

To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray

This hymn of invocation is one of a two Luther composed specifically addressed to the Holy Spirit. Like its companion, “Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord” (LBW # 163) it comes from early in the Reformation (1524) when the opportunity to re-form culture spiritually was seized by Luther in a flurry of liturgical proposals and hymn-writing. Here we see how the specific work and proper personhood of the Holy Spirit are integral to Luther’s theology.

Notes on the Text: LBW # 317; ELW # 743; WA 35:447-8.

Following Augustine, Luther thinks of the Holy Spirit as the divine agent who eternally bonds in love the Father and the Son, who now in time through Word and Sacrament includes creatures in this bonding of the Beloved Community which the Holy Trinity eternally is. As verse two in the LBW rendition has us sing, “O Sweetest Love, your grace on us bestow; Set our hearts with sacred fire aglow, that with hearts united we love each other, every stranger, sister, brother. Lord, have mercy!”

There is *reason* for this love. The Holy Spirit is *light* as well as warmth. The Spirit brings light to enlighten the *mind* as well as fire to melt and transform cold and hardened hearts. Thus the LBW fourth verse implores this enlightenment of the Spirit, praying: “Teach us Jesus Christ to know aright that we may abide in the Lord who bought us, till to our true home he has brought us.” Jesus Christ is the Spirit’s *reason* for loving us just as the love of Jesus Christ is the *test* of the spirits, whether they come from God or not (I John 4:1-2).

In Luther’s original order, LBW verse four comes second. In this original order, the “rationality” of God’s love poured into human hearts by the Holy Spirit is inseparably bound to Jesus Christ, so that it is clear that the *Holy Spirit* is none other than the Spirit of *the Son*. Likewise Luther has us sing that the Spirit of the Son demonstrates true love in bringing us to our true *Vaterland* – no earthly ethnicity, but participation in the eternal life of God *the Father*. The personal distinctions and relations give the plot line of the gospel narrative by which the Triune God shares His own eternal life with creatures.

The Holy Spirit persuades by shedding God’s love abroad in our hearts – a persuasion which is rational in the sense that its reason is Jesus Christ. It is rational but not rationalistic in that Luther knows that reason is a servant, not a lord, of the loves of our hearts. Overcoming human mistrust of God at the very seat of human desire in the “heart,” itself scarred and warped by the sinful dynamics of the fallen creation, is not chiefly a matter of overcoming theoretical or philosophical doubts. Such doubts can be important and demand theological attention. But only the Spirit’s actual communication of the love of Christ *pro me*, “for me,” “shed abroad in our hearts” (Rom. 5:5) remedies our Adamic mistrust. That remedy is what the Spirit aims to work in sermon and sacrament and fellowship by presenting Jesus Christ as the deed of God’s love, even for the enemy who I am, that is, the sinner who despairs of love.

Just as justification is Luther’s applied Christology, faith is Luther’s applied Pneumatology (doctrine of the Holy Spirit). Thus Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed begins emphatically with the confession, “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his

gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” Here in the harbinger of the Beloved Community the Spirit is daily at work overcoming distrust and despair until at last the Spirit raises one and all to eternal life. The Augsburg Confession, Article V, echoes this strong theology of the Spirit when it speaks of the Spirit working through Word and Sacrament “as through means to create faith where and when it pleases God.”

What we should note here and ponder is the virtual equation of the Holy Spirit and the gift of justifying faith. “Faith” is Luther’s word for the Holy Spirit given and at work in human beings so that what the Word promises and gives can be truly heard and personally appropriated.

Though two, they belong together: the incarnate Word, witnessed in Scripture and proclaimed in Word and Sacrament, and the Holy Spirit, given through the Word in order to create the very faith to receive it. The Son is given by the Spirit, and the Spirit is given by the Son, one by another and never the one without the other, yet always in this back and forth between two who are personally distinct yet essentially related as one God with the Father who sends them into our world, into our hearts.

In Lutheran history, this robustly applied Trinitarian theology that both distinguishes the really distinct persons of the incarnate Word and the Spirit, and at the same time relates them essentially to each other in their mutually reinforcing operations, faded from consciousness. In Lutheran orthodoxy, the Word alone was thought to be given in the miraculously guaranteed inspiration of the Scriptures, in which miracle the work of the Holy Spirit was fixed. The emphasis on the objectivity of the Word in the Bible was so pronounced that the human reception of the Word in the Spirit’s grant of justifying faith was practically neglected, as the father of Pietism, Philip Jacob Spener, lamented in his *Pia Desideria*.

In Lutheran Pietism, reacting against this pastorally disastrous neglect in the name of the objectivity of the Bible, the religious experience of the reception of the Word in the new birth took increasing precedence over the specific form given to faith by the incarnate Word. Sooner or later any “spiritual” experience became the main thing, no matter how distantly related to the cross and resurrection of the Word Incarnate. Orthodoxy thus anticipates modern fundamentalism while Pietism anticipates modern liberalism. Both separate and indeed antagonize what Luther held together in lifting up the person and work of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the Triune God.

Corresponding to this Trinitarian unity in difference of the Word and the Spirit, Luther also holds personal and corporate experience together. The contemporary alienation between “spirituality” and “organized religion” is totally foreign to Luther’s theology of the Spirit, who works on each personally precisely by gathering all into “mother Church” (Large Catechism, Article III of the Apostles’ Creed) where the Word is proclaimed and experienced rightly in the fellowship of mutual love. There are two reasons why Luther can hold personal and corporate experience together.

First, Luther rejects strong notions of individual agency. He denies that “by our own understanding or strength” we can even find our way to the merciful Savior, Jesus Christ, let alone climb up to God almighty without Him. In contemporary language, we might say that for Luther individuals are not subjects or sovereigns but patients, whose agency in the world is always a function of those greater

powers to which they give themselves as persons, whether in the final analysis as puppets of Satan or as beloved children of the heavenly Father. Thus, I can only be a human person in relation to something other and greater than myself, in whose agency I find my own true power and mission in life. In this way my personal experience and my social or corporate world go together. Truly prophetic preaching pops the bubble of the illusion of personal autonomy and exposes the idols and demons which rule over us apart from the Holy Spirit of God.

Second, Luther holds, like his teacher Augustine, that we are moved in all things by our loves. He rejects as a rationalistic fiction the belief that human beings are properly identified by their capacity for calculating reason and that their worth accordingly depends on governing themselves successfully according to such a calculus. Instead for Luther human beings are properly identified in Jesus Christ as beloved children of His heavenly Father and their worth accordingly is given as the gift of the Holy Spirit in forgiveness and new life.

We are motivated in everything we do by our loves. The real issue in life, according to Luther, is *what* we love and *whether* it is truly worthy of all our love. This biblical and Trinitarian vision of the human reality and the human predicament is deeply at odds with modern ideas of the “sovereign self,” the debased image of which in our culture is the “consumer,” whose joy in life is to choose between equally superfluous toys. The person and work of the Holy Spirit is to present us a crucified Jewish male of the first century and to ask us whether we find anything attractive about Him. When we have turned our heads away in repugnance from this sight, then, and only then, are we in the place where the revelation of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world can be spoken, heard and believed. Revealing *that* and remaking us in accord with *that* is the precious work of the Spirit of God.

Four-Week Teaching Plan

Week One: Read the hymn as a whole but in the correct order (LBW 1, 4, 2 3). Make note of the themes of the petition in each verse and their progression: first, for the faith that triumphs over death; namely, second, the faith that knows Christ aright as the Lord who has bought us; third, that in this Spirit-given faith in Christ we love as we have been loved; and fourth, that we persevere against the malice that still threatens us. This gives a model of the sanctified (not sanctimonious!) life.

Week Two: Discuss the ideas of human freedom that abound in our culture by asking for responses to Paul’s categorical statement in Gal. 5:1. Be sure to articulate common notions of autonomy and choice, asking how they relate to Paul’s claim. Proceed with study of Gal. 1: 13-26.

Week Three: Study Jesus’ “inaugural sermon” in Nazareth according to Luke 4: 16-23. Explain how Luke understands the title, Christ = Messiah, as the one anointed, not with oil but with the Spirit (cf. John 1:32-3). What are the works of the Spirit in which the man Christ fulfills the messianic office?

Week Four: Study Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:1-22 on the Pentecost event. Discuss the idea that the same Spirit who anointed Jesus for His messianic office is given to the church as community, both gathered and in mission.

Sermon Outline

A Pentecost sermon utilizing “To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray” could proclaim the gift of the Spirit in faith, hope and love as an outline of the Christian life both personally and corporately.

Select Bibliography for Further Study

Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets” (1525) in Luther’s Works 40: 73-224.

Martin Luther, “Concerning Rebaptism” (1528) in Luther’s Works 40: 225-262.

