

FEATURES OF LUTHER'S SPIRITUALITY

A Paper

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Theologian Robert Webber describes a dinner party where the subject of spirituality was introduced. Once broached, the topic generated a number of culturally acceptable responses reminiscent of an article that once described “Spirituality in America” as “what we believe, how we pray, where we find God.”¹ The article, from Newsweek magazine, defined spirituality as the “passion for an immediate, transcendent experience of God.”² The search for spiritual passion in modern Western culture takes many forms. Webber’s dinner guests identified with many of the forms of spirituality mentioned in the Newsweek article, culminating in the host being asked his belief. When Webber surprised everyone by answering he was a committed Christian, “who believes Jesus to be ‘the way, the truth, and the life,’”³ the guests responded in startled silence. When Webber asked the guests what they would now ‘do with him,’ one guest responded, “Explain yourself. I’m willing to hear you out.”⁴ Webber made clear to his guests that in order to explain himself he would have to tell a story. He quickly added, “All spiritualities are based on a story. You have to know the story of a particular religion to understand its spirituality.”⁵ Webber was by no means the first to define his spirituality through the story of the gospel as recounted in

¹J. Adler, “Spirituality in America,” *Newsweek*, September 5, 2005, 9.

²Robert E. Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 14.

³Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 14.

⁴Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 14.

⁵Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 14.

Scripture. Martin Luther also defined his spirituality in this way. For Luther, *sola scriptura* would be no empty battle cry. As Luther grew to understand how the gospel story was at the root of his own spirituality, what changed was more than the opinions of a handful of dinner guests.

Thesis and Methodology

Martin Luther's spirituality demonstrates a strong connection to the gospel story. As an Augustinian monk, Luther would have gained much of his intimate knowledge of Scripture and the gospel story through use of a common monastic strategy for studying Scripture that involves three steps; *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation), and *illuminatio seu contemplation* (illumination or contemplation).⁶ In this paper, I will use the same structure to explore some of the major features of Martin Luther's spirituality, demonstrating his piety's connection to Scripture. Within my exploration, I will lean heavily on the commentaries and primary source documents found in Krey and Krey's volume, *Luther's Spirituality in The Classics of Western Spirituality*.

***Oratio* (prayer)**

When Martin Luther approached the gospel story he began with prayer.⁷ Luther understood that the need for prayer was due to the fact that "the biblical text overthrows all human reason and forces the reader to call upon the Holy Spirit for help."⁸ A believer's prayer life is not just an exercise in spiritual obedience. Rather, Luther saw prayer as a way for believers to build their faith story in a kind of lived theology.⁹ Liturgical theologian Simon Chan

⁶Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther's Spirituality in The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), xiii.

⁷Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther's Spirituality*, xiii.

⁸Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther's Spirituality*, xiii.

⁹Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther's Spirituality*, xxvii.

articulates this opinion when he relates prayer and worship to living and active theology; “to speak of worship (prayer) as a fitting response implies that in the very act of worship (prayer) we are participating in the God who is truth.”¹⁰ During Augustine’s time, the concept *lex orandi – lex credendi*, the rule of prayer is the rule of faith,¹¹ clearly articulated the conversational relationship between prayer and faith. As an Augustinian monk, Luther would have been influenced by this perspective on prayer and faith. To this end, Luther knew that one of the most important tools to reform the church would be the way the church expresses its prayer and worship.

“There are no greater contributions by Luther to the devotional spirituality of his followers than the small and the large catechisms that he wrote in 1529 and his hymnody.”¹² Philip and Peter Krey relate that in the organization of both catechisms, Luther moves from commandments, to the creed, to prayer.¹³ In doing so, Luther encouraged families to worship and pray together within their households, thanking God for his gifts and establishing the “sanctity of every household” – elevating the spirituality of everyday people and moving away from the “professionalization” of the monastery.¹⁴ For Luther, prayer and worship were the front door for understanding the gospel story, ecclesial renewal and the foundation of personal spirituality.

Meditatio (meditation)

Translating the Bible into German is one of Luther’s enduring works. In the preface to his German writings, Luther remarks that he translated the Bible so that the Bible and not his own

¹⁰Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 48.

¹¹Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 48.

¹²Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 183.

¹³Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 183.

¹⁴Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 184.

books would be accessible to all.¹⁵ Luther believed that if the German people could hear and read Scripture in their own language, their spirituality would be greatly enriched.¹⁶ Luther writes in *An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg* (1523), “Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word. Again, we profit by nothing as much as by the Word. For the whole Scripture shows that the Word should have free course among Christians.”¹⁷ Though many of the significant renewals Luther brought to corporate worship involved the deletion of items he considered ‘prattling and rattling,’ Luther retained the eucharistic words of Jesus “to the exclusion of almost everything else.”¹⁸ Concerning the importance of the gospel story used in worship, Luther believed that “The Word – summarized in the eucharistic words of Jesus, and proclaimed and preached at every liturgical service – becomes the true center of authentic Christian worship.”¹⁹

To Luther, meditation involved Scripture and repetitious reading. Krey and Krey explain how according to Luther’s understanding, “one must meditate by using all one’s senses, especially that of repetitive hearing, to experience the external word for understanding.”²⁰ In his preface to the German writings, Luther expounds, “you need to know that the holy scripture is the kind of book that makes the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, since none of them teaches about eternal life except this alone.”²¹ Using Psalm 119 as a biblical framework, Luther

¹⁵Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 119.

¹⁶Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 119.

¹⁷Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey (eds.), *Form of the Mass 1523 and German Mass 1526 in Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 77.

¹⁸Nathan B. Mitchell, *Protestant Critique and Liturgical Reform in The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 320.

¹⁹Nathan B. Mitchell, *Protestant Critique and Liturgical Reform*, 320.

²⁰Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 119.

²¹Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 122.

prescribes meditation as the repetition of scripture reading “not only in your heart but externally, aloud, so that, in constantly repeating the words, you can compare your oral words with the ones written literally...reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection in order to understand what the Holy Spirit means by them.”²² For Luther, one’s consumption and internal abiding of Scripture was crucial to one’s spirituality.

Et Illuminatio seu Contemplatio
(Illumination and Contemplation)

Gregory of Nyssa referred to those who lived the monastic life as martyrs – witnesses to the gospel story and the greatest models of the faith.²³ In the sixteenth century, this impression largely remained. By comparison, Martin Luther’s spirituality involved approaching the gospel story in prayer, then meditating on Scripture. If a Christian would commit to these steps, Luther believed the Holy Spirit provided spiritual illumination. The illumination Luther gained through the Holy Spirit’s unveiling of Scripture pointed him to an expression of piety that was more communal and less individual. Luther believed that expressing spiritual disciplines in the everyday world provided a more effective and sincere spirituality, fulfilling the gospel’s great commandment and great commission. Luther wrote, “everyday relationships and duties prove the greatest spiritual discipline of all.”²⁴

For Luther, living out one’s spirituality in accordance with Scripture also means suffering. In his sermon at Coburg on cross and suffering, Luther instructs believers that they will suffer, and their afflictions will be given to them by Satan and the world.²⁵ Luther writes, “first, we must note that Christ’s suffering did not just deliver us from the devil, death, and sins;

²²Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 122.

²³Gregory of Nyssa. *The Life of Saint Macrina*, trans. Kevin Corrigan. 2001 ed.; repr.(Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 37.

²⁴Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, xxv.

²⁵Phillip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 151.

his suffering is also an example for us that we should follow in our own suffering.”²⁶ Real suffering hurts. If a believer chooses their own kind of suffering, Luther intimates, “it would not be suffering if it did not hurt very much.”²⁷ Luther’s preoccupation with suffering comes, again, from an orientation toward the gospel story. Luther points out in his sermon at Coburg that, “we should also be crucified with him (Christ) and suffer with him, as he clearly shows in many places in the gospels. ‘Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me,’ says the Lord, ‘is not worthy of me.’”²⁸ Luther’s teaching on suffering helps Christians understand that one of our primary responses to prayer and meditation on Scripture will be the formation of a spirituality that prompts believers to act as the hands and feet of Christ.

Conclusion

Luther’s commentary on Psalm 117 provides a poignant demonstration of his spirituality, intersecting Scripture, the mandate for good works in response to God’s grace, and the need to endure the temptations and sufferings of Satan. This expression comes as Luther elaborates on one of the seven deadly sins, *acedia* – otherwise known as sloth. Luther writes, “The Word of God demands that we do not race over it and think that, by doing so, we have completely grounded ourselves in understanding it, as superficial, overstuffed, and bored souls do.”²⁹ Luther goes on to name this state as the condition of sloth. Sloth is a “joylessness that all too often gives way to despair over God’s purposes, plans, and willingness to love and help us in ways we cannot even imagine.”³⁰ Luther exhorts believers through Paul’s words in Romans, that

²⁶Phillip D. Krev and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 152.

²⁷Phillip D. Krev and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 153.

²⁸Matt 10:25, ESV.; Phillip D. Krev and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 152.

²⁹Phillip D. Krev and Peter D. S. Krey (eds.), *Luther’s Spirituality*, 129.

³⁰John N. Blackwell, *The Noonday Demon: Recognizing and Conquering the Deadly Sin of Sloth* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004), 12.

Christians “not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”³¹ Whether through this commentary on Psalm 117, one of his sermons, or the renewal of liturgy, Luther encourages Christians to build their spirituality on the foundation of the gospel story. According to Luther’s writing and life work, believers in Jesus Christ should fill themselves with prayer (*oratio*), meditate on God’s Word with fear, humility and diligence (*meditatio*), and allow themselves to be illuminated by the Holy Spirit through practical contemplation involving the service of others and endurance of suffering (*Et Illuminatio seu Contemplatio*).

³¹Rom 12:11.

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