

LUTHER AS CRITIC AND ADVOCATE
OF SPIRITUALITY*Theodor Dieter*

Much is said about spirituality nowadays. This talk about spirituality has two aspects: it is foreign to many people yet at the same time something they long for. Often they have no way to judge among the various forms of spirituality on offer in magazines and books, workshops and courses. They are spiritually illiterate and, therefore, both easy to inspire and easy to ensnare. It is ever more important today, then, to have criteria for evaluating spiritualities. Martin Luther can help us develop the ability to be discriminating in matters of spirituality.

In 1517 and 1518, because of his Ninety-Five Theses on Indulgences, Luther became known publicly as a critic of a powerful spiritual institution. Luther was, however, not only a critic of spirituality, but also the founder of an evangelical form of Christian spirituality. His critique and his constructive views of Christian spirituality are connected to one another. We understand his critique rightly only if we see that it concerns the dangers of *every* Christian spirituality, including the Lutheran one. For this reason, Luther's thought still deserves our attention today.

In what follows, four aspects of Luther's critique of the spirituality of his day will be presented along with what is of importance for our time. Afterwards I will lay out four elements of Luther's constructive contribution to Christian spirituality. These elements are Luther's alternative to what he rejects in his critique.

Luther's Critique of Certain Forms of Christian Spirituality

Love of Self or Love of God? Toward the end of the year 1510 through the beginning of 1511, Martin Luther was in Rome—the only time in his life he was there. Within the order of Augustinian friars to which he belonged there had been a controversy between those who wanted to fulfill the order's rule strictly and those who did not. Luther was supposed to get permission in Rome for the monasteries of the strict persuasion to live their fastidious way of life without harassment.

Luther did not succeed in doing this in Rome, but the matter weighed on his mind. If monks could argue so bitterly over being allowed to keep their rule as strictly as pos-

sible, then the question inevitably arises: is this controversy really about how God is best served, or is it perhaps an (as it were) Olympic contest over who the most spiritual and most serious seekers after God are? If it is the latter, then this "contest" is not primarily about God, but about the self-validation of pious humans. Even in spirituality, then, inverted human self-love can be at work. Such self-love is a danger for every kind of piety. The danger in spiritual people of instrumentalizing God for their own purposes is particularly difficult to recognize, since such people are still truly anxious to love and serve God.

Luther in his penetrating analysis recognized that a person is a sinner in that he always seeks his own. "In all things seeking his own"—that is what the sinner is doing. All the good found in a person, as well as the good that a person does, will be appropriated by that person as a gain for his own self, as more self-affirmation, more self-esteem, more self-fulfillment. This is something much deeper than egotism, in which one takes too much from or gives too little to another. No, this is the fact that a person relates all the good to back to himself so that he seeks himself and the elevation of his own. No attempt to do something for God's sake alone can succeed. Always the person himself is reflected back, bend backs on himself. As Luther says, a human being is always crooked.

Luther further recognized that even people who live under the grace and power of the Holy Spirit have to fight their whole lives long with this inverted self-love. Sinners who seek their own in all things don't stop doing that when it comes to spirituality. There are monks who completely fulfill their vow of abstinence, but are proud of and pleased by their purity. Luther calls this "fornicating with purity." Monks may accomplish purity in bodily things, but they commit spiritual impurity and even, as Luther so sharply put it, spiritual fornication. Sexual purity is instrumentalized to elevate oneself and to enjoy one's own moral power.

Luther calls this seeking one's own in all things the "drosy of the soul." A person with drosy is desperately thirsty, but as soon as she has drunk she is immediately thirsty again. Spiritually, the desire to acquire and keep everything she

runs across does not stop in the face of God. The spiritual person has contact with God, loves God, serves God—but often not for God’s sake, rather for her own sake. Profound alarm at the fact that, *especially* in spiritual people, it is not God but one’s own and one’s self that is sought can be felt in Luther at many points. The theology of the cross explains that God withdraws Himself from the person who wants to acquire Him. Humans want the strong, the beautiful, the lovely God. But God meets us humans in the weakness of the cross of Golgotha as well as in the weakness of our own lives, in the ugliness of failure as well as in the convicting harshness of life.

This means that we have come to the first basic problem of all spirituality, namely the problem of whether in spirituality it is the love of God or the love of self that leads the way. That may seem surprising since it is precisely in the realm of spirituality that we have contact with God, closeness to God, service for God. But it is a widespread and serious threat to any spirituality.

The Grace of Christ or Human Effort? A second aspect of Luther’s critique is this: spirituality includes exercises such as prayer, meditation, fasting, pilgrimages, etc. They are often understood as a way for people to get to God, to get close to God. “Return to me and I will return to you,” we read in Zechariah 1:3. That verse could qualify as the basic principle for many forms of spirituality. Luther, on the other hand, stressed that the encounter between God and mortals originates with God and is pure grace. “What do you have that you did not receive?” This sentence from 1 Corinthians 4:7 could qualify in turn as the basic principle of spirituality in Luther’s understanding. Even a person’s faith which responds to the call of God, even the practice and action of faith by which faith comes to life, all these things happen thanks to the grace of God.

For Luther the false understand-

ing in the efforts of spiritual people is exemplarized in the mass-as-sacrifice offered up to God. For Luther the holy Supper is the “summary of the gospel” (*Summe des Evangeliums*). In it Jesus Christ gives himself to us: “Take and eat. This is my body.” In the mass-as-sacrifice, however, that movement between God and us is just the reverse, potentially leading to the idea that participation in the mass is a spiritually meritorious work, and that a person can subsequently donate this merit to another. But in this case the spiritual person who wants to act and give, rather than just receive, ends up gambling away grace, for grace is only given freely.

This is probably the most difficult inner conflict of spirituality: according to the Scriptures, God’s dealings with people are grace through and through, but effort is an essential part of spirituality. How can the two be set in relation to one another so that the gracious character of spirituality is not lost?

Inner Spirituality or the Corporality of God’s Word? Luther summarizes the relationship of God and mortals thus: “God does not deal, nor has He ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a word of promise... We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of His promise.”¹ Promise and faith belong together.

Now you can think about and accentuate the relationship between the two differently. There were those on the evangelical side who accused Luther of stopping halfway with his Reformation discovery. What counts, they said, is not the external word which penetrates only the ear, nor the water of baptism that touches only the skin, nor the bread and wine of the Supper than can be only eaten and drunk. No, what counts is the inner word, the inner certainty of the speaking of the Spirit, the inner remorse, the inner burning and yearning and longing. That was the view of the so-called enthusiasts.

The Zürich reformer Zwingli in turn relied on a phrase from John 6:63 (“the flesh avails nothing”) and criticized Luther’s insistence on Christ’s physical presence in the holy Supper as crude materialism. The words of institution, “This is my body,” “This is my blood,” are not to be understood literally, according to Zwingli, but spiritually. They require interpretation because they point to something beyond themselves. For Luther, that sounds like the self-seeking “I” that does not accept and receive what God has to give but self-reflectively creates its own reality. Because people have different interpretations, because one interpretation takes it in one direction while another goes somewhere else entirely, Luther fears that the clarity of the word of God would end up getting lost. He even sees a structural parallel between the understanding of the mass as sacrifice and the multiple interpretations of Zwingli: while Luther emphasized that God comes to us in the Supper and makes a present of Himself to us, in the mass-as-sacrifice the emphasis is placed on the action of the church (even if this action is related to the self-sacrifice of Christ), while Zwingli for his part emphasizes the action of remembering the Last Supper by which the participants make present the absent Christ. Certainly in both cases Luther oversimplified the position of those he criticized, but all the same he did expose an all-too-frequent and dangerous tendency in the everyday life of the churches. In church life, subtle theological doctrines are almost always oversimplified, so their weaknesses become visible as under a magnifying glass.

The problem that Luther identifies here is perhaps the most serious problem of spirituality today. “If you believe, you have it. If you don’t believe, you don’t have it!” Luther himself said that. When we read biblical texts today we like to ask, how does this affect me? What does this provoke in me? These are important questions, and as initial questions they are

totally justified. But if they remain the main questions that we direct to biblical texts, then the subjectivity of the recipients absorbs everything that is communicated to them from the outside. The most important thing is no longer *what* is communicated to me, but rather what and how *I* receive, listen, and understand. Is it still Christ who is the primary focus? Or has he been displaced by the soliloquy of a spiritual person who, in order to make this soliloquy more interesting, picks and chooses ideas from the outside, but then does whatever she wants with them?

Spirituality Corresponding to the Gospel or Arbitrarily Chosen? The principal spiritual form of life at Luther's time was monasticism, to which of course nuns also belong. Luther sharply criticized monasticism insofar as he recognized in it the attempt to gain, by special spiritual efforts, communion with God and salvation. Insofar as in monasticism the gracious character of all true spirituality is not preserved, Luther criticizes it.

But another aspect that Luther criticized was the fact that monks and nuns take vows that bind them for their whole lives long. If at some point they come into conflict with their chosen lifestyle, with celibacy, poverty, and obedience, they feel nevertheless bound by their vows and view their transgression of those vows as a sin. Luther asks whether such a vow may indeed bind the conscience. Unlike the words declared at a marriage ("what God has put together, let no one put asunder"), Luther finds no biblical basis for a monk's vows. That doesn't mean that Luther thinks Christians could not decide upon a celibate communal living arrangement at all. But he is of the opinion that this decision, even if taken for one's whole life, is not binding on the conscience such that one will be guilty before God if one no longer desires this lifestyle and chooses another.

Here we come back to a funda-

mental problem. There are countless spiritual practices and exercises. Of all of them we must ask whether they correspond to the gospel and whether we can practice them in such a way that the gracious character of the spirituality is not lost. We must continue to ask whether they are binding for all or only for certain people that choose them, and whether, once they have been chosen, they must always be followed (as in the case of vows). For Luther here and again the basic alternative arises: biblically grounded or self-chosen. "Self-chosen" does not mean "free" in the sense of "self-determined" and thus as opposed to "imposed by others." "Self-chosen" means much more: without biblical grounding but still making a binding claim, either for an individual or a community or even all Christians (such as the fasting rules for certain times of the church year). Spiritual practices and exercises which are in this sense self-chosen easily lead to those who do them looking down on those who don't, so that a inverted self-love ends up being the overall result of spirituality. You can also see that those who do such practices sometimes take them as being meritorious so that the practitioners are entitled to make certain demands of God, again with the result that the gracious character of the spiritual practice is obscured, at the very least. There is much that is good, helpful, and useful for the Christian life and that therefore should be done, but Luther always asks whether a spiritual practice or exercise imposed on oneself and others is genuinely binding.

It is clear now how the four aspects of Luther's critique are interrelated. Is spirituality about inverted self-love or God's love? about grace or human efforts? about inwardness or the corporeality of God's word? about the gospel or an arbitrary choice?

*Four Aspects of Christian Spirituality
according to Luther*

Incarnational Spirituality Christian spirituality can only be lived out

when people are moved by the Spirit of God. But how does that happen? *God* does this, and indeed in a twofold manner, as Luther explains: first from the outside, then on the inside. From the outside through the spoken word of the gospel and the sacraments; on the inside through the Holy Spirit and faith and the gifts of the Spirit. It happens in a specific order: first the external, corporeal; then the internal, spiritual. Both belong together. Thus the movement of God in the incarnation is this: God does not want to deal with people without means, and God's Spirit does not want to speak to the human spirit unmediated, but only mediated through His revelation in Jesus Christ and as this revelation is witnessed to in Scripture.

God is human. This has fundamental consequences for any spirituality that claims to be Christian. Who God is we know in a definite sense only in Jesus Christ. Of Jesus Christ in turn we know nothing without the preaching and writings of the apostles and those who wrote under their influence. God has come in history, and therefore every Christian spirituality bears the marks and also the messiness of history. But that is the way of God with mortals. Spirit becomes flesh! God becomes a flesh-and-blood human being, and therefore our spirits do not come to God without a body, without ears that hear, without eyes that see, without a mouth that tastes. Paul calls the body the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Admittedly, the flesh we speak of here is not simply the thing that people train at the gym, the ideal of which is the bodybuilder. That often is a spiritless flesh, more a piece of meat than anything else. The innovative biblical understanding, however, is that the flesh is seen in unity with the spirit. The flesh retains its own unique identity, but in openness toward the spirit. What exactly does that mean? To figure that out, and live it, is the task of Christian spirituality.

Since God has given Himself to us in the God-human Jesus Christ, and

since Jesus Christ always gives himself to us physically in the holy Supper, then it would be an expression of the highest arrogance of the spiritual “I” to spiritualize this physical reality of the nearness of God, which is what Luther saw in Zwingli and the enthusiasts. Let reality be reality: that is Luther’s concern, because the reality of God is a reality *for us*. We let this reality be what it is when we receive it as it presents itself to us.

More than other theologians, Luther strongly emphasized human faith, receiving, and trust on the subjective side of salvation. Precisely on that account he at the same time vigorously underlined the objectivity of the gift.

A few years ago I was in Baltimore. On the walls of many buildings was painted the word “Believe!” I thought this was a typically American thing to do, since there are so many committed Christians in the U.S. But then I heard that it was the mayor of the city who ordered this word to be painted all over. The city was not doing well, with all its social problems, so the mayor was really saying: we must believe in *us*! We must believe that we are capable of overcoming our huge problems. Therefore: believe! Let’s believe in our own strength! Thousands of motivational trainers live on the fact that they can motivate people to have faith in themselves. And it does work, as we recently saw in the European Football Championship. First-class teams quickly become mediocre teams when they lose faith in themselves and their victory.

But this faith in oneself is something quite different from faith in Jesus Christ, in his promise and presence. Here it is not the trust itself that creates someone you can trust, and it is not the receiving that makes the gift. Were it so, then the Christian faith would be the most grandiose human self-justification, not justification by God. To prevent this perversion, Luther sets great store by the givenness of the gift and emphasizes the real presence of Christ in the holy Supper to an almost

offensive extent. Christian spirituality is always incarnational spirituality that takes seriously the corporeal mediation of the word and sacraments, which the Holy Spirit needs to communicate the gospel.

The Spirituality of the Categorical Gift and the Practice of Receiving

We have seen that the gift of God is given to people. This includes the fact that God’s gift does not depend on preconditions from the human side. God gives His gift without conditions, freely, out of grace. Luther emphasizes that even receiving the gift is God’s work. “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...”² Lutheran Christians confess this in the Catechism. Because of this some Lutheran theologians answer the question, “What should we do to enter into communion with God?” with one word: “Nothing!”

But that is only half the truth. We have heard that, according to Luther, the work of God in humans is twofold: coming from the outside and moving toward the inside. But if God works in humans from the outside, then the human in this respect is actively participating throughout by receiving—in listening, understanding, seeing, tasting. Created human skills are put to use: senses, reason, emotions. Because there is no interior without the exterior, no spiritual without the corporeal, the exercises and practices of spiritual life come into play.

That a person believes and is certain about God is God’s work. People can do as many spiritual exercises as they want, but this does not buy them the right to receive faith from God. That they believe at all is grace itself. But because faith comes from preaching, as Paul says in Romans 10:17, exercises are a part of faith: participation in worship, reading the Bible, meditation. And faith always wants to express itself: in prayer, in singing, in reflection, etc. It’s the same as with

breathing. People do not make air; they inhale and exhale it. And that they inhale and exhale at all, that they live, is not their own doing. But there is no life without inhaling and exhaling. So faith, the spiritual life, is wholly and utterly grace, and yet it fulfills itself in particular spiritual activities.

Luther, unlike some of those who follow him, strongly emphasizes both: that faith and communion with God is entirely thanks to the grace of God, *and* that spiritual exercises essentially belong to this faith. These exercises are in a sense the space in which God’s Spirit can work on us. That could be the model for understanding spiritual exercises rightly: to prepare the space where the Spirit of God can work on us. Now perhaps the subheading of this section will become clear: the spirituality of the categorical gift and the practice of receiving. It is about a categorical gift, not a hypothetical one that is subject to conditions. And the receiving fulfills itself in the human actions of listening and viewing. Grace and practice do not exclude each other, in Luther’s understanding, but belong together. When Luther speaks about faith he often uses the word “exercise.”

Luther was asked once by his barber Master Peter about the right way to pray. Luther wrote in response a small treatise called “A Simple Way to Pray, for a Good Friend.” Here Luther gives us a glimpse into his own prayer habits. “When I feel,” he says,

that I have become cool and joyless in prayer because of other tasks or thoughts... I take my little psalter, hurry to my room, or, if it be the day and hour for it, to the church where a congregation is assembled and, as time permits, I say quietly to myself and word-for-word the ten commandments, the creed, and, if I have time, some words of Christ or of Paul, or some psalms, just as a child might do... When your heart has been warmed by such recitation to yourself and

is intent upon the matter, kneel or stand with your hands folded and your eyes toward heaven and speak or think as briefly as you can: O heavenly Father, dear God, I am a poor unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to raise my eyes or hands toward thee or to pray. But because thou hast commanded us all to pray and hast promised to hear us and through thy Son Jesus Christ hast taught us both how and what to pray, I come to thee in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ together with all thy saints and Christians on earth as he has taught us: Our Father who art, etc., through the whole prayer, word for word.³

Then Luther, depending on the time he has available, meditates on the individual petitions of the Lord's prayer. He outlines briefly the thoughts that come to him here. He concludes this meditative passage:

Finally, mark this, that you must always speak the amen firmly. Never doubt that God in His mercy will surely hear you and say "yes" to our prayers. Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain. Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, "Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth." That is what amen means.⁴

What today is so often split apart actually belongs inextricably together for Luther: the individuals that pray and the community that prays; the highest individual prayer and the holy Scriptures as the source and fulfillment of prayer. But Luther does not want his own meditation on the Lord's prayer to be repeated word for word by his barber. The barber should find his

own words. What Luther says is simply an example and an incentive to the man's own prayer. Luther reports of himself:

It may happen occasionally that I may get lost among so many ideas in one petition that I forego the other six. If such an abundance of good thoughts comes to us we ought to disregard the other petitions, make room for such thoughts, listen in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit Himself preaches here, and one word of His sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation.⁵

This is an impressive example of the unity of the external and internal, the work of the Holy Spirit and human activity. Luther says again: "To this day I suckle at the Lord's prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill."⁶

The Spirituality of *Anfechtung* and of the "Die and Become"

Spirituality has essentially to do with the fact that a human being is a corporeal, ensouled, spiritual unity. This includes the fact that a human being lives in space and time. When a person gains knowledge of God or of herself, she must always preserve and regain that knowledge in different times and other spaces through asking questions and changing. Because she is a creature in time, she can never keep the knowledge or belief she has won as an unchanging certainty, always the same and static. Luther says emphatically that the believer is a being that is always in and out of a state of *Anfechtung*.⁷

In *Anfechtung*, an accusation always rings through your conscience: you've done everything wrong, and now it is too late to correct it! You are a sinner and nothing but a sinner! Your faith is not genuine, but only imaginary!

You're lost for all eternity! God wants nothing to do with you! When our lives rise up against us like a wild animal, when God seems like an enemy or like a cold, horrific, silent power, and we do not know whether it's God or the devil behind such experiences, then we find ourselves in the situation that Luther calls *Anfechtung*. For him it is simply part of the Christian life to enter into such states of *Anfechtung*. The *Anfechtung* reflects certain aspects of our lives, but as if in a distorting mirror. That's what makes it so dangerous: we cannot deny that so much is wrong in our lives, but in the distorting mirror of *Anfechtung*, God's grace, though it surrounds us and works in our lives, is hidden, and that is why we see such a frightening distortion of our own reality. Therefore what matters is fleeing to the God of the gospel while we are in that state of *Anfechtung*, holding fast to His promises, to His assurance that He wants to be a gracious God to us.

Luther once answered a question about the right way to study theology by saying that you study aright by practicing *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*—prayer, meditation, and *Anfechtung*. It is not the first but the second practice that is meditation on Scripture, because you can't just start reading Scripture as you would any other book. Luther explains:

[Y]ou should know that the holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone. Therefore you should straightaway despair of your reason and understanding... But kneel down in your little room [Matthew 6:6] and 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.⁸

The second, meditation, is not a merely internal activity. Rather, according to

Luther, this particular practice means that

you should meditate, that is, 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. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you will then have complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe.⁹

The third part is *Anfechtung* or *tentatio*. It is not performed by a person herself, but rather overwhelms her. Luther writes that this 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.”¹⁰ It is therefore *Anfechtung* that helps Christians to have a true experience of God. But we should bear in mind that Luther does not think that in *Anfechtung* a person has an experience primarily of herself or what’s happening in her own inner life. Luther far more emphasizes that the Christian has an experience with the Word of God. She learns how strong and comforting this Word is, so that all *Anfechtung* begins to be overcome. Thus through *Anfechtung* she experiences the power of the one Who overcomes it. It leads her deeper into the Word, to the depth dimensions, to the surprising strength within.

Without *Anfechtung*, a Christian would be stuck with a superficial understanding of the Word of God. For Luther, his numerous opponents, the accusation of heresy, the death threat from the emperor in 1521 under which he lived for the rest of his

life: all belonged to *Anfechtung*, and he repeatedly stressed that without these numerous and powerful opponents he never would have become such a good doctor of theology. They forced him to test, correct, deepen, and better substantiate everything he taught and did, again and again. *Anfechtung* leads into the depths of God’s Word.

Accordingly, Luther never understood Christian existence as something peaceful and always in the same identical state of *being*, but as a *becoming*, a movement not only from a superficial understanding of the Word of God to a deeper understanding but also one from the sinner to the justified. That is indeed the real core of *Anfechtung*, when a person discovers that he does not love God with his whole heart, as God demands: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength.” That’s what is meant already in the “Hear, O Israel” of Deuteronomy 6:5 and again when Jesus repeats this verse in answer to the question about the highest commandment (Matthew 22:37). Even the believer does not love God with his whole heart, but rather again and again refers everything his life back to himself as its final goal, as a result of his inverted self-love. It is through the law, spiritually understood, that this inverted self-love is exposed by the first commandment and accuses people: You are a sinner! For Luther it requires nothing less than the death of this inverted self-love for Christians to be able to fulfill the commandments in a state of rightful love of God. This release from the vicious circle around oneself back toward the love of God is not a one-time event but must be repeated over and over again. The spiritual imperative to “die and become!” is the deep movement of spirituality, in Luther’s sense.

Spirituality in the Everyday Life of the World In medieval canon law it was said: “There are two types of Christians, the consecrated and the laity.” The consecrated were the monks, nuns, and priests. Luther

claimed to the contrary that *all* the baptized are consecrated as priests. Luther explains that faith belongs to baptism, and faith connects the believer with Christ the way a wedding ring binds a man and woman in marriage. In a marriage, as it worked in Luther’s day, there was common property: the goods or property of the groom became the goods and property of the bride, and vice versa. So since Christ is a priest and a king, in faith Christians are also priests and kings. That the baptized are priests, then, means that they stand before others on behalf of God, because they speak for God. And they stand before God on behalf of others, because they make intercessions for them. Both of these things characterize priests: they speak *from* God and ask *for* others. In addition, priests sacrifice for others out of love. The nature of priesthood in this sense is a part of the spirituality of Christians in everyday life. It is also therefore necessary that Christian priests are spiritually discriminating. To this end Luther wrote his two catechisms in which he laid out just what the Christian faith means.

If baptism and faith ground the basic similarity among all Christians, then the monastic form of life can no longer be preferred as the higher and more authentic spiritual form of life over marriage and worldly professions. Because marriage has both God’s commandment (“be fruitful and multiply”) and God’s order (“what God has put together...”), it is a God-pleasing way to live. Monks and nuns cannot say that of their own lifestyle, Luther claims. The result is that the living together of a man and woman in marriage, with responsibility for children, is no longer to be considered spiritually secondary. The family is the place where love for others is to be experienced and where God is to be served in the right way. This also implies an appreciation of the natural working of the world. We need not leave the world in order to serve God. Rather, in procreation, parents are coworkers with God in the process of

creation. Living together in the family is the God-given place for love of others and responsibility for others, as it can also be a place of suffering discipleship. Luther knew very well that suffering is also a part of living together and accepting responsibility.

Likewise one's profession is understood as a place where one can live out a vocation from God. Vocation exists not only in religious orders but should also be understood as being positively placed in the worldly estate. Through the activities of their professions, people help their neighbors get what they need for the business of life.

Luther's spiritual appreciation of the family and worldly professions as well as his fundamental critique of religious orders made history and left their mark on Protestant spirituality. Today, however, as a Lutheran theologian looking back on Luther's verdict on the religious orders, I cannot deny that this critique was and is connected to a great loss for the Protestant churches. Luther had good reasons for his verdict on monastic vows. But this verdict was against the dominant forms of monasticism in his time and in no way takes into account all possible forms of monasticism and certainly not all the ways in which monks and nuns might lead their lives.

Luther insisted that the radical will of God be applied to all Christians: there should not be a spiritual elite that shoulders the whole burden of discipleship while "ordinary" Christians can just dispense with it. Karl Marx once said mockingly that Luther turned monks and pastors into laity because he turned the laity into pastors. But it is not even as simple as that. Even if one considers the great impact of the Protestant parsonage on church and culture in Europe, it is impossible to overlook the fact that

the parsonage did much to contribute to the bourgeois domestication of much of Christianity. That the kingdom of God breaking in is something entirely new in this world and not only the sanctification of the natural (and perhaps also the cultural) slips into the background of Lutheranism. With the disappearance of the monasteries on the Protestant side were also lost the institutional places where the wisdom and discipline of the spiritual life were handed on from generation to generation. Pietism was in some ways the attempt to live in a monasticism without a cloister in the everyday life of the world. It is striking how often the early pietists in their writings speak of "leaving the world"—a traditional expression for entry into a religious order. But without the fixed locations of transmission of spiritual traditions, people in the Protestant world in some sense always had to reinvent the wheel of the special spiritual life. Renewal movements often break down and slide back into legalism because the spiritual leadership that might be able to preserve the tradition across the upheaval of the generations is missing. It is not without reason that, if you look at bookshelves of spiritual literature today, you'll find many more Catholic authors than Protestant ones.

Even a theologian like Luther cannot simply be lifted up out of his context. It is one of the bad habits of Lutheran theology often to quote Luther as if he promulgated eternal, contextless truths. This is a failure to see that sometimes, if we wish to preserve his intentions nowadays, we might have to say something quite different from what Luther would have said in his own time.

I am convinced that still today we can learn a lot from Luther, even in matters of spirituality. But I am equally

convinced that we will best take up Luther's crucial points only when both his context and his unfolding impact on history are considered as well, and when we are not afraid to deal critically and self-critically with the great reformer. This attitude would allow Lutherans to adopt many (though not all!) of the various aspects of Roman Catholic spirituality, to receive and treasure them, and also in turn to share ours with Catholics, thus making fruitful the productive potential of Lutheran spirituality and theology. *LF*

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Notes

1. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 36:42 [hereafter cited as LW].
2. Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 355.
3. LW 43:193–5.
4. LW 43:198.
5. Ibid.
6. LW 43:200.
7. *Translator's note*: Because the German term is so vivid and specific, it is retained here rather than attempting to select one English word to replace it. *Anfechtung* includes connotations of struggle, despair, temptation, and affliction.
8. LW 34:285–286.
9. LW 34:286.
10. LW 34:286–7.