



# FACE . . .

## Evangelical Spirituality: Captive to the Word of God

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**A**MONG THE MANY DEFINITIONS OF SPIRITUALITY THAT I'VE COME ACROSS, ONE stands out, not only for its wit, but also for its insight: spirituality is something that introverts do to make extraverts feel guilty. I recount this definition not to disparage the subject in question, but because lurking behind its humor are some cautions about the practice of spirituality. It suggests that expressions of spirituality are more idiosyncratic than some might care to admit: dependent on factors like personality, gender, and cultural context. It suggests that at least in the popular imagination, there are some preconceived notions about what real spirituality looks like: introspective, contemplative, withdrawn. Finally, it hints at a possible downside to some conceptions of spirituality: guilt, inferiority, spiritual smugness.

Having said this, let me offer a definition of my own making that is a good deal less witty but perhaps a bit more helpful for parish pastors and other leaders trying to respond to parishioners' questions: spirituality is simply the way in which believers try to hold Sunday and Monday together. The words "Sunday" and "Monday" of course, are just metaphors for the uneasy intersection of sacred and profane in which believers live their lives. Furthermore, since believers everywhere have always faced this challenge, this suggests that there is nothing intrinsically Christian about the concept of spirituality. Indeed, many spiritual disciplines can be and are utilized by both Christian and non-Christian religious traditions, to equal effect. Evangelical spirituality, the outward manifestation of Christian piety, is distinctive, not because of certain techniques or practices but because of its insistence on Christ as the proper object and the Holy Spirit as the proper agent of that piety. Finally, as regards definition, it should be noted that spirituality is *de facto* not a new concept, not for Lutherans, not for Christians. The term, though coined over fifteen hundred years ago, has only recently come into wide popular usage in the United States, in religious as well as secular publications. Perhaps because of its relative newness, there is a tendency in some religious circles to regard spirituality

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## Evangelical Spirituality: Practicing the Marks of the Church

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UPON IDENTIFYING MYSELF AS A THEOLOGIAN, I OFTEN GET A PUZZLING RESPONSE: “Oh, I’m not at all religious, but I am a very spiritual person.” More often than not the person produces a dizzying array of disciplines that display her spirituality: journaling, Zen meditation, study of a variety of sacred texts along with a smattering of self-help books. We have all met her: she represents the “spirituality of practices” heralded by Robert Wuthnow.<sup>1</sup> I want to ask which “spirits” this particular “spirituality” invokes, to which “spirits” this eclectic mix of practices and techniques points, and how my spiritual pilgrim manages to be so certain of her path.

More seriously, I want to argue for the existence of a distinctively Lutheran spirituality, for the need to call it “spirituality,” and for the presence of a Lutheran voice in the whole matter of discerning the spirits. In the whole contemporary fascination with spirituality we have much to learn; we also have much to offer.<sup>2</sup> First, at a time when both divine and demonic “spirits” abound, we can be clear about the “spirits” invoked in any Christian spirituality: it is the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ that “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies” us.<sup>3</sup> The Spirit that animates this spirituality works against the rampant individualism of too many contemporary spirituality practitioners: this “Spirit” works in community to gather people into a body called church. One is relieved of the burden of the solo spiritual quest.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998). Wuthnow describes the 1950s as a decade dedicated to a “spirituality of dwelling,” characterized by the rootedness and sense of place offered by organized religions. The sixties inaugurated a “spirituality of seeking,” in which people departed the churches of their childhood to negotiate their own relationship to the sacred. Now, Wuthnow argues, these same people are exhausted by the spiritual tourism this spirituality of seeking encouraged and gravitate toward the daily discipline of spiritual practices.

<sup>2</sup>For an excellent discussion, see Lisa E. Dahill’s article, “Spirituality in Lutheran Perspective: Much to Offer, Much to Learn,” *World & World* 18/1 (1998) 68-75.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 345.

as a newly discovered religious attribute, something to be acquired or achieved though the performance of certain previously unused religious rituals and exercises that must be learned from a specially trained (often Roman Catholic) spiritual director.

Properly understood, however, attention to evangelical spirituality has always been and will always be one of the primary concerns of Christian ministry. The definition of evangelical spirituality proposed above presents no new tasks for the evangelical pastor: preaching and teaching the word so that people hear, believe, and act upon it has always been a central responsibility of Christian ministry. The all too prevalent notion that parish pastors don't or can't "do" spirituality is deeply problematic, for it seems to presume that whatever it is that pastors presently do is irrelevant to their parishioners' attempts to hold Sunday and Monday together. Put slightly differently, the Sunday sermon may not seem nearly as innovative or exotic as a number of so-called spiritual disciplines, but, despite its familiarity, it is no less legitimate, effective, or "spiritual."

It's likely that more than a few parishioners' conceptions of spirituality have been influenced by the pop-spirituality literature that is so prevalent these days. Women's magazines, tabloids in grocery-store checkout lines, and whole spirituality sections in many bookstores carry all sorts of prescriptive literature. Some of it is surely of comfort to people struggling to put their lives in order or overcome addiction or adversity. However, much of it is market driven, often narcissistic, and shorn of ecclesiastical, even religious connections. It cannily packages spirituality primarily as a foolproof coping mechanism, enticing consumers with promises of new techniques and even objects (angel pins, scented candles, crystals, etc.) that will strengthen them against all the obligations, temptations, distractions and disappointments of daily life.<sup>1</sup>

Luther's insight into the nature of spirituality is a good starting place for parish leaders trying to steer seeking parishioners away from this thicket of market-driven, utilitarian expressions of pop-cultural spirituality, as well as evaluate the theological merits of the reams of prescriptive spirituality literature currently being churned out by religious publishing houses.

Thus, all that our body does outwardly and physically, if God's Word is added to it and it is done through faith, is in reality and in name done spiritually. Nothing can be so material, fleshly or outward, but it becomes spiritual when it is done in the Word and in faith. Spiritual is nothing else than what is done in us and by us through the Spirit and faith, whether the object with which we are dealing is physical or spiritual.<sup>2</sup>

This is a helpful caution against the gnostic and dualistic tendencies of much

<sup>1</sup>For specific examples and excerpts from the literature of pop spirituality, see Cynthia Jürisson, "Pop Spirituality: An Evangelical Response," *Word & World* 18/1 (1998) 14-23.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *This Is My Body* (1527), *Luther's Works*, vol. 37, ed. Robert Fischer (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961) 92.

contemporary spirituality literature from religious sources. Inordinate emphasis on practices requiring withdrawal, solitude, and silence can give the mistaken impression that that this world is not the realm of the Spirit's activity and that daily life is not the place where we encounter God. But prayer while doing the dishes, attentive and critical reflection on the sermon, and hymn singing on family car trips are all legitimate spiritual disciplines: examples of the many ways in which believers attempt to hold Sunday and Monday together in their own lives.

There are two other criteria, drawn from the Lutheran theological tradition, which ought to be considered when evaluating spiritual disciplines. First, one must consider whether the focus is christocentric or egocentric. Too much of pop spirituality almost seems to take Luther's definition of sin as a programmatic imperative: *homo curvatus in se*, the human turned in upon the self. Spirituality becomes little more than a path to self-actualization and self-aggrandizement. By contrast, the purpose of evangelical spirituality has always been, since the birth of Christianity, to turn one's focus outward, toward Christ, toward the neighbor, toward service in the world. Feelings of confidence and self-comfort may well be by-products of an evangelical spirituality, but they are neither goals nor proof of its existence.

A second criterion is particularly apt in evaluating spirituality literature from religious sources, some of which appear to promise, albeit with the best of intentions and techniques, the religious equivalent of pop spirituality's coping mechanism: foolproof methods for banishing doubt, strengthening faith, and improving character. In doing so, even an evangelical spirituality can prematurely drift from cross to glory in a misguided attempt to circumvent the way of the cross for paths that promise the believer greater certainty, fewer temptations, and protection from the challenges and tribulations that visit anyone who lives between the now and the not yet. The fact is that spiritual disciplines, whether new or old, innovative or shopworn, are as vulnerable to works-righteousness, narcissism, and idolatry as any other category of human existence. Such a judgment is not meant to condemn the practices of spirituality, but only to clarify their proper contribution to the Christian life.

There is a long tradition of spiritual care among Protestant clergy, and Lutherans have played a prominent role in that history. Luther, Spener, Bonhoeffer, and others sought to place spiritual disciplines in the proper theological perspective, evaluating them according to commitments to justification, insights into human nature, and convictions about the primacy of God's word. Like our forebears, we share the same responsibilities and face similar challenges from both church and culture. The increased attention to spirituality in recent years can help all of us reassess and reprioritize our pastoral responsibilities, to insure that our ministries do indeed communicate the power and sufficiency of the gospel to people living at the uneasy intersection of sacred and profane. ⊕

Second, we are also relieved of the task of creating our own distinctive bag of spiritual tricks and techniques, picking and choosing what might be meaningful to us. Christians have been given a core of practices in which we might encounter this orienting Spirit. Luther called them the “marks of the church”: the preaching and hearing of the word, baptism, the Lord’s supper, the office of the keys, ordination/commissioning/consecrating of leaders in the church, prayer, praise, catechesis, and the way of the cross or Christian discipleship.<sup>4</sup> This first circle of practices, the “marks of the church,” revolves around the word of God in tight, inner orbit, showing us “where, what, and who” the church is.<sup>5</sup> Around these core practices we could configure a second circle of practices in which practicing Christians engage: marriage, dying well and burial, keeping Sabbath, hospitality, pacifism, remembering the dead, etc.<sup>6</sup> There may even be a third circle of practices, including our beloved traditions of coffee hours and potlucks, so long as these tertiary practices have the word of God at their heart.

There is a twofold danger in assembling one’s own eclectic bag of spiritual practices. First, the organizing principle of such a spiritual mosaic is nothing more than one’s own idiosyncratic taste. But second and more sinister, the practices of every religious tradition cohere around a central religious core, be it the word of God or the sovereignty of Allah or the quality of compassion. Incorporating practices from other traditions into one’s own wrenches these practices out of their religious universe and renders them mere techniques: activities pressed into service of an alien end.<sup>7</sup> How would Christians regard a community of Buddhist monks adopting their practice of the Lord’s supper apart from the orienting practices and doctrines of Christian communities? Borrowing practices from other religious traditions may be the ultimate form of spiritual colonialism.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Luther identifies these in his treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 41, ed. Eric Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 148-168. Cf. Reinhard Hütter, “The Church as Public: Dogma, Practice, and the Holy Spirit,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3/3 (1994) 352-357; Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Marks of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). On practices in general, see Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiesen Nation, *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998); Margaret R. Miles, *Practicing Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

<sup>5</sup>Luther, *On the Councils and the Church*, 168.

<sup>6</sup>See Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). Bass and her colleagues examine practices that I would place on this second circle: honoring the body, hospitality, keeping Sabbath, testimony, singing, etc. They do not treat what I regard as the first circle of practices, Luther’s “marks of the church.” These secondary practices need the orienting, inner circle of practices to inform and direct them, lest they become mere group activities.

<sup>7</sup>A “technique” requires certain skills and is judged by the quality of the good produced, while a “practice” is good in itself and is judged by standards internal to it. For example, if prayer is assessed in terms of what it produces, it is no longer a practice, but a technique. If prayer is expected to achieve some goal, no matter how laudatory, it is probably being judged by standards external to it. See Matthew Lamb’s caveat: “Unfortunately, much of the modern instrumentalist orientation has deformed Christian asceticism, prayer, and piety...into techniques rather than the genuine practices they are meant to be.” Matthew Lamb, “Praxis,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1989) 787.

<sup>8</sup>The Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith identifies three ways in which practices from other traditions may be integrated into Christian prayer: as psychophysical preparation for prayer; as a technique for generating greater spiritual experience; and as a competing religious reality. It advises Roman Catholics to limit the use of these techniques to psychophysical preparation, lest they violate the integrity of Christian prayer. See

Finally, how do we know we are on the right path? One of great gifts of the Christian tradition is the caution that “now we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor 13:12). Modesty is the only appropriate response. But the path we walk has been well-trodden. The practices Luther identified as “marks of the church” were done over time and in community: experience refined and focused them. In the background of each practice is scripture; in its foreground is doctrine. Practices claim their basis in scripture; in turn they are normed by doctrine. Practices embody doctrines; doctrines direct practices.<sup>9</sup> This means that practices may alter. For example, the practice of ordaining only men was altered in view of the wisdom of scripture, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and a long period of discernment concerning where the Spirit of Christ was moving Christians in a particular time and place. It is both a gift and a task to stand in a tradition which is a living argument with scripture, doctrine, and the ongoing work of the Spirit of Christ. Lutherans must boldly challenge the false dichotomy between being “spiritual” and being “religious.” ⊕

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“Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,” in *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 19/30 (December 28, 1989) 492-498. While I am in basic agreement with the argument, I would also attend to the integrity of the practice in its own tradition: e.g., Zen meditation in the fabric of Zen Buddhist thought and practice. I would allow for the use of such a practice as long as: (1) it is oriented to the core of Christian practices: the Word of God; (2) it does not replace any of those core Christian practices or “marks of the church”; and (3) one acknowledges the violence one does to the practice by removing it from the context that gives it meaning and integrity, i.e., Zen Buddhism.

<sup>9</sup>See Reinhard Hütter, “The Church as Public: Dogma, Practice, and the Holy Spirit,” 352-357; Martha Ellen Stortz, “Methodological Reflections on Being a Practicing Christian,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 26/1 (1999) 38-41.