



Analyzing the Immigrant Churches in North America through the Lens of 1 John 4:1–21

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The inconsistencies between Luther's theology of the cross and spiritual experience have been destabilizing many recent immigrant congregations of Lutheran heritage in North America. Lutheranism and triumphalistic empirical piety are the two incompatible forces repeatedly leading churches into divisions. Attempts to address the issues arising among the believers often neglect a critical theological reflection. Luther's theology of the cross can be a guiding force in the spiritual experience of the contemporary church by serving as a pivot point that links the Christian church as the eschatological community under the sphere of the Holy Spirit to the early Christian community. For spiritual experience to be consistent with theology of the cross in the context of immigrant churches in North America, it must integrate faith and love of neighbor with Christian teaching and practice.

The fourth chapter of 1 John begins with a warning against "false prophets" who "have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Stephen Smalley suggests that the

The commandments to "love one another" and to form the Christian community on God's love are clearly seen in 1 John. Yet these are statements that are easier to say than to realize, and many communities fall short. New immigrant communities in the United States are often torn by internal struggles over issues from home and by the traumas of trying to adapt to a bewilderingly new religious situation in this country.

term *pneuma* (“spirit”) in 1 John should be understood as signifying “a human person who is inspired by the spirit of truth or the spirit of error.”¹ In using the plural *pneumata* (“spirits”), John has never intended to indicate multiplicity of either the divine spirit or the evil spirit. He rather wants his audience to understand that the spirit of truth or error may operate in many people at the same time. The need to test the spirits arises from the uncritical attitude of the Johannine community of faith toward charismatic expressions to the extent of being attracted to the heretical enthusiasms characterizing the spiritual activities in their congregations. This negligence involved inattentiveness toward the fundamental antithesis that exists between error and truth, antichrist and God, heresy and orthodoxy. Smalley cites F. D. Maurice: “There have been traders in spiritual enchantments in all ages.”²

John uses the term *error* (1 John 4:6) to highlight the connotation of deception and falsehood implied in being wrong.³ Gerard S. Sloyan describes “false prophets” as those who disseminate wrong teaching. Rensberger, who argues in favor of the Spirit’s most intimate association with teaching in Johannine literatures, says that teaching, whether in an ecstatic state or not, was viewed as charismatic by the early Christian community. It signifies divine presence in a Christian life enabled by the Holy Spirit. Rensberger writes, “As elsewhere in 1 John, there is no middle ground; teaching comes either from the Spirit of God or from the devil.”⁴ In a similar vein, George Parsenios, explaining the significance of the phrase “gone out” (1 John 2:19; 4:1), states that early Christianity’s understanding of prophecy was not limited to ecstatic speech, but it rather included teaching under the Spirit’s guidance.⁵

Parsenios identifies “going out” in 1 John with noncompliance with instruction. In his words, “The teaching of those who ‘went out’ could be construed as the seduction to follow another Christ, since they do not adhere to what has been taught ‘from the beginning’ (1 John 2:22–24; 2 John 9).”⁶ As Marianne Meye Thompson argues, “the Johannine epistles refer more broadly to all of those who left the church as *false prophets*, because they carry with them testimony that claims to be spirit-inspired.”⁷ Jesus described false messiahs and false prophets as those arising from the midst of the nation that is falling apart and the stumbled believers who hate, betray, and surrender one another to suffering and death. The fading away of love and increased lawlessness provide a favorable condition for them to produce signs and wonders with an intention to deceive and lead people astray, “even the elect.”⁸ Smalley describes them as “the heretical members of

¹ Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 207.

² F. D. Maurice, *The Epistles of St John: A Series of Lectures on Christian Ethics* (London; New York: Macmillan, 1893), 223. As cited in Smalley, 207.

³ Gerard S. Sloyan, *Walking in the Truth: Perseverers and Deserters: The First, Second, and Third Letters of John* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 42, 43, 45.

⁴ David Rensberger, *The Epistles of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 68.

⁵ George L. Parsenios, *First, Second, and Third John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 110.

⁶ Parsenios, *First, Second, and Third John*, 110.

⁷ Marianne Meye Thompson, *1–3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992.), 113.

⁸ Matt 24:3–24.

John's congregation who have spearheaded a secession from the community."⁹ They do so not by opposing the true prophets but by opposing Jesus in their false teaching with an intention to deceive people. Smalley argues that John uses the term "world" (*cosmos*) to describe "humanity in opposition to God and the accompanying evil attitude of those who are aligned with antichrist."¹⁰ Going out into the world is non-adherence to what one has been taught. Thus, not only the origin of teaching, but also the community's response matters in bringing the divine presence closer and shaping Christian life.

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Response to teaching can either be listening and obeying or defecting and distancing oneself from the community. John uses these responses as criteria for discerning "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:5–6). John says, "All who obey his commandments abide in him" (1 John 3:24). The notion of listening and obeying is not unique to Johannine letters as his audience is familiar with the Old Testament concept of "Hear [*shema*], O Israel" (Deut 6:4) and Jesus's reference to it in response to the scribe who asked which commandment was the most important (Mark 12:28–31). In the African context, listening and obeying is an expression of love and respect for the speaker, particularly when the speaker is one's parent or an elder of a community. This is based on the cultural understanding that parents and elder members of the community cultivate trust by consistently speaking the truth and condemning deceitful behavior. They are also committed to teaching the younger generation how to discern truth from falsehood and to develop qualities that contribute to maintaining the culture of trust in their daily relationships.

Likewise, the Johannine community was instructed to cling to faith and love, the two core theological themes, as criteria for discerning the origin of the spirit. John first refers to the spirit that confirms Christ's humanity as "the Spirit of God," which confesses that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2). Jensen argues that the phrase "in the flesh" refers to the world of humanity as a whole. His "coming" in this text also points to the resurrected incarnate Jesus coming back into the realm of humanity.¹¹ John's addressees were exposed to a "spirit that does not confess Jesus" (1 John 4:3), or individuals who deny incarnation. As some scholars clarify, John aims to affirm Jesus's humanity against those who consider him only

⁹ Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 219.

¹⁰ Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 217.

¹¹ Matthew D. Jensen, *Affirming the Resurrection of the Incarnate Christ: A Reading of 1 John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 158, 167.

divine.¹² As Thompson articulates, the Spirit-inspired confession John talks about has nothing to do with demon possession, charismatic experience, or prediction of the future. It is, rather, concerned with “the substance of one’s teaching . . . about Jesus Christ,”¹³ including that Jesus is the Word of God, the true human being through whom God revealed himself to us, and who gives life to the world through his self-giving death. Thus, making the gospel relevant to the community among which we live involves seeking ways to demonstrate our faith that Jesus Christ has come in flesh and that his presence in believers by his Spirit needs to be perceived as God for them rather than God against them.

John also calls attention to the connection between faith in Christ and love of neighbor as another means of testing the spirits of prophecy. Those who love God have an obligation to love fellow human beings (1 John 4:20). Hatred in the context of faith makes even a seemingly genuine confession a false statement and, thus, signifies alignment with the “spirit of error” and “the antichrist.” Parsenios argues that the criterion of truth for 1 John is not a solely intellectual matter, but also an experiential one. Besides the christological criterion that promotes the view that the truth is present in those who believe in Jesus Christ, the love for one’s enemies, which at the same time signifies the presence of the Holy Spirit, is a criterion of truth. The spirit of truth promotes love for one’s enemies.¹⁴ It is only true worshippers who love God and their neighbors, whose love for one another assures that they remain in God and God remains in them, and that they will live eternally.¹⁵ Thus, faith and love are the core themes of Christian mission.

John calls Christians to participate in the *missio Dei*, particularly God sending his only Son (1 John 4:9). Based on the Greek word ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*), which means “to send,” Jensen argues that the meaning of mission in 1 John is not limited to incarnation alone but includes Jesus’s “pre- and post-resurrection mission.”¹⁶ The *New Interpreter’s Bible* commentary describes the purpose of God’s sending of the Son in the flesh as “a loving act of sacrifice,” which Christians must imitate in their mission endeavor. Put more explicitly, by imitating the sacrifice in their relationship with each other, Christians affirm that Christ acted out of sacrificial love.¹⁷ Thus love as a missional theme involves giving away one’s privi-

¹² As Beverly Gaventa and David Petersen argue, “The problem in 1 John seems to be the opposite of that in the Fourth Gospel. Where the Gospel of John affirmed Jesus’s divinity against those who considered him only a human, 1 John affirms Jesus’ humanity against those who see him as only divine. His opponents seem to have overemphasized Jesus’ divinity to such a degree that his humanity, his work in the flesh, is considered irrelevant for salvation.” See *The New Interpreter’s Bible One-Volume Commentary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and David Petersen (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 910.

¹³ Thompson, *1–3 John*, 113.

¹⁴ Parsenios, *First, Second, and Third John*, 109–10.

¹⁵ John Paul Heil, *1–3 John: Worship by Loving God and One Another to Live Eternally* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 168.

¹⁶ Jensen, *Affirming the Resurrection*, 177.

¹⁷ Gaventa and Petersen, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 910. Rensberger argues, “The concept of a personal religion that has no relation to the outward facts of our lives, of a private spirituality that has no bearing on our conduct toward other people, is as remote as it could possibly be from this author’s understanding of what it means to abide in God and have God abiding in us.” Rensberger, *The Epistles of John*, 78.

lege in the form of sacrificial offering rather than a reciprocal one. A meaningful life becomes dying to oneself and existing for others not only as life-giver but also in the form of love that continuously extends to one's neighbor. Jensen's interpretation of the phrase "has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:1–6) as referring to "the resurrection appearance of Jesus in the realm of humanity"¹⁸ affirms that love as a missional theme connotes a continuous act of presenting oneself to the other. By sending his only Son into the world and saving the entire world from sin and death, God has reversed the reciprocal view of love. Jensen says that 1 John 4:9, 10, and 14 concur with other New Testament literatures in conveying the message that Jesus was sent to be sin-offering, condemn sin, and redeem all who believe in him.¹⁹ In consent to this view, Rensberger writes, "Love is thus defined as the giving up of one's own self-interest for the sake of one's beloved, not only a *feeling* of affection and concern, but an *action* of self-giving."²⁰ Consequently, the new life of faith that "we may live through him" ought to be engaged in a continuous struggle against selfishness so that our daily interaction with our neighbors can be a healing and liberative experience for them.

Having seen faith and love in connection with the works of the Spirit and the Word in 1 John 4, our discussion now turns to the significance of these core themes in terms of how the theology of the cross and the works of the Holy Spirit foster Christian commitment to community. The main aim of this section is to analyze the inconsistencies seen in this regard in the context of the Oromo immigrant churches in North America.

In the first place, there is often an inconsistency related to *love* in the life of the immigrant churches. John gives theological reasons for the command to love one another (1 John 4:7–8). Faith and love of God can be visible only if embodied in love of neighbor. David Rensberger argues that how people relate to each other demonstrates their relationship with God. This makes the claim that God is love an activity and a dynamic presence of the divine in human history rather than a static intellectual concept or an unsubstantiated theological speculation.²¹ As argued in *Africa Bible Commentary*, Christians can contribute to this love that is made complete in them (1 John 4:12). Thus, love is illustrated with a triangle in which God's love for a person and for their neighbor forms two sides and the love of a person and their neighbor for each other completes the triangle.²² The notion of contributing to God's love signifies the inseparability of belief and mutual love in the Christian life, which, in Rensberger's words, is "a loving response to the loving initiative

¹⁸ Jensen, *Affirming the Resurrection*, 167.

¹⁹ Jensen, *Affirming the Resurrection*, 177.

²⁰ Rensberger, *The Epistles of John*, 75. Rensberger further argues that the life and divine revelation that we have received in Jesus's humanity binds us "to shape our own humanity after that of Jesus. If what he did with his human life made God known to us as *love*, then what we do with our human lives will show whether or not we have truly taken in this revelation, for love is something that a human life can embody" (75).

²¹ Rensberger, *The Epistles of John*, 74.

²² Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive, 2006), 1535.

taken by God.”²³ First John portrays relationship with God as “a gift of God’s love.” As Smalley elucidates, “anyone who enters into a real relationship with a loving God can be transformed into a loving person.”²⁴ Thus, this relationship with God allows us to accept, contemplate, and act according to the work God has accomplished in Christ for our salvation. A transformed Christian life focuses on God’s generous, self-giving, and compassionate act revealed on the cross.

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An important question that seeks an answer in this regard is the place of the theology of the cross in the immigrant church’s view of spiritual experience. Immigrant Christians’ experience of God includes his intervention in their suffering. An inconsistency is discovered when this theological perspective fails to make a careful distinction between sentimentalism and the theology of the cross, particularly when it comes to commitment to community in times of conflict. Gerhard Forde contrasts the theology of the cross with “sentimentalized theology,” which promotes the view that “God is supposed to be more attractive to us because he identifies with us in our pain and suffering.”²⁵ This in turn leads to the danger of taking a transactional approach to relationships rather than viewing things through the lens of Christ’s suffering and death on the cross.

How is sentimentalized theology affecting our commitment to community as immigrant Christians? According to Forde, sentimentality has led to the erosion in the language of theology today, which is evident in the fact that we tend to describe ourselves no longer as sinners but as victims and to accuse others of being victimizers. He refers to this as “slippage in the language of theology.”²⁶ He points out the danger of such slippage and falling out of place of theology, saying, “The slippage is often very slight and subtle and hardly noticeable; that is what makes it so deceptive.”²⁷ Forde’s discussion is highly relevant to the experience of the immigrant churches in North America that seem to be missing 1 John’s

²³ Rensberger, *The Epistles of John*, 83. As Rensberger asserts, “We cannot be what God is, but we can do as God does. Patterning our actions after the love of God, the love that God is, provides the clearest indication that we are genuinely in relationship with God, that we are God’s children and know God” (74).

²⁴ Smalley, 1, 2, 3 *John*, 227. Rensberger states, “We only accept the revelation in Jesus, and the relationship with God that comes with it, when we ourselves act in love” (76).

²⁵ Gerhard O Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), viii. Forde explains: “A sentimentalized theology gives the impression that God in Christ comes to join us in our battle against some unknown enemy, is victimized, and suffers just like us” (ix).

²⁶ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, ix.

²⁷ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, ix.

intention in speaking of God as love, which is to provide Christians with a model to imitate. Following Forde's insight, we can appropriately describe the discrepancy in the immigrant congregations' view of commitment to community as a fruit of "sentimentalized theology." Accordingly, the recurrent splits and instability within immigrant congregations signify that the language of theology has already slipped and fallen out of place as a result of sentimentalism, and that there is little understanding of the theology of the cross. This is evident not only in dialogue and decision-making but also in our view of the church as a community under the sphere of the Spirit.

The second aspect of inconsistency between the spiritual experience and Luther's theology of the cross is detected in the pragmatic aspect of *faith*. Jensen argues that the word "beloved" (Greek *agapetoi*) in 1 John 4:11 is intended to draw "the readers' attention to the way of living that the audience should follow."²⁸ The implication of this is that Christian ethical behavior should include treating other believers with love as true Israelites.²⁹ Faith that cannot be expressed through love for one's neighbor is an incomplete and dead faith. That is why John warns his addressee, "Whoever does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14). Apostle James confirms this in his letter, saying, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17). Active faith is the one that is brought into completion by works (James 2:22). This faith embodied in love for one's neighbor becomes visible through humble service. For John, Christians' abiding in God and God abiding in them should be seen in their attitude toward other people rather than in their isolated spiritual life that is unrelated to their public engagement.

In *Experience and Faith: The Significance of Luther for Understanding Today's Experiential Religion*, William Hordern argues that the theology of the cross plays a central role in Luther's understanding of the gospel. If one misses it, they miss not just a specific doctrine but "a perspective or motif that enables us to understand all Christian doctrines. The essence of theology of the cross is that God always comes to us in ways that we do not expect and which, at first sight, seem disappointing or inappropriate."³⁰ This compels us to ask more specific questions pertaining to the topic of discussion: What does it mean to be a congregation in North America? Have we ever thought of what message the external appearance of our church, and the activities in and around our church building convey to those observing from a distance?

Martin Kümlehn tells of walking to a conference venue and, along the way, coming past a banner hanging at the entrance to a church. The banner read:

²⁸ Jensen, *Affirming the Resurrection*, 173.

²⁹ Rensberger says, "The statement that God abides in those who love one another is a statement about how God is seen: God abides in them, and is seen and made known not only *to* them, but also *through* them to the world. Christian love for one another is the ongoing revelation of God; it is one of the ways in which the Christian community makes God known." Rensberger, *The Epistles of John*, 77.

³⁰ William Hordern, *Experience and Faith: The Significance of Luther for Understanding Today's Experiential Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 85.

“Welcome, wherever you are on your spiritual journey”³¹—which leads me to reflect on the experience of immigrant Christians. Whoever visits the immigrant churches of the Oromo community may see a similar sentence signifying the receptive attitude of the members: “BAGA NAGAAN DHUFTAN/ WELCOME.”³² Sadly enough, such congregations may also have been going through traumatic divisions due to the dispute over who is welcome at the church and who is not.

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This is illustrated by an incident from about three years ago. A congregation hosted an annual conference for which participants were expected to come from congregations in Europe and America. As part of the preparation to welcome their guests, the church members invested their time, money, and energy on the renovation of the church building. On a sunny Saturday morning, with the painting of the exterior of the church building almost done, some of them were cleaning around the church building when a woman crossing through the parking lot approached them and said, “Hi, what a beautiful color! You guys are busy doing a great job on the outside. I wish I could see what your church looks like inside.” None of them paid attention to the woman’s words because they had no doubt that their church was good on the inside too—until things started to fall apart two months after the conference when a conflict arose over who was welcome in their church community.

Therefore, we can see that for some immigrant churches in North America, the dispute over who is welcome in the church has more to do with difficulty accepting each other within the congregation, than with external issues of cultural and confessional differences. Any attempt to portray one group as clinging to confessional and cultural heritage and the other as less concerned about faith and the gospel serves no other purpose than to highlight the division caused by the hidden motives of a few individuals. The inconsistency in contemporary immigrant churches involves a discord caused by an understanding of sin and morality that neglects the theology of the cross and the Spirit’s role in fostering Christian commitment to community.

The third area of inconsistency involves the church’s call to *test the spirits*. Lack of flexibility in dealing with minor conflicts among believers is posing a hindrance to discernment of truth. There are occasions when discerning the spirits is

³¹ Martin Kumlehn, “Church for the People: Guidelines for Protestant Parish Work,” in *What Is Lutheran? Introductions to Theology, Worship, Congregation, Ecumenism and Church Law*, trans. Neville Milliamson (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 101.

³² The Oromo words *Baga Nagaan Dhufan* simply mean “Welcome.” They also say “*Anaa Haa Dhufu*.” Both sentences carry the connotation that someone eagerly awaited has arrived.

confused with judging others. Rensberger exposes the appropriation of the terms *antichrist* and *spirit of error* in the contemporary church in ways that are deceptive and misleading.³³ Sometimes we do not even allow the Holy Spirit to judge the issues and disagreements in our daily interactions with neighbors, as well as in church-partnership relationships locally or ecumenically. Forgetting that the Spirit we have received is not the full measure of our inheritance but only the first fruits, a first installment, a pledge (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:14), we brag of our empirical piety and act as if we possessed the Gospel when, in reality, we are owned by the Gospel. This is a theological crisis arising from upholding empirical righteousness over against Christ's redeeming reality in our life mediated by the Holy Spirit.

In Luther's theology of the cross, "the Spirit is not a divine power put in the service of man; he is God who draws man into his service."³⁴ Therefore, as Thompson suggests, testing the spirits must be exercised with care because discerning the truth always involves other persons or fellow Christians who claim to be directed by the Spirit. Although it is the task of the church to teach and nurture people in Christian faith, we must not be judgmental in our approach.³⁵ Yet, the fact that Satan continuously tries to deceive believers makes testing the spirits an ongoing responsibility of the church rather than a once-and-for-all occurrence.³⁶

However, the immigrant churches often fall short of recognizing the reality that a congregation is the community the Holy Spirit has gathered under the headship of Christ. The prosperity gospel preachers flourishing in the immigrants' home country consider themselves messengers who view the Holy Spirit as stepping in as needed to assist the preachers' own efforts to create their private church through their independent ministry. These preachers have extended their influence to the immigrant churches in North America. The negative consequence of their involvement is seen in the instabilities experienced in churches, as well as in family life. As a correction to this, Prenter argues that "the church does not become an episode in the pious life of the individual, but the individual in his whole existence becomes a 'part,' a 'member' of the organism of the church which is eschatological people of God, the fruit of the eternal work of the Spirit down through the generations to the last day."³⁷ Therefore, the church's role in discern-

³³ In Rensberger's words, "All too readily the picture of a cosmic struggle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan has been imported into conflicts among Christians, so that simple disagreement and honest debate become difficult if not impossible. Claiming that your opponent is a tool of the devil means that it is no longer possible to consider what he or she says thoughtfully; there is no chance that any portion of their reasoning could be correct or worthwhile, or that they could have any good intention of faithfulness to Christ." Rensberger, *The Epistles of John*, 72.

³⁴ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1953), 237.

³⁵ Thompson, *1–3 John*, 113, 119. Thompson further explains what this means: "We must be careful, then, on insisting that others believe exactly as we do when the Scriptures are silent or difficult to interpret with certainty" (119).

³⁶ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1534.

³⁷ Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 243.

ing the spirits includes making sure that the preacher is taken by the Spirit and made part of the church or congregation that is sent to proclaim the Word.

The future of the immigrant congregations' commitment to community in North America depends on the capacity to discern between "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6), particularly in association with teaching about sin and righteousness. Human beings' constant struggle against sin involves the battle between "the old man" (flesh) and "the new man" (who became spirit by faith in Christ), which Luther describes as the struggle that takes place between "man's real self and the Spirit of God."³⁸ The "real self" we inherited from the Fall is the demonic one from which only the cross can liberate us. This calls our attention to reconsidering our pride in empirical piety, whereby we try to remove the speck from our neighbor's eye without even noticing the log in our own (Matt 7:3–4). The intervention of the Holy Spirit can set us free from our real selves and hide us "with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). Then we can locate the demonic and the unrighteous in ourselves and see mercy and righteousness in God.

The future of the immigrant congregations' commitment to community in North America depends on the capacity to discern between "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

Finally, the immigrant churches in North America need to be open to engaging in dialogue on controversial issues among themselves and with the indigenous churches in their immediate context. With its core themes of love and faith, 1 John 4:1–21 calls immigrant congregations to pay attention to Luther's theology of the cross if they are to be present to people with love, respect, and compassion before challenging them. Christian commitment to community is inseparable from commitment to the cross of Christ under the sphere of the Holy Spirit. Genuine spiritual experience is that which integrates faith and love of neighbor with Christian teaching and practice. ⊕

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³⁸ Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 225.