the gospel.

The foundation for confession and absolution is of course the law-gospel motif or, as Luther would say, *simul iustus et peccator*. In the life of the Christian, this spirituality is only a continuation of what once happened in his baptism. Baptism is necessary because through it grace is offered. It is given only to those who are sinners and repent of their sins. Baptism is an historic act in the life of the Christian, as it can be documented according to time, place, and who performed it. Its significance or internal meaning is continually repeated. The congregation assembles as Christ's church because it has been baptized; and this right to assemble as baptized saints is announced with the words "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," which words are essential to corporate worship. The individual Christian repeats these words in his private devotions, because he is a member of the congregation of baptized saints. The opening psalm of the introit includes the *Gloria Patri* because the congregation has been incorporated into Christ through baptism. The Apostles or Nicene Creed is confessed because the congregation is repeating its answers that each was asked at the time of baptism: "Do you believe in God, and in his Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit?"

Baptism, which has corporate meaning in including the believer in the church as the body of Christ, has significance for the spirituality of the Christian on days other than Sunday. Each

day the Christian drowns himself in baptism and comes forth as a new man clothed in Christ's righteousness. On account of the perpetual significance of baptism, Lutherans have retained what their confessions call penance or confession and absolution. Luther saw this as a necessary continuation of baptism that happens every day as long as the Christian lives. The Augsburg Confession and the Apology view confession with absolution as a separate sacramental action that is nevertheless derived from baptism. In the corporate setting of the worshiping congregation, the pastor who once baptized repeats the essence of baptism by hearing the confession of the baptized and again forgiving his sins. This continuous confession and absolution in the life of the Christian is not only made possible, but is necessary and required, because the Christian remains sinner as long as he lives. He really needs the law because he is always the sinner and he really needs the gospel because without it he would never know that God has forgiven him in Christ. This indicting and forgiving of the sinner not only happens in preaching, but in confessing to the pastor and receiving his absolution. It can be done in a general way for the entire congregation, but it can happen in an individual way, as Luther and the reformers intended that private confession and absolution must be retained for the benefit of God's children.

Thus for a liturgy to be Lutheran it must be continually presented as the preaching of the law and the gospel. Thus, after the confession and absolution, the congregation sings the Kyrie Eleison, "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." Then it sings the Gloria in Excelsis, "O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, That takest away the sin of the world, have mercy." It hears the law and gospel again in the readings of the Epistle and the Gospel and still again in the sermon. As the congregation prepares for the reception of the body and blood of Christ, it prays again for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, "and forgive us our trespasses."

The highest and most concrete expression of the gospel for the sinner because he is continually sinner comes in the celebration and reception of the sacrament. The Christ who was himself once offered to God, and who offered himself for the sins of the world, and who continually stands before God offering himself as the eternal sacrifice, comes to the sinner with the same body and blood he offers to God. Lutheran spirituality, since it is a contemporary incarnationism, sees the holy supper not only as an historical remembrance of an act that happened in Palestine about two thousand years ago, but an act of the incarnate and exalted Christ who is God and man, really and personally active in his congregation right now. The Christ who is exalted above the heavens is even more present (if we dare speak in these terms) with the congregation on earth, feeding them with the same body and blood that he continually offers to his Father. In the sacrament the boundary and border between heaven and earth has been erased. The same feast celebrated in heaven by saints who sing the praises of the Lamb of God is celebrated by the saints on earth.

Luther, more than any other reformer, addressed the question of spirituality in the lives of believers with his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. His Small Catechism with its teachings on the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's

Prayer, baptism, confession and absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the prayers for morning and evening and for meals was intended for use in the family and for teaching to the children. The family gathers not as individuals, but as members of the congregation. Thus their family devotions reflect what the Christian congregation does on Sunday. The Commandments remind them of their sin, the Creed of God's salvation, and the Lord's Prayer of their continued need for God's grace in their condition of sin. Lutherans still maintain the most extensive system of parochial schools for the purpose of maintaining catechetical preparation necessary for participation in the worship life of the church.

Luther's spirituality was in this sense not religious, but secular, because it is lived out in the world.

This strong emphasis on the centrality of the preached gospel and the sacrament does not suggest for Lutheran spirituality that Christians are to separate themselves from the world. Lutheran spirituality is not monastic, but involves participation in the world, yet with the full understanding that the world can in no way be identified and confused with the kingdom of salvation. Luther's exposition of the Ten Commandments clearly shows that for him good works were not a separate religious category of activities as they were in medieval Christianity. While good works meant that Christians must refrain from sin, they were more importantly understood as the secular works performed for the protection and benefit of the neighbor. You keep the Seventh Commandment not only by not stealing, but by helping the neighbor to prosper financially. Luther's spirituality was in this sense not religious, but secular, because it is lived out in the world. The law, which condemns me as sinner, becomes positive affirmation for me as saint. This double or contradictory understanding of the law does not originate in God, but in me who as sinner sees the law as condemnation, and as saint sees the law as affirmation. Luther intended that every service be one of preaching and the celebration of the sacrament. It could hardly have been other-

wise for him. This hardly exhausted his efforts to give shape to church spirituality. From the medieval church with its seven canonical hours, he preserved matins and vespers for other worship. Central to these were not only the canticles taken from Luke—the Benedictus, the Magnificat, and the Nunc Dimittis—but the Te Deum, a hymn of praise to the Trinity and Christ. When Luther took to hymn writing, he did not sing of the soul's ascent to Christ, but took the ancient canticles from the mass and the matins and vespers, and paraphrased them. While all of Luther's hymns were doctrinal with biblical themes, as they came to Luther in the medieval heritage, they should not be regarded as biblical, doctrinal, or medieval fetishes, but as focusing the sight of the believer on what God has done for him in Christ.

Since Lutheran spirituality is public or corporate, finding its expression in its worship around the word and sacrament, its architecture reflects this liturgical posture. In this country this architecture has been strongly influenced by the Protestant milieu, but still there is an ideal. In the center of the chancel stands the altar with the double and related symbols that Christ as the sacrifice for sins feeds his church with himself in the sacrament. Thus Luther calls this sacrament in his Small Catechism the sacrament of the altar. Above or on the altar should stand the crucifix, serving the double function that the sinner's only hope is in the one who died, and that Christ now appears before God pleading that our sins not be held against us. The older churches placed the baptismal font at the back of the church to symbolize that baptism is the only entry into the fellowship of the redeemed. Luther suggested that every Christian should have over his bed a crucifix and baptismal certificate, not to suggest that baptism has earned our salvation, but rather that it is through baptism that each of us is incorporated into Christ, and thus we share in his salvation. Today the pulpit is more likely placed to the right side of the altar, the place where traditionally the gospel was read. In some older churches, the pulpit was placed right above the altar to signify that Christ comes both in the word and the sacrament.

Lutheran spirituality cannot be fully drawn out in this short space, but at all points it must point to the full incarnation of God in Jesus, the proclamation of the law and the gospel as expressing the reality of the believer as he confronts himself and God, and the preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments as the presence of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, according to both his divine and human natures. Anything less than this is hardly Lutheran and less than completely Christian. **LOGIA**