
Faith, Love, and Mystery: Spiritual Legacies of the Lutheran Reformation

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In honor of the ministries of May and Winston Persaud, this article reflects upon the ways that people live and experience Christian faith, especially from the perspective of global Lutheranism. Such experiential depth—including the generous Presbyterian background that May has brought to her life among Lutherans—has characterized the Persauds’ lives both as scholars and community members. Their shared witness to the reality of Christ’s grace and the activity of the Holy Spirit have long been inspiring to me and many others, constituting a core element of how Winston and May have positively impacted those around them.

Lutheran theology has from its beginning contained strong elements of religious experience, including experiences that might now be given labels such as spirituality, spiritual formation, and mysticism. Indeed, this article asserts that personal experience is a *sine qua non* of the teachings and practices of Lutheran Reformation and global Lutheran traditions, without which any description of the theology is incomplete. While such a faith is decidedly “personal,” it is also grounded in the shared reality of Christ’s saving work for the entire world through his cross and resurrection. Through the Word of God and the holy sacraments, this communal experience is given as a “for you” that is both singular and plural. In the Lutheran tradition, the personal experience of salvation leads not to selfishness or isolation but to love of others as an invitation and immersion into caring about the world with the love that Christ has first given us.

In a world hungry for meaningful words and actions, specific practices of Bible study, prayer, and service to others are key Lutheran spiritual practices worth claiming, naming, and putting to good use. Already when Christians worship, they are participating in a multifaceted spiritual practice that integrates singing, prayer, readings from sacred scripture, and communal reflection on the Word. Described in the Augsburg Confession as the assembly of believers gathered around God’s word and the sacraments,¹ such worship can rightly be viewed as a personal and communal encounter with the presence of the living God and tangible means of grace. While such spiritual experiences are by no means unique to the Lutheran tradition, Lutheran commitments to justification

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by faith alone and the reform of worship around the reception of such offer a set of spiritual experiences that have distinctly shaped experiences of Christ’s gospel.

Experiential origins

This experiential faith tradition began already with Martin Luther’s so-called “Reformation breakthrough,” which included a spiritual encounter that meets scholarly definitions of mysticism. Historian Berndt Hamm, for instance, described Christian mysticism as “a personal direct and holistic experience of the blessed nearness of God, which leads all the way to a profound union with God.”² Such a personal experience of God’s blessed nearness stirred and propelled Luther’s passionate efforts to reform the church.

Although stemming from later in his life, Luther’s 1545 retelling of how he came to his Reformation theology sometime in the 1510s invokes precisely this spiritual, experiential, and mystical language. Recalling this early spiritual experience later in his career, Luther wrote:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night,

1. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 200) [hereafter BC], 42.1.

2. Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, translated by Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2014), 53.

I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates...

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.³

Spiritual language, typical of late medieval mysticism, fills this account, for instance, the words “sweetest,” “born again,” and “the gate of paradise.”⁴ While wrestling with scripture in his diverse roles of Bible professor, Augustinian brother, and local preacher, Luther experienced how God’s righteousness—understood as mercy rather than judgment—unlocked a liberating encounter with a loving Lord: God’s righteousness given freely and received by faith opened for him the gates of heaven. Indeed, Luther’s personal investment in a living, grace-filled encounter with God helps explain the tenacity with which he taught and defended his theology when challenged, opposed, and even threatened by massively powerful forces of church and state.

The Way of the Cross

This transformative relationship with the Word of God is evident in the *Ninety-five Theses* that launched the Reformation in 1517. A work aimed at addressing church reforms, the *Ninety-five Theses* are rightly remembered for how they challenged problematic teachings and practices related to the sale of indulgences. At the same time, Luther’s theses began and ended by describing the Christian life experientially as a journey with Christ that goes through trials and struggles to experience the blessings of the Lord.

Luther’s first thesis clearly defines repentance in the Christian life not as a set of rituals or requirements to perform but as a relationship with God to be experienced in transformative ways: “When our Lord and master Jesus Christ said, repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”⁵ Luther’s critique of indulgences was not only about potential financial abuse but even more a question of whether the church should be “indulgent” with forgiveness in this way, because encouraging Christians to go through the experience of repenting and trusting themselves to God’s mercy seemed to be both more biblical and more salutary than avoiding such hardships. As Timothy Wengert noted, “Luther’s earliest concern was not that heaven and the gospel were for sale but rather [that] escape from judgment and

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from the law were!”⁶

This idea that Christians should view their struggles with sin as part of what it means to receive the transformation mercy of God is visible at the end of the *Ninety-five Theses*: “94. Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their head through penalties, death and hell; 95. And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace.”⁷ Although the Indulgence Controversy escalated largely due to issues of money and authority, Luther’s theological critique of indulgences was built upon the personal, experiential belief that faith is a relationship of walking with Christ in humility and trust.

From such a perspective, what does a Christian life look like? It looks like a daily journey of recognizing brokenness in the world, turning to Christ in faith, and receiving God’s free gifts of mercy, reconciliation, and renewal. In response to the papal condemnation of his teaching that sin remains in Christians throughout their lives, Luther described faith as an ongoing relationship with Christ. Referring to the parable of the woman who added a pinch of yeast that leavens the whole batch of bread, he wrote:

The second parable [about the forgiveness of sin as an ongoing process] is written in Matthew 13. It tells of the leaven which the woman mixes in three measures of meal until it is thoroughly leavened. The new leaven is the faith and grace of the Spirit. It does not leaven the whole lump at once but gently, and gradually, we become like this new leaven and eventually, a bread of God. This life, therefore, is not godliness, but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything

3. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986) [hereafter LW], 34:337.

4. Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 52-54.

5. LW 31:25, citing Matthew 4:17.

6. Timothy Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, with Introduction, Commentary, and Study Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), xxviii-xxxi; citation from xxix-xxx.

7. LW 31:33, citing Acts 14:22.

is being cleansed.⁸

For Luther, the Christian life is a journey of spiritual growth and progress marked not by avoidance of sin or suffering but rather by ongoing conformity to the cross of Christ and its gracious power to bring life out of death.

Living in the Word

Teaching how Christians can live into the transformative power and promises of God's Word through study of Scripture, Luther modified the medieval monastic pattern from *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *contemplatio* (prayer, meditation, and contemplation) to the experiential pattern of *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* (prayer, meditation, and struggle).

Beginning with *oratio*, Luther encouraged people to "pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding"⁹ Next, a person should meditate on the Word "not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them."¹⁰ Worth noticing at this point is the fact that Luther has invoked the Holy Spirit in his description of both *oratio* and *meditatio*. Bible study is truly a Spirit-filled encounter.

Then comes *tentatio*, or in German *Anfechtung*, which is an experiential word that means affliction, suffering, temptation, testing, or trials. Instead of a final step of encountering God through contemplation (whether understood as a mental activity or as the passive reception of truth from God),¹¹ Luther commended the testing and wrestling that comes from living out one's faith in daily life. Hard as they might be, such struggles reveal that God's Word powerfully speaks to us and empowers us amid life's challenges. As he wrote,

This [*tentatio*, *Anfechtung*] is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's word is. Wisdom beyond all wisdom... For as soon as God's word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor [of theology] of you, and by his assaults [*Anfechtungen*] will teach you to seek and love God's word.¹²

For Luther, knowing or considering God's promises intellectually or doctrinally is only part of the relationship with God. The fuller view appears when we learn to apply God's mercy and love to life's

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most challenging situations, experiencing in the flesh the power of God that is promised and given in the Word.

Receiving Christ's benefits

These spiritual practices of encountering God's transformation through lived experiences of repentance, faith, trials, and the free gift of God's grace are deeply embedded in the teachings and practices of the Lutheran Reformation as a whole, including in the theology of Philip Melancthon, Luther's close colleague. In his introduction to the first systematic theology book of the Lutheran Reformation, Melancthon wrote, "to know Christ is to know his benefits."¹³ This means that theological teachings are incomplete until Christ's benefits and blessings have reached real people's lives.

Melancthon's strong connection between theology and experience in 1521 has direct parallels in the *Small Catechism* that Luther published in 1529. Just as Melancthon had connected knowing Christ with receiving Christ's benefits, Luther moved from definitions of the sacraments—asking, "What is baptism?" and "What is the Sacrament of the Altar?"—to discussion of what benefits the sacraments give: "What gifts or benefits does baptism grant?" and "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?"¹⁴ With the language of gifts and benefits, the reformers clearly reminded Christians that faith really is supposed to be good for us. The faith that looks to God for all life and goodness is truly transformative, powerful, and positive. We are right to expect and receive blessings from our participation in Christ's church.

As Luther wrote, the sacrament of baptism "brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of Christ declare."¹⁵ In that light, baptism is not a ritual to perform

8. LW 32:24, referring to Matthew 13:33.

9. LW 34:284-285.

10. LW 34:285.

11. Jennifer Hornyak Wojciechowski, *Tending the Garden: A History of Christian Monasticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025), 35-36.

12. LW 34:286-287.

13. Philip Melancthon, "Loci Communes Theologici [1521]," in Wilhelm Pauck, editor, *Melancthon and Bucer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 21.

14. BC 359.1-2, 5-6 and 362.1-2, 5-6.

15. BC 359.5-6.

or a theology to understand. It is God's action for us, which gives the good things of God that it promises.

Similarly, the *Small Catechism's* description of Holy Communion says that "forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation."¹⁶ For Luther, the forgiveness of sin, which is received in Holy Communion and through the proclamation of the gospel, expresses the full restoration, reconciliation, liberation, and rebirth of life with Christ. With such words from Luther and Melancthon, we see that definitions of Lutheran sacramental theology include the actual reception of God's benefits in the lives of believers.

Union with Christ

Melancthon's *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (1531) connected these embodied eucharistic blessings with Scripture and early church writings. Citing the fifth-century bishop Cyril of Alexandria and the apostle Paul, Melancthon described the union of believers with God in Holy Communion by saying:

we confess our judgment that in the Lord's Supper, the body and blood of Christ are truly and substantially present and are truly distributed with those things that are seen, the bread and wine, to those who receive the sacrament... For he [Cyril] says, "We do not deny that we are joined spiritually to Christ by true faith and sincere love. But we do entirely deny that we have no kind of connection with him according to the flesh... For who has ever doubted that Christ is a vine in this way and we are truly the branches, deriving life from him for ourselves? Listen to Paul as he says, 'we are all one body in Christ; although we are many, we are nevertheless one in him, for we all partake of the one bread.' Does he perhaps think that the power of the mystical benediction is unknown to us? Since this is in us, does it not also by the communication of Christ's flesh, cause Christ to dwell in us bodily?"... in the Lord's Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and substantially present and are truly offered with those things that are seen, bread and wine. Moreover, we are talking about the presence of the living Christ, for we know that death no longer has dominion over him.¹⁷

Here Melancthon affirmed the spiritual, mystical, and physical presence of the risen Christ in believers, given with the bread and wine in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Showing that this view survived the ensuing decades and centuries, theologians of the Lutheran Orthodox era (from the late 1500s to the early 1700s) retained the category of mystical union in their teaching about the Lord's Supper. As Heinrich Schmid, a nineteenth-century compiler of Lutheran Orthodoxy wrote:

In addition to such an intimate internal union between Christ and the believer, the spirituality of the Lutheran tradition sends believers to serve their neighbors. For instance, Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian* connects the inward liberation that comes from faith with an outward care for others.

The Holy Scriptures assert that God dwells in the believer and express by this a peculiar union of God with a person, which Dogmatics distinguish as a mystical union... [This] union is not merely figurative, but literal and actual, so that it cannot be described otherwise than as the union of the substance of God with the substance of a person, in consequence of which God pours out the fulness of God's gracious gifts upon the regenerate.¹⁸

Thus, the theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy—remembered for their rigorous intellectualizing—retained this mystical, spiritual, experiential conception of the sacraments in Christian life that Luther and Melancthon also taught.

Serving neighbors as a spiritual practice

In addition to such an intimate internal union between Christ and the believer, the spirituality of the Lutheran tradition sends believers to serve their neighbors. For instance, Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian* connects the inward liberation that comes from faith with an outward care for others. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."¹⁹

Indeed, after spending the first part of this treatise describing the benefits that come through faith (including union with Christ!), Luther focused on the external side of Christian faith, not merely as an ethical impulse or a path for spiritual discipline (valid as such motives are) but rather as participation in the being of God. Luther wrote: "We conclude therefore, that Christians live not in themselves, but in Christ and in their neighbor. Otherwise, they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith, in their neighbor through love. By faith, they are caught up beyond themselves into God. By love they descend beneath themselves

16. BC 362.5-6.

17. BC 184.1-185.4.

18. Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Third Edition, revised and translated by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1899), 480; amended for gender inclusivity.

19. LW 31:344.

into their neighbor. Yet they always remain in God and in God's love."²⁰ With such passages, Luther made radical claims of both the deep connections with God that exist through faith and the manifestation of that faith through service to neighbor. Such a spirituality, therefore, includes love for others as much as it does personal union with God.

Luther's theology was not lost with his death but became embedded in the tradition. The next generation of Lutheran reformers cited Luther in the *Formula of Concord* (1577) to connect the salvation and liberation that comes through faith in Christ with good works done for the sake of others. This quotation from Luther's preface to Romans, Article 4 of the *Formula of Concord* asserts:

Faith is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God. It kills the old 'Adam' and makes us altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and all powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever, who gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are... Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake life itself on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes people glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God, who has shown this grace. Thus, it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.²¹

The inspiring and vivid images in this passage demonstrate the extent to which the later Lutheran tradition continued to connect personal faith and spiritual experience with an immersion in service to others.

Singing, serving, praying

The expressiveness of singing presents an additional form of embodied spirituality from the Lutheran Reformation. Just as good works serve neighbors through loving actions, the Lutheran reformers valued how music enriched private devotion, corporate worship, and community gatherings. Lauding the role of music in Christian life, Luther wrote:

I plainly judge, and do not hesitate to affirm, that except for theology there is no art that could be put on the same

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level with music, since except for theology [music] alone produces what otherwise only theology can do, namely, a calm and joyful disposition. Manifest proof [of this is the fact] that the devil, the creator of saddening cares and disquieting worries, takes flight at the sound of music almost as he takes flight at the word of theology. This is the reason why the prophets did not make use of any art except music; when setting forth their theology they did it not as geometry, not as arithmetic, not as astronomy, but as music, so that they held theology and music most tightly connected, and proclaimed trust through Psalms and songs.²²

With the Psalms and canticles such as the Magnificat in mind, Luther believed that theology and music both proclaim the gospel. Indeed, the reformers intentionally embraced congregational singing and the composition of new gospel-centered hymns. Reformers wrote hymn paraphrases of the Psalms, sections of the catechism, and new hymn lyrics for use throughout the liturgical year. As Gracia Grindal writes: "Luther clearly thought that the new Evangelical hymn [as a genre] was in fact the Word of God, capable of kindling faith in the heart of the hearer. He assumed that the purpose of his hymns was evangelical. Their rhetoric was to be directed to the congregation. All singers were, to some extent, preachers of the Word."²³

Not only to be learned and meditated upon through hymns that Luther wrote for various sections, Luther's *Small Catechism* stands on its own as a strong spiritual and devotional resource. While Luther's explanations are themselves highly edifying, when Luther talked about learning the catechism, he meant that people should spend time directly with the primary texts themselves, especially the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, and Lord's Prayer. As he wrote in his preface to the *Large Catechism*:

Many regard the catechism as a simple, trifling teaching, which they can absorb and master at one reading and then toss the book into a corner as if they are ashamed to read it again... But this I say for myself: I am also a

20. LW 31:371; amended for gender inclusivity.

21. BC 576.1-12, citing LW 35:370-371.

22. LW 49:428.

23. Gracia Grindal, "Hymnody," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, Timothy J. Wengert, general editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 350.

doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly.²⁴

The building blocks of faith that we meet in the primary texts of the *Small Catechism*—commandments, creed, and Lord's Prayer—give us more than enough to ponder and live for, more than any doctor of theology, including Luther himself, could ever master.

In a 1535 tract written after his barber asked for advice on how to pray, Luther gave creative examples of how catechism continued to shape him:

If I have had time and opportunity to go through the Lord's Prayer, I do the same with the Ten Commandments. I take one part after another and free myself as much as possible from distractions in order to pray. I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer.²⁵

More than the twofold “law and gospel” use of the commandments to show sin and drive us to Christ's mercy, Luther here described how one might use elements of the catechism—including the commandments—as a fourfold basis for prayers that inspire learning, gratitude, confession, and asking God for what is most needful.

All these spiritual practices of service, song, and prayer come together in the daily prayers that Luther included in his *Small Catechism*. For morning prayer, Luther wrote:

In the morning, as soon as you get out of bed, you are to make the sign of the holy cross and say: ‘God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, watch over me. Amen.’ Then kneeling or standing, say the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. If you wish, you may in addition, recite this little prayer as well [Luther's morning prayer]... After singing a hymn or whatever else may serve your devotion, you are to go to your work joyfully.²⁶

With the Psalms and canticles such as the Magnificat in mind, Luther believed that theology and music both proclaim the gospel. Indeed, the reformers intentionally embraced congregational singing and the composition of new gospel-centered hymns. Reformers wrote hymn paraphrases of the Psalms, sections of the catechism, and new hymn lyrics for use throughout the liturgical year.

This simple outline for morning prayer presents many of the spiritual practices identified throughout this article. Luther invites meditation on important biblical and theological sources like the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. He also invites the embodied activities of making the sign of the cross and taking the devotional postures of kneeling or standing. Then he concluded with the blessed spiritual activity of serving neighbors through daily vocations, as believers “go to your work joyfully.”

Conclusion

The Lutheran Reformation did not offer its followers a purely intellectual, doctrinal, or ecclesiological description of Christianity. Rather, the Lutheran tradition—past and present—expresses a lived encounter with God, which is experienced through spiritual resources and practices such as scripture, sacraments, catechesis, prayer, singing, and service. This is a rich heritage worthy of being recognized, claimed, and—most of all—experienced in Christian lives today.

24. BC 380.5, 7-8.

25. LW 43:200.

26. BC 363.1-3.