

Fall 2017 Luther Lecture 6
Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Luther and the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit has been referred to as the “orphan” of the Holy Trinity due to the fact that, in Lutheran preaching and theology, all the emphasis has been placed on salvation as a gift of God accomplished in God’s Son Jesus Christ. Indeed, salvation was, in fact, accomplished by Jesus Christ. On the cross, Christ bore our sins and effectively canceled them out. In his resurrection, he opened the way for us to eternal life. As we saw last week, Christ is at the center of Christian theology and proclamation. The message of the church is Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul said, “I preach Christ and him crucified.”

However, the Christian creeds, based on the witness of scripture, confess the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Both the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds contain three articles, each devoted to one of the three persons. The first article confesses God the Father as creator of all things, the second God—the Son—as our Savior, and the third God as that person of the Trinity who calls and unifies the church, brings the forgiveness of sins, and grants eternal life through the resurrection of the body. Obviously, Luther affirms the role of the Spirit in all the items listed in the two creeds.

Before getting more specific with respect to the Spirit’s role in our lives, and in the work of salvation, it is important to note that Luther regards the Holy Spirit, according to orthodox Christian tradition, as the co-equal and the fully divine third person of the Triune God. Based on Jesus’ statements to his disciples in the gospel of John, the Spirit is described as having “proceeded” from the Father and the Son.” While the Son was eternally “begotten” of the Father, the Spirit is sent from both. This became a controversy with the eastern Orthodox churches that wanted to interpret that text as saying the Spirit proceeded only from the Father. Called the *filioque* clause—that the Spirit was sent by both Father and Son, this controversy was the reason for the split between the Latin church in the west and the Greek church in the east around 1000 AD. However, of more importance in this controversy, was the insistence in the west of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome over the whole church. The Orthodox rejected any such thing.

The point is that Luther accepted the western tradition that the Holy Spirit was fully divine, co-equal to Father and Son, and that the Spirit proceeded from or was sent into our world and lives by both to accomplish the very things laid out in the third article of the creed.

More specifically for Luther, while Jesus Christ--the incarnate and pre-existing Son of God, begotten of the Father from all eternity--while the Son became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, he so entered history at a specific time, meaning that the eternal had entered time in Jesus Christ. While he accomplished the work of salvation through his crucifixion for our sin, and his resurrection, effectively overcoming sin, the devil, and death on our

behalf, nevertheless, a distinction has to be made between accomplishing salvation and distributing salvation to individual believers. Salvation was accomplished by Christ in 30 AD. However, the salvation he accomplished is conveyed to believers of all times and places by the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who brings us freedom from our sin through forgiveness, brings us the righteousness of God as a gift, and brings us eternal life, both in the present as hope and in the future as the resurrection of the body to new and imperishable life.

This means that we have to make a distinction between salvation as a work accomplished by God in Christ at a particular time in history, and salvation received through the gift of the Spirit bestowed on us by both the Father and the Son. The salvation won by Christ in the year 30 AD can do us no good unless it is received within our lifetime. Here again, just as the eternal enters time in the birth of Jesus Christ, just so the eternal enters our lives as we receive the Holy Spirit in an "existential moment" at some point during our lifetime. This is what Luther means when he says that while Jesus Christ does the work of salvation, the Holy Spirit distributes that very saving work to us as individuals and to the church as the Body of Christ, unified by the same Spirit of God.

As is the case with other doctrines of the church, Luther discussed and writes about the Holy Spirit in a variety of documents, each emphasizing another aspect of the Spirit's work among us. In the Large Catechism, in the section on the third article of the creed, Luther focuses on the word "Holy" when writing about the Spirit. The Spirit is called "Holy" says Luther because it is the Spirit that makes us "holy." The word normally used for this is "sanctification." Sanctification—growth in holiness—begins with the birth of faith in our hearts. Since Luther, in his explanation of the first article, defines faith as the "trust of the heart", and that our god will be whatever we entrust ourselves to for our ultimate good and for our refuge in any time of trouble, the Spirit gives us the gift of faith in Jesus Christ as precisely this. Therefore, the Spirit brings Christ out of the past and into our present in such a way that we are enabled to put the faith of our hearts in Christ as our ultimate good and the One to whom we turn in any time of trouble. This being the case, the Spirit both conveys the living reality of Jesus Christ our savior to us; the Spirit also grants us the faith we place in him as a gift. Apart from the Spirit, we cannot know the living Christ as our Lord and Savior. And apart from the Spirit, it follows that neither can we experience the birth of faith in our hearts.

The ongoing work of the Spirit in this regard is what affects the growth of faith from the implanted seed of the word (more of that later) to the most important and influential source of change in us. Growth in faith is also growth in holiness for as we more fully receive the love of Christ into our hearts, just so, this love changes and transforms us over time such that we can love God and our neighbor. This is what sanctification means: letting go of those things that are not God but which we regard and seek as our ultimate good and source of happiness and security, and seeking these things in Jesus Christ instead. Because Jesus releases us from our sinful behavior and from the motivation for that behavior, he frees us from sin and for love. Love, is not our own creation. It is not produced by our strength or efforts. It is a gift that is confessed or bestowed on us as the Spirit conveys Christ into our hearts. Therefore the law, that we are to love God and

work for the good of our neighbor without need of repayment, is a gift of God received by faith. Likewise, our righteousness before God, which is non other than the love that exists in our hearts, is also a gift. We cannot love God without first receiving his love for us. Therefore, the love with which we love others and God comes first from God to us. Any attempts to try and do this apart from the presence of Christ--as Christ is given to us by the Spirit--will fail. Our hearts will remain bound to self-interest and our behavior will be characterized as disobedience.

This further means that the gift of God's grace comes from heaven to earth. The road to God is from above to below, not from below to above, as those who strive to make themselves holy suggest. God has descended to us in Jesus Christ, freeing us from the need to somehow ascend to heaven through the renunciation of the world. Therefore Christians continue to live in the world, to marry, to have children, to work in society, to earn a living, and to enjoy the gifts of God as they exist in this world. The question is not, "How do we renounce the world to become spiritual?" We don't. Rather, the question is, "How do we live in the world without being of the world?" This process is effected in us through the Holy Spirit precisely because the Holy Spirit brings us to Christ who has accomplished our salvation in his death and resurrection.

But how does the Holy Spirit come to us with the gift of Christ and bestow his saving work on us and in us? Around the year 1525, when the people Luther referred to as "fanatics" and "heavenly prophets" who "swallowed the Holy spirit feathers and all," he wrote a book to clarify this question entitled Against the Heavenly Prophets. These self-appointed spokespersons for the Holy Spirit had told the peasant population that God was leading them to rebel against their noble overlords. While Luther sympathized with their plight, telling the princes that they needed to enact reforms that would improve their lot in life, Luther completely rejected violent rebellion on Christian grounds. Not only because he believed God had ordained secular authority based partly on Romans 13:1-3, but also because he knew and actually witnessed that this rebellion would lead to a bloodbath.

The theological issue related to the Holy Spirit was in regard to whether or not the Spirit inspired individuals with new messages from God. Moreover, if such were the case, how could anyone else know whether or not such inspirations were really granted by the Spirit? Perhaps they were the result of the devil's work.

Therefore, in this book, Luther laid out his understanding of how the Spirit worked in our hearts based on his exegesis of scripture. His conclusion was that the spirit does not work independently of the threefold word of God: written, proclaimed, and enacted in the sacraments. In other words, the Holy Spirit binds himself to the word such that, as individual believers read, hear, or participate in the word sacramentally, the Spirit conveys the truth of that word to the believer. Faith therefore is the product of encountering the word externally along with the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. When we read or hear Christ preached, the Holy Spirit conveys Christ to us inwardly so that we might receive his forgiveness, love, and new life by faith. It is not possible or theologically defensible to separate the word from the Spirit. Under the influence of the

Spirit, the word becomes "a word event" because the Spirit is the power of the word to change lives.

Elsewhere, Luther also pointed out that before a person is ready to receive the word in the power of the Spirit, the person has to have come to feel the need for it. As we discussed elsewhere, Luther divides the word into law and gospel. The law convicts us of our sin by showing us that we do not and indeed cannot obey it. Left to our own devices before the law therefore, we would be driven to despair, hopeless of ever achieving a right relationship with God. Luther believed the Spirit is also active in this process. This he called the Spirit's "alien" work, for the Spirit's proper work is to bring us to faith in Christ. But if a person feels no need for God's mercy and forgiveness in Christ, such a person will never seek it. Therefore, in order to convince us of our need for Christ, the Spirit works through the law so that we will seek Christ.

This particular perspective on the Spirit's work also confirms the fact that the church belongs in the third article of the creed. For in order to be in a position to hear the word and to participate in the sacrament, we must first be placed "in the lap of the church." Christian worship revolves around the means of grace: the word and sacraments. Therefore, the church is "the creature of the gospel." Because the church is where we encounter the threefold word, the church is where the Spirit is active bringing people to faith, and aiding them in their growth in faith.

This means that the acting subject in the worship service is God. The preacher is only the mouthpiece for God the Holy Spirit for no one comes to faith part from the inner testimony of the Spirit. The Spirit creates faith, increases faith, and preserves faith. The preacher has no power over a person's heart in this regard. The preacher can proclaim the word but only God can produce faith in the word.

It should be said that Luther was well aware of the fact that not everyone who hears the word will come to faith in Christ. While it is out of bounds for anyone to make judgments as to who will and who will not come to faith, nevertheless, it is clear that the word has little if any effect on some. It's best to simply quote Jesus in this regard. "You will know them by their fruits."

In sum, the power to produce faith comes from heaven to earth. This happened within human history with Jesus Christ in whom the eternal entered time. He accomplished salvation through his death and resurrection. The Spirit distributes the salvation Christ accomplished through the threefold word, encountered as we receive the means of grace in the context of the church. The Father sent the Son to save us, and the Spirit delivers that salvation to us. Thus, we believe in one God.