

Faithful & Afire

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2012-2013

Called To Be Christ's Witnesses

Called to perceive by faith and to proclaim the unseen works of God amidst the things that are seen.

Leader's Guide

Topic: We are witnesses to the unseen work of the Holy Spirit, who makes us holy by delivering to us holy things.

1. Focus of This Study

The Holy Spirit is often identified as "the unknown God." Who Is He? What is his work and how does He go about doing it? What does it mean for our life as Christians that the Holy Spirit uses holy things to make holy?

So much of the conversation today is about generic spirituality. This kind of spiritualism is popular for many because it tends to be disconnected from the person of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace that He employs to give and work the holy things of God to the people. The popular belief in this spiritualism shows itself in the willingness of Americans, who seldom read the Bible or attend divine services, to call themselves "spiritual." Their "spiritual"ness is not dependent on God's chosen means for conveying the true things of the Spirit.

Jesus ties us down to His words, which are spirit, and through these, the Holy Spirit gives life (John 6:63). His tying down is also a freeing. We are freed from our own natural spiritual tendencies, which are toward death and damnation (Ephesians 2:1-3). We are freed from the burden of creating our own spirituality. God has made us spiritual people with the breath of life (Genesis 2:7) which is the word of God; full of the Holy Spirit and life. The Holy Spirit makes holy by using the holiness-creating means of the word and sacraments.

Contemporary "spirituality" evacuates meaning from Christianity by reducing the enfleshed actions of Christ, the God-Man, to human concepts and ideas. In the novel *Friends, Lovers, Chocolate*, by Alexander McCall Smith, the protagonist, Isabel Dalhousie expresses her amazement at a woman who strongly disbelieves in an afterlife. However, she can hardly match such strong revulsion with her own strong confession to the contrary: "We strove for God—or many people did—and did it really matter what form we gave to the concept of God? In her mind, it was striving after the good. And what was wrong with striving after the good in a way which made sense to the individual?" Isabel succinctly describes our deep desire to reduce God to an abstract term, "the good." God is not an abstraction or a conceptualization. Indeed such a conceptualization is a move not toward God but away from Him. Isabel is moving from God to the good, from the concrete and personal to the abstract and impersonal. Here God becomes just a construct of the mind, the mental projection of Schopenhauer.

This way of finding God is like those about to die of dehydration in the desert drilling a well only to hit oil instead of water. What is wrong with oil? Nothing, except it is not water. Reducing God to "the good" is like finding oil rather than water. Oil has its benefits and under the right circumstances is more valuable than water. However, when life is on the line, all the oil in the world will not help.

The abstractions of the divine nature are all very beneficial in themselves, but not God.

St. Paul points us away from abstraction and conceptualization to a God who becomes flesh of our flesh. God is not a mere idea, but irreducibly Himself, "I am" (Ex 3:14). The historical specification of the resurrection of the Christ as the first fruits of those who sleep, promise an equally specific resurrection of His body following the Head. We live because He lives. Therefore, we are not striving after "the good" as a way of finding God, but God has striven after us defining the good in the person of His Son, who was crucified and raised again. Only in God is the good truly known, not vice versa. The good that is given us by God is intimately and inseparably tied down to the person of Christ. The life eternal that He has bequeathed us comes only from His striving to save us unto Himself forever. His voice shall raise from their graves all the faithful in God. "The good," as valuable as it is, will never do any of that. The giver of the good is none other than the third person of the holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

2. Scripture Search

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14. Note the power of the word of God to undo death and to give hope and life where there is none.

Ezekiel highlights the power of God in his word as his Spirit raises the dead as it is spoken, which is the Spirit's mission (John 16:7-11). He kills only to make alive. His killing to convict the world of its sin. Only then can the dead be raised by the word-work of the Spirit.

Read Acts 2. The Acts of the Apostles are also the acts of the Spirit.

The Lutheran Study Bible points out that the Holy Spirit is mentioned 57 times in the book of Acts alone. The whole theology of the Spirit is found in the Acts of the Apostles. Note that the numerical growth of the early church comes entirely as the work of God; "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

Sanctification, the work of the Holy Spirit, is "word-work." God the Holy Spirit uses the means of grace to create and sustain faith in the hearts of his people [AC 5 & 14]: John 15:26, Romans 10:12-15, John 17:20, Titus 3:5-7, Romans 1:16, and Luke 10:16. God uses the tangible to deliver the spiritual and they cannot easily be distinguished.

To make us holy, the Infinite condescends to our finitude. Baruch Spinoza placed the spirit of God in nature. God is everywhere. This is an illocal or dislocated god. Immanuel Kant placed God beyond all epistemological and metaphysical categories. Kant declared the rationalists wrong. There can be no knowledge of the word for Kant. Religion then becomes a purely moral category (categorical imperative) [Koeberle, 99-100]. God does the unexpected and is not neatly boxed up into the contrived categories of transcendence and immanence.

2 Chronicles 6:18-20 "But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence. May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said you would put your name there. May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place." God is where he says he is.

3. From Our Lutheran Perspective

The Augsburg Confession gives the work of the Spirit centrality in Article 5, whereby sinners receive justification through the means of the secondary instruments, the human preachers. See also Luther in the LC 2:37. The whole work of the Spirit is to sanctify, that is, "to make holy." Review the explanation to the third article of the Creed in Martin Luther's Small Catechism.

The Third Article *Sanctification*

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

What does this mean? I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.

On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.

This is most certainly true. *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism 1991 CPH; electronic.*

It is through the divinely appointed instruments of Word and sacraments that the Holy Spirit is given (AC 5.2). LC 2:37: “But how is such sanctifying done? Answer: Just as the Son obtains dominion, whereby He wins us, through His birth, death, resurrection, etc., so also the Holy Ghost effects our sanctification by the following parts, namely, by the communion of saints or the Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting; that is, He first leads us into His holy congregation, and places us in the bosom of the Church, whereby He preaches to us and brings us to Christ.”

The conversion of humans and their preservation in the faith is entirely the work of God the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther confesses that we cannot believe by our own reason or strength (SC 3.3). Whatever we have is given by God the Holy Spirit. This is the consistent testimony of the Holy Scriptures and all faithful teachers who reflect the divine truth of God’s Word. Preachers ought to be comforted by the power of God’s Word to do what God says in it by the power of the Holy Spirit. Their work is but to proclaim the divine Word, and God does all the rest. The preacher can leave things to God when He proclaims the divine truth about Christ and His substitution for us sinners. Their office and its authority rest not with their work or performance but with God’s grace.

The Lord grants the office in which the pastor works. It is the Lord’s work in which they are engaged, not their own. That means that He gives the fruit. He divides out the labors; one preaching, another visiting, and still another teaching. These are His gifts. He can distribute them according to His will, to whomever and whenever it pleases Him. He brings us to the harvest that the Word’s seed has sown. It is the Lord’s work, not ours, to persuade those who hear His Word.

We should never become discouraged when the Word of God is rejected, because the Lord will work His way when and where it pleases Him. Moreover, that almost never pleases us. However, we are not in this work of proclaiming for our own pleasure, but for His. God is more than willing to leave us looking foolish if His plans are accomplished. He will work His will when it is best for Him and our neighbor and not us. Oh, well. What do we have that we have not received? It is all His to give and distribute as He sees fit.

Luther’s famous rant against papacy as sheer enthusiasm rings true today as we see spirituality disconnected from spirit and word taking over in religion. “The papacy, too, is nothing but enthusiasm, for the pope boasts that ‘all laws are in the shrine of his heart,’ and he claims that whatever he decides and commands in his churches is spirit and law, even when it is above and contrary to the Scriptures or spoken Word.⁵ All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God

to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations, and he did this through other external words.⁶ Even so, the enthusiasts of our day condemn the external Word, yet they do not remain silent but fill the world with their chattering and scribbling, as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the spoken word of the apostles but must come through their own writings and words. Why do they not stop preaching and writing until the Spirit himself comes to the people without and before their writings since they boast that the Spirit came upon them without the testimony of the Scriptures” [Theodore G. Tappert, ed. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 312]. **The Spirit is preached when the Word of God is preached.**

LC 4:19: “Therefore we always teach that the Sacraments and all external things which God ordains and institutes should not be regarded according to the coarse, external mask, as we regard the shell of a nut, but as the Word of God is included therein.” The finite is capable of the infinite (Mark 10:27).

The closeness of God is the Spirit’s work. Luther: “In our day, in the time of the New Testament, God has given us Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and absolution to bring Christ very close to us, so that we can have Him not only in our heart but also on our tongue, so that we can feel Him, grasp Him, and touch Him” [AE 22:420]. 1 John 1:1

Discuss the role of the means of grace in the Spirit’s work. Has God “put himself into a box”? If so, why?

LOCATEDNESS and MEANS: God has tied himself down to tangible means (*media gratiae*). God uses tangible, fleshly means because he knows how we are made. Read and discuss the following in terms of tangible means:

Galatians 3:1-6

John 6:53-58

4. Points to Ponder

Discuss: the conflict between flesh and spirit that cuts a number of ways across the biblical revelation. Consider how the incarnation changes our views of how the Spirit goes about His work.

Are flesh and spirit brought together? If so, how?

In what ways is the Spirit’s ministry also a dividing of spirit and flesh?

Years ago, upon reading Paul Ricouer’s Symbolism of Evil, I was stunned by the idea that a great deal of the language we use to describe sin has its source in the words that describe external filth or dirt. I just simply never thought about it that way. I suppose I had soaked up the thing to which the symbolism of uncleanness and defilement pointed without thinking about the fact that those terms came from the business of outward dirt and its removal. I suppose that there is a little Gnostic in all of us that can only think in purely spiritual ways about the Christian faith. We have “the spiritual is about religion and flesh is about reality” dichotomy stuck pretty firmly in our chests.

This division is a consequence of our fallenness; that we cannot see flesh and spirit united. We are incapable of walking with God in the afternoon (Genesis 3:8). This shows itself in our foolish opinion that what we do with our body will not affect our spiritual life. What we do with our body we do with our spirit. This is why the Apostle Paul reminds us, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1Co 6:19-20).

The life of the body is the life of the spirit. Some time when you plan to go to church, you should try to send your spirit to the house of the Lord without its being connected to your

body. It doesn't work out very well, does it? We are left only to walk with God again where He deigns to offer Himself to us. Here we have glimpses of our ultimate goal that we might share with God in the Garden of His heaven and in it strolls with Him in perfect harmony and fellowship. The patriarchs Enoch and Noah were said to walk with God when they passed from this world: "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). God has walked with us on the dusty roads of Palestine leading on toward Jerusalem and His passion and death (Mk 10:32). This was to be a very real and bodily death, not the airy-fairy thing of "pure spirituality." No, sin and death affects us, every bit of us: body and soul, mind and heart. In Christ's conception into human flesh through Mary, His bodily needs, His fleshly suffering and the giving up of His spirit in death (John 19:30), there is a complete salvation for us poor sinners affected in our totality, as we are, by the plague and filth of sin. He walks with us even now, in the gift of baptism that we might walk with Him in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

Read Luke 1:30-37 and discuss the shocking specificity of the gospel proclamation found in the unseen work of the Holy Spirit conceiving in Mary, the incarnation of Christ.

This same Holy Spirit that conceived the Christ within the flesh of Mary so that he should become incarnate, puts the same Christ into us through Baptism so that we are put to death, conceived and born again of God (John 1). The Holy Spirit was sent from the Father and the Son to work in the flesh of all believers. How can we use the incarnation of Jesus Christ to help God's people see the same unseen works of the Holy Spirit in them?

Use the explanation of the Third Article above to further explore the work of the Holy Spirit.

To what degree is preaching Christ alone a true preaching of the Holy Spirit?

It is easy for us humans to think of ways in which we could improve the divine plan of salvation. God's Son being conceived in human flesh of the Virgin Mary offends us. We would prefer to bypass the incarnation of the Son, and move on to the far more glorious revelation that God is among His people in Christ. We would prefer to avert our eyes from the weakness and humility of God in the incarnation. We desire to rush past the hovel in which God's Son is born to Mary, held in her arms, suckling at her breast. Like Moses, we are willing to demand that God show His full glory to us, we don't want to see God's back from the cleft in the rock. We do not want to be placed in the flesh of the Rock that is cleft for us. We do not want to be placed into His side where we will be splashed clean by the blood and water issuing from His flesh of His wounded side. We prefer not to think of our God as the great grandson of Jesse. We prefer to see what can only be seen in the life to come (1 Corinthians 13:12).

God has seen fit to be manifested among us in a single human life with a shocking specificity. He narrows His divine revelation to one man. This causes great offense among humans like us, who would prefer that God not limit Himself by coming among us in this one person, who is Himself the only way to heaven (John 14:6), and is the full and complete divine revelation (Heb 1:1-2). This specificity rules out all other mediators and ways to God. It rules out all other spirituality and all other ways to God. It's no wonder humans so easily hate this proclamation and seek to obliterate it by demanding it be silenced. Only God the Holy Spirit can break the darkness and death to which we tend and lead us to a confession of the incarnation of God's Son (1 Corinthians 12:3).

We remain captive to the actual revelation that God has given to us: Christ the incarnate Son. There can be no better or higher salvation than the one actually offered to us sinners through His only begotten Son. We cannot philosophize or theorize our way to a better economy of salvation. To do so would be to break the first and second commandments. To plan a better way of salvation is to claim to be God and claim that you have a different and better word. It is to call God a liar. Faith accepts the humility of God in Christ, incarnate of Mary, son of David,

son of Jesse (Romans 1:3-4). Faith confesses His flesh to be the locus of God in the world. Faith claims that to have Him in the flesh is to have God.

Discuss the list of meanings for the word “to make holy” offered by Matthias Flacius in his *Clavis Scripturae*. How can we see the richness of the work of the Holy Spirit in this list?

Flacius lists eight different meanings of the word *sanctificare* in his *Clavis Scripturae*: Worship of God [Matthew 6:9], the work of Christ making holy the church [John 17:19], justification in the broad sense [John 17:17], our actions [2 Corinthians 7:1; Romans 6:19], ceremonial cleansing of the people or the things in offering to God [Exodus 29:37], to set apart persons or things for an extraordinary use. [Jeremiah 12:3], to attempt to do something [Jeremiah 6:4], an ironic meaning, signifying its opposite [Leviticus 6:27].

5. For Conversation

The Holy Spirit is sometimes called the “unknown God.” Is there a sense in which the Spirit desires to do His work incognito? And if so, how does that affect our pastoral work in the congregations?

In what ways are the means of grace both a revelation and a concealment of God the Holy Spirit?

How can we live under this revealing concealment and concealing revelation? How does this relate to Luther’s theology of the cross?

Some years ago, a young church member came to me after a Bible class with a quizzical look on her face and said, "Pastor, since I have been coming to Bible class here, you have talked a lot about Jesus." I was glad to hear that. Then she asked quite earnestly, "When are you going to start talking about God?" Suddenly I was not so glad. As patiently as I could I walked her through John 14:8-10 where Philip asked a similar question of Jesus. Given our theology of the Holy Spirit, how would you deal with this question?

How does the teaching of the person and work of the Holy Spirit relate to our teaching of the exclusivity of Christ? How does Christology relate to the person and work of the Holy Spirit? How does Christo-centricity relate to the Spirit’s work in the church?

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