

I remember the first time I opened the pages of Gene Veith's book *The Spirituality of the Cross* in 2006. The theology and spirituality from the pages of this little book struck my ears with peculiarity and a strange comfort. At the time, my theology was like an unfinished puzzle—pieces were still scattered and disconnected. And so Veith's book not only challenged many of my false presuppositions about the Christian faith but also aided me in constructing the rest of the unfinished theological puzzle. *The Spirituality of the Cross* helped show me a cohesive spirituality that is rooted in Christ and His gifts, flowing outward in the vocations that the Lord has prepared for me to walk in.

I had a profound joy in first hearing that a third edition of Veith's book was being released by Concordia Publishing House. Joy not only because I have an updated edition to rediscover again but also that there will be an updated edition for the next generation to discover. My young children and confirmation students thank you, Mr. Veith, for this wonderful book that they will read in the upcoming years. I pray that this third edition will be as beneficial to the next generation as the first edition was to me.

—Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard  
Author of *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? 12 False Christs*  
Pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Minot, ND

Lutheran theology needs to rule the day. In it, one will not only find biblical fidelity, near company with the church ancient, but also the most comprehensive and relevant verbiage for contemporary quirks and concerns. *The Spirituality of the Cross* is for all those who are seeking the simplicity of God's good news for humanity but structured in a systematic way that sticks.

—Flame, Grammy-nominated Christian rap artist

Gene Edward Veith's *The Spirituality of the Cross* is a must-read classic for every Lutheran—and everyone interested in what it means to be Lutheran! Lifelong Lutherans, recent converts, and outside observers alike will benefit tremendously from Veith's straightforward and beautifully written outline of the key elements of the Lutheran faith. This new edition is even more relevant, insightful, and moving. Veith unceasingly points the reader back to the core of our Reformation faith: Christ, our God-made-man, for us.

—Molly Lackey, author

Gene Veith has gifted every reader of *The Spirituality of the Cross* with an exceptional compendium of Lutheran theology and practice. Light bulbs go off for either understanding rich articles of the faith for the first time or, at the very least, learning to better express them. This volume liberates from the shackles of natural religion—moralism, speculation, mysticism—delivering the reader to “the power of God,” namely, “the word of the cross” (1 Corinthians. 1:18). The cross is indeed our theology. Christ still brings heaven to earth through His Word and Sacraments, as well as earthly vocations made holy through faith.

— Rev. Alfonso Espinosa, PhD,  
Senior pastor, Saint Paul's Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA

*The Spirituality of the Cross* is essential reading for all who desire meaningful Christianity in these otherwise meaningless modern times. Veith provides readers with an updated and expanded version of his classic exploration of what makes Lutheran theology unique and permanently relevant. Just as this edition reflects Veith's own journey in the spirituality of the cross, I highly recommend this book to all who journey through this life longing for a stout spirituality of the cross.

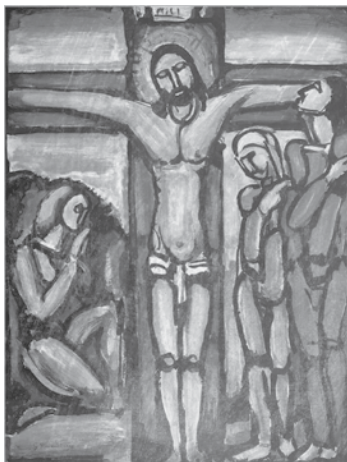
—A. Trevor Sutton  
Author of *Being Lutheran and Why Should I Trust the Bible?*

# *The* Spirituality *of the* Cross

The Way of the First Evangelicals

THIRD EDITION

**GENE EDWARD VEITH JR.**





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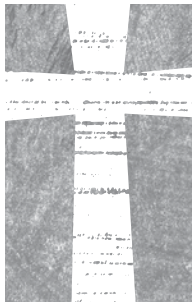
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*To Pastor Don Kirchoff, who brought us in*

The cross alone is our theology.

—*Martin Luther*



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## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

This book first came out in 1999. Since then, it has been translated into many languages—Chinese, Russian, Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, Latvian, Korean, Portuguese, Turkish—and, I am told, has been helpful to many readers. I keep running into people who tell me how they found the book “liberating” and “life-changing.” I continue to be astonished and gratified by such reactions, though, as I hasten to say, none of what they are so excited about came from me. I didn’t make any of this up. This emphasis on grace, atonement, forgiveness, incarnation, sacraments, and the transfiguration of ordinary life comes out of a major Christian tradition.

This so-called Lutheran Christianity started as an attempt to reform Catholicism (which didn’t want to be reformed) and gave rise to Protestantism (which soon left it far behind). As such, Lutheranism involves major elements of both Catholicism (sacraments, liturgy, creeds) and Protestantism (the Gospel, the Bible, the priesthood of all believers)—making it a uniquely ecumenical form of Christianity—while also having its own distinctives (vocation, the two kingdoms, the theology of the cross). All of this results in a particularly life-affirming, physical-existence-affirming, liberating version of Christianity.

I myself discovered this strain of Christianity as a complete outsider. I grew up in mainline liberal Protestantism,

flirted with all kinds of “spiritualities” in college, felt the allure of Catholicism, and became broadly evangelical. But when I stumbled onto Lutheranism, everything came together for me. This, at last, was the church and the theology and the spirituality that I had been yearning for.

I wondered, though, why it had been so hard for me to find. The English-speaking world is not very familiar with Lutheranism. It would have been a different story in Scandinavia or Germany or Eastern Europe or even Africa. Remarkably, even some who go by the name “Lutheran” in the United States have chosen to emulate other American Christians—whether mainline liberal Protestants or conservative evangelicals—rather than their own spiritual tradition. I found Lutheranism with much effort, thanks to pastors who catechized me, led me in worship, and gave me things to read. But I knew there were other people out there, just like me, who knew nothing about the Lutheran option.

So I wrote this book. I decided to write the book that I had needed, that I wish someone had given to me, back when I was floundering. That was back in the late 1990s. And the book has done what I hoped it would do. Quite a few people have become Lutherans with the help of this book. Quite a few Lutherans have discovered what Lutheranism is all about. Best of all, some people have become Christians with the help of this book, which cast down what had put them off about Christianity and which taught them for the first time who Christ is and what His cross accomplished for them.

In 2010, the book came out in a second, revised edition. I clarified a few explanations that, judging from reader feedback, were confusing. I expanded some discussions. Most of all, I made adjustments based on my further study and experience.

Now, another ten years later, Concordia Publishing House has asked me to prepare yet another edition. And rightly so. The religious landscape today is very different from what it was in 1999 and 2010. Back then, Christianity was somewhat popular. Evangelicalism was in the ascendant, and churches were morphing into megachurches. Secularization was taking its toll, but, for the most part, churches in the United States, at least, were enjoying good numbers and high status. But today the bottom seems to have fallen out of American Christianity.

While Christianity is booming in the rest of the world, it is fading in North America and Western Europe. We are in the era of the “Nones,” those who say they have no religious affiliation whatsoever. There are now as many Nones in the United States as there are evangelicals, each numbering about a quarter of the population. And yet very few of these Nones are atheists or materialists. Nearly three-quarters of the Nones believe in a god of some kind, and nearly four-fifths believe in some kind of spiritual realm. They really are, as many of them say, “spiritual but not religious.” They hold to highly personal and interior spiritual beliefs and practices, assembled from many sources according to their own constructions, but they reject any kind of “organized” or “institutional” religion.<sup>1</sup>

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1 See my book *Post-Christian: A Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). Note particularly my discussion of research on the Nones, pp. 233–45.

And who can blame them? Liberal churches have made themselves so secular, in a vain attempt to appeal to secularists, that they have little to offer secularists who yearn for something more. Conservative churches that speak much about sexual morality are revealed to be rife with horrific sexual abuse. Some churches keep their popularity by offering a consumeristic “prosperity gospel” and facile pop psychology, as opposed to anything remotely recognizable in historic Christianity. And even churches that maintain a sense of moral and theological integrity often seem shallow and simplistic. Those who are “spiritual but not religious” might well become interested in the rich heritage of Christian spirituality, but they would be hard-pressed to find it in most American churches.

In my opinion, the moral and spiritual weakness of Christianity today derives from a broad-based de-emphasis on the cross. To be sure, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Second Person of the Trinity is central to all of Christianity, and all branches affirm that Christ’s crucifixion, in some sense, is connected to our salvation. Lutheranism is in solidarity with all of the other branches of Christianity, but it puts a particularly strong emphasis on the cross of Jesus Christ, who, through His suffering and death, atoned for the world’s sins and gives us redemption. Indeed, the teaching that we are justified by faith in the atoning work of Christ on the cross is considered “the chief article”—the underpinning of every aspect of Lutheran theology and, indeed, of the Christian faith as a whole.

In recent years, both liberal and conservative churches have been minimizing this teaching. Mainstream Protestants have

been saying things like, “If God punished His Son for other people’s sins, that would be cosmic child abuse” (ignoring the union of the Father and the Son in the Trinity). Many conservative Protestants and Catholics have been downplaying a high view of the atonement as an offense against God’s righteousness and so shifting the burden of righteousness back on us (ignoring our inability to bear that burden, as only God can). Christians from across the spectrum are saying that when the apostle Paul teaches that the cross frees us from the Law, he is referring only to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament (ignoring how those laws themselves are manifestations of atonement for moral transgressions).

Our natural religious impulses and the religions that we devise for ourselves tend to condition salvation based on what we do and what we deserve, on our “good works” or our “merit.” When churches downplay the cross, this legalistic, merit-based spirituality rushes in to fill the void. Thus it is commonly believed, both inside and outside the church, that Christianity is all about morality, about “being good.” Contrast that with the Lutheran emphasis that Christianity is primarily about finding forgiveness when we *fail to be moral*, when we are *not good*.

Certainly, Lutherans believe in morality, in being “good” in all of the senses of that term, but this comes not from rules, external constraints, and the repeated cycle of failing and trying harder, but from an internal transformation that Christ creates by means of our faith. Without Christ’s justification, we try to justify ourselves. That is, we declare ourselves righteous by insisting on how virtuous we are, which becomes a formula for

hypocrisy, rationalization, and conflict with others. And when we justify ourselves, we end up justifying our *bad behavior*. This explains why moralism is so often accompanied by immorality.

But when we no longer have to justify ourselves because Christ justifies us through His cross, we are freed from all of that. Lutheran theologians say that this kind of justification is “the article upon which the church stands or falls.” When a church plays down the cross, it “falls.” And that is what we are seeing today. Churches are falling.

Recovering Lutheran spirituality—the spirituality of the cross—can revitalize all of the Christian traditions. What I have to say here can be helpful, I think, even to those who have no intention of becoming Lutheran. For example, Baptists are currently split between their “Calvinist” and their “Arminian” factions. A Lutheran view of salvation can show them a way forward. Christians are currently having problems figuring out how they should relate to an increasingly secular world. The Lutheran theology of culture can be helpful in resolving those issues. Christians today have difficulty dealing with suffering. The Lutheran theology of the cross addresses that in a profound and deeply consoling way.

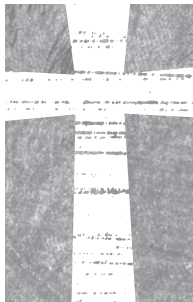
A particular challenge for people today, whether Christians or Nones, is how to live a meaningful life in this seemingly meaningless world. That is, how to be “spiritual” in a “material” world—do we have to be one or the other? Should we run away from the material in an effort to be spiritual? Or should we give up and run away from the spiritual and just be material? Are the spiritual and the material compatible? How do we navigate

their contradictions? Lutheranism offers a unique perspective that can help resolve questions like these so that even the “secular” realm can become charged with spiritual significance.

This third edition is essentially the same book as the earlier editions, but I revised it in light of these new contexts and audiences. I have added material, including some adapted from my book with Trevor Sutton, *Authentic Christianity: How Lutheran Theology Speaks to a Postmodern World* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017). This edition also features a brand-new chapter, addressing a topic of utmost importance that Lutherans have developed in some distinctive ways—namely, Christology.

The late Paul McCain, Publisher at Concordia Publishing House, was the one who asked me to put together this third edition, and I regret that he died before he could see the final product. Through his own work, the books he published, and our friendship, Paul influenced my own theology for the better.

Another reason for this edition is that I have done more study, more worship, and more living. This book is personal, reflecting my own journey, and my journey has continued.





# INTRODUCTION:

## **The First Evangelicals**

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 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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

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2 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), xi.

terms of togas and sandals, rather than everyday human beings like themselves.<sup>3</sup> 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 Christianity. It is as if Lewis’s rooms turned out to be not different at all, with each room off the hallway being identical to all of the rest, with the same bland decor, electronic screens, and pop Muzak. This new popularized Christianity that seems to be driving out all of the distinct Christian traditions is full of good feelings, but it often seems one-dimensional. In the meantime, the riches and insights of the historical Christian traditions are all but forgotten.

Another problem today is that some of these metaphorical “houses” have evicted their former Christian residents. On the outside, they have maintained their ecclesiastical appearance, but inside they are utterly empty. Or they are filled with trash. Or turn out to be prisons. Or are haunted houses, filled with demons. Sir Edmund Spenser, one of Lewis’s favorite authors,

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3 See C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 12.

told the story of a knight who tries to live in the House of Pride, only to be beaten up, tormented by his failures, and imprisoned in the Cave of Despair. He gets rescued, and a woman who symbolizes Truth brings him to another kind of dwelling. On the outside, it is a hovel, not impressive at all, so small that he has to stoop down to enter. But once he is inside, the building is vast and spacious. (Spenser's building that is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside is the source of the TARDIS in *Doctor Who*, as well as the stable in Lewis's *The Last Battle*.) Here the knight is met by a woman who symbolizes Grace. She puts him under the care of three other women—Faith, Hope, and Love—who heal him of his wounds, equip him for his quest, and send him out to slay the dragon. Spenser, who knew something of the spirituality of the cross, called this seemingly unprepossessing but actually wondrous structure the House of Holiness.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, holiness—like the incarnate God who was born in a manger, was homeless, and was crucified on a cross—and the churches that convey this holiness are like that. Not much to look at, perhaps, on the outside, very mundane and ordinary seeming, even off-putting. But when they are known from within, they are glorious.

This holiness I found in Lutheranism. I sensed it the first time I attended the Divine Service and when I worked through the catechism and when I first received Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion. And when I studied vocation, the aura of holiness even began to illuminate my work, my family life,

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4 Sir Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, canto 10.

and my “secular” existence. This book is an introduction to the Lutheran spiritual tradition.

## 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.” To be “evangelical” means focusing 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 ministries do stress salvation through Christ and emphasize “evangelism”—telling other people about this good news—so the term is apt. But originally, the word *evangelical* meant “Lutheran.”

In the years following the Reformation, “evangelicals” were those who agreed with Martin Luther, as opposed to the “reformed,” who agreed with 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 emphasized 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.

Then again, there are also many people who could be described as religious without being spiritual. Their theology

is an abstract intellectual system, a set of correct answers to philosophical questions. They believe in God as an idea, an abstraction, rather than knowing Him as a person. Their religion is a type of information. And, typically, their criterion for religion is their own intellectual understanding, adjusting their theology accordingly. Christianity, though, is no abstraction. God is not a mere concept; rather, He took on flesh and blood. Repentance and faith are personal. So are hope, love, prayer, and the Christian life. These have to do with the Holy *Spirit*, with spirituality.

Spirituality needs theology, and theology needs spirituality. In Christianity, these go together. The conventional view is to distinguish between the “spiritual” and the “material,” with the former being ethereal and ghostlike, and the latter being physical and tangible. Such a dichotomy gives rise to both Gnostics, who deny that the material realm exists, and Materialists, who deny that the spiritual realm exists. Christianity, though, with its doctrines of creation and incarnation—and Lutheranism in particular with its doctrines on sacraments and vocation—brings the spiritual and material together.

So by “spirituality,” I do not mean any kind of content-free, theologically vacuous quest for transcendent experiences for their own sake. Nor do I mean some sort of escape from the physical realm. Rather, spirituality has to do precisely with the content, what fills abstract theology, mundane institutions, the physical realm, and the everyday life of the Christian with their real substance.



The quest for spirituality, even among those who have given up on religion, is, I think, genuine and important. Many people today, in our shallow, mass-produced, materialistic culture, yearn for depth, for richness, for transcendence. Sadly, many people today have not found spiritual substance even in their churches, which seem to have become just as superficial, commercialized, and, in their own way, secularized as the rest of the culture. If their churches have stopped cultivating Christian spirituality, some Christians are turning to church bodies that seem to have preserved it, such as Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy, while others are giving up on Christianity completely, turning instead to pagan or self-manufactured spiritualities.

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.

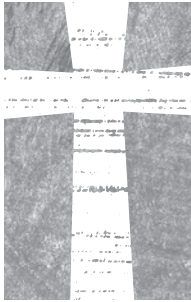
For some reason, Lutherans tend to be uncomfortable with proselytizing, with “stealing sheep” from one church to another, and this is really not my intention in writing this book. I think any Christian could draw on the spiritual insights of the Lutheran tradition that will be described here, though 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 spiritual 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.



## 1

## JUSTIFICATION: The Dynamics of Sin and Grace

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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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5 Adolf Koeberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, trans. John C. Mattes (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936; repr., Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1995), 2.

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 faith. Or, to unpack what that means, we are justified by grace through faith in Christ and His work on the cross.

## **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 high 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—turning morality into 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.”

Again, “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.

Another approach to the spiritual life, besides moralism, is speculation, the assumption that knowledge is the key to spiritual fulfillment. If we only knew the truth, if we could only find the key to understanding the complexities of life, if only we attained the right knowledge, then we would be content. Thus we have the elaborate systems of ideology, the ingenious paradigms of explanation, the impulse to figure out the why of life.

Certainly, the pursuit of knowledge, like the pursuit of morality, is among the worthiest of human endeavors. And yet, as a spiritual path, it, too, keeps running into dead ends. The human mind is just not big enough to take in the whole of existence.

Many answers have been offered, but they keep changing, as the history of human thought shows. One school of philosophy is succeeded by another, and even scientific theories are continually revised. It seems impossible to settle upon truths that are final and indisputable.

Certainly, spiritual truths—such as knowledge of an utterly transcendent and infinite God—stagger the human intellect. To paraphrase the Samaritan woman, the well is deep, and we have nothing to draw with (John 4:11).

Furthermore, human systems have a way of reflecting human desires more than objective reality. Ideologies that claim to account for everything have often become the pretext for power plays, deception, and oppression. The Enlightenment of the French Revolution gave us the Reign of Terror and

Napoleon. The progressive-sounding tenets of Marxism gave us the gulags. As with moralism, the way of speculation often becomes simply another occasion for human pride, manifesting itself in an elitism that scorns ordinary people, a private arrogance that shuts out the rest of the world. In the meantime, the truth seems ever more elusive, just beyond our reach.

And even if we knew, what would we have? In Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, the hero sells his soul to the devil for knowledge. But when he finally knows for sure what he had dreamed of learning—the details of celestial mechanics, the disputed facts of astronomy, the heights and depths of the educated mind—the knowledge he has achieved at such a great cost suddenly seems pointless, unsatisfying, and unconnected to his true spiritual condition. Now I know. But so what?

In my own case, I pored over books of every kind in my search for spiritual illumination. To be sure, they all contradicted one another, and I wondered about putting my trust in a single human being, no matter how wise he seemed, who knew as little as I did. But I was engaged with filling my head while neglecting my actual life.

Though the ways of moralism and speculation are followed by religious and nonreligious people alike, perhaps the most appealing mode of spirituality today is mysticism: attaining the ecstatic experience of becoming one with God. Transcending ordinary life to attain direct communion with the divine, leaving behind this world to ascend into the spiritual realms, having a direct experience of the supernatural and tapping into its power for our own purposes—these have been the goals of

mystics and spiritual masters of all religions. The techniques of achieving such experiences are varied, from ascetic self-denial to elaborate methodologies of meditation, but they all promise spiritual ecstasy and supernatural empowerment.

One problem here is the fine line between the self “becoming one with God” and the self becoming God. Merging with the divine can have as its hidden agenda self-deification. The most mystical religions, such as Hinduism, and the popular secularized mysticisms, such as those that constitute the New Age Movement, conclude by invoking “the god within.” The climax of Hinduism is the realization that “Atman [the god of the inmost self] and Brahma [the transcendent deity] are one.” New Age self-help seminars try to get across the idea that “you create your own reality.” The ultimate discovery in many of these mystical systems, expressed more or less directly, is that “you are God.”

Even Christian mystical experience, while drawing away from such formulations, can veer close to claiming supernatural power, from divine inspiration—with the Holy Spirit speaking to the person directly—to the power to work miracles. Mysticism can come dangerously close to the serpent’s primal temptation: “You will be like God” (Genesis 3:5).

Even when mysticism does not go that far, its temptation is to use God for one’s own purposes—to achieve an intensely pleasurable experience, to score a “spiritual high,” to gain power to make one’s life more pleasant. This is the way of magicians and con artists, as well as spiritual masters. The notion itself that the spirit is something that can be “mastered” shows the