



LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL  
SOUTHERN  
SEMINARY

# Spirituality & Spiritual Formation

A Position Paper of the Faculty of  
Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary  
Columbia, South Carolina  
October 1998

## Introduction

“Spirituality” and “Spiritual Formation” have been significant items on the agenda at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary for several years. Input of various kinds from members of the Board of Trustees, bishops, and students helped to draw the attention of faculty and administration to this dimension of seminary life. At the same time, a wide range of faculty interests and concerns, both scholarly and pastoral, have converged spontaneously on these themes.

Formal discussion of the issue was initiated by a paper written and circulated by President Reisz in 1996. Other papers and presentations by faculty and staff followed. In May 1997 President Reisz appointed a Working Group on Spiritual Formation, chaired by Professor Agneta Enermalm, which was charged to “bring to the president and the faculty recommendations for discussion and action regarding an enhancement of our intentional spiritual formation of students” (Memo of May 8, 1997, from President Reisz).

During the 1997-1998 academic year the Working Group devoted considerable attention to “action,” planning and carrying out a wide range of formation activities. At the same time, it was realized that the seminary needed an explicit theological context within which to develop formation activities and integrate them into the curriculum and other aspects of the seminary experience. Further-more, the lively and constructive discussion initiated within the faculty by President Reisz’s 1996 paper seemed to be moving naturally towards resolution in a statement of shared theological principles.

In the Spring 1998, therefore, the Working Group appointed a Drafting

Committee consisting of Professors Tony Everett and David Yeago and Pastor John Largen. Several drafts were discussed and revised by the Working Group. A final draft was sent to the faculty at the end of the Summer of 1998 and adopted, with some revisions, by a unanimous vote of the faculty on October 9, 1998.

At the same time, the faculty also unanimously adopted the following definition of a “position paper”:

- 1. A Position Paper is adopted by the faculty as a guide and point of reference for discussion and action within the seminary community. It should therefore be put into the hands of students on an ongoing basis and made available to the wider seminary family.*
- 2. A Position Paper is adopted by the faculty as a theologically responsible contribution to ongoing discussion within the wider church. It should therefore be made available to the church at large by appropriate means.*
- 3. A Position Paper is adopted by the faculty for the purposes indicated: as a guide and reference-point for discussion and action within the seminary community, and as a responsible contribution to ongoing discussion within the wider church. A Position Paper is not adopted as a “confession” or theological standard to which members of the faculty are individually bound.*

It is with these ends in view that the following statement is made available for discussion and reflection.

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# Spirituality & Spiritual Formation

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Unanimously Adopted October 9, 1998.

## I. "Spirituality" in Light of the Lutheran Confessions

1. "Spirituality" has many meanings in contemporary culture, not all of them theologically acceptable. **In this paper, "spirituality" will be taken to mean intentional practice of the Christian faith, both corporate and individual, insofar as it seeks to build up Christian identity and nurture "life in the Spirit" in the multiple dimensions of personal existence.**

2. The Lutheran Confessions make room for such intentional spirituality when they speak of a certain "cooperation" with the Holy Spirit on the part of the believer:

As soon as the Holy Spirit has begun this work of rebirth and renewal in us through word and sacrament, it is certain that by the power of the Holy Spirit we can and must cooperate, though still in great weakness. Yet this does not originate in our carnal, natural powers, but in the new powers and gifts which the Holy Spirit has initiated in us in conversion... (**Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration**, Art II, par 65).

3. The Formula **warns** us that we must never regard our cooperation as parallel and equal to the operation of the Spirit, "*like two horses pulling the same wagon*" (ibid., par 66). Rather, **our "cooperation" is itself the Spirit's gift**, according to the Pauline rule: "*What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?*" (1 Cor 4:7; cf. ibid., par 35).

4. According to Lutheran confessional teaching, the work of the Spirit which grants faith inescapably transforms us (cf. ibid., par. 70; Apology, Art IV, par 64). At the same time, the changes that occur in our lives by the power of the Spirit never become the basis for our confidence in God's favor and love: "*... renewal in faith, hope, and love is always dependent on God's unfathomable grace and contributes nothing*

*ing to justification about which one could boast before God*" (Joint Declaration on Justification, par 27).

**Our confidence before God is always founded exclusively on God's free mercy embodied in Jesus Christ and proclaimed in the power of the Spirit through word and sacrament.**

5. Within this framework, **the Lutheran Confessions affirm the dramatic and dynamic character of Christian life as attested in Holy Scripture:**

Because in this life we receive only the first-fruits of the Spirit, and new birth is not completed but only begun in us, the struggle and conflict of the flesh against the Spirit continue even in elect and truly reborn persons. Indeed, not only is there a great difference to be discerned amongst Christians, so that one is weak and another strong in the Spirit, but individual Christians discover in their own lives that they are at one time at peace in the Spirit and at another fearful and shaken, at one time passionate in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another cold and weak (**Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration**, Art 11, par 67).

In the midst of this struggle, believers are called to "*abide in Christ*" in order to "*bear much fruit*" (Jn 15:4-8), to "*be watchful and pray*" (Lk 21:26), to avoid "*conformity to this world*" while being "*transformed by the renewing of the mind*" (Rom 12:2-3), to "*walk by the Spirit*" while refusing to "*gratify the desires of the flesh*" (Gal 5:16), to "*put away your former way of life, the old self*" and to "*clothe yourselves with the new self created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*" (Eph 4:22). **"Spirituality" is one name for the struggle of believers to respond to such admonitions.**

6. **Lutheran tradition understands "spiritual life" as faith itself, alive in adoration and praise, and holding fast in daily conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil:**

Although faith fully possesses Christ and all his riches, yet it must be continually kept in motion and exercised, so that it may have assurance, and firmly retain its treasures. There is a difference between having a thing and firmly keeping hold of it, between a strong and a weak faith.... Where faith is not continually kept in motion and exercised, it weakens and decreas-

es.... Therefore you should not imagine that it is enough if you have commenced to believe; but you must diligently watch that your faith continue firm, or it will vanish; you are to see how you may retain this treasure you have embraced; for Satan concentrates all his skill and strength on how to tear it out of your heart. Therefore the growth of your faith is truly as necessary as its beginning, and indeed more so; but all is the work of God (*Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. by J. N. Lenker, vol. V, 254-256).

7. Operating within this confessional and theological framework, Lutherans participate in the spiritual tradition of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, receiving and synthesizing that great tradition in a theologically principled way. **We have no Lutheran resources in spirituality which are not themselves already involved with wider Christian traditions of belief and practice.** Luther's own "spiritual theology" — his pastoral theology of Christian existence — drew heavily on patristic and medieval pastoral and monastic resources. The great Lutheran spiritual writers of the age of Pietism and Orthodoxy were likewise remarkably ecumenical, both in their openness to the Christian past and in their willingness to learn across confessional dividing-lines. Today also Lutheran spirituality is an essentially ecumenical endeavor. **Our task is to engage and integrate the classical Christian tradition and the best contemporary resources in a theologically and pastorally responsible fashion.**

## *II. Christian Spirituality: Ecumenical Affirmations*

1. With the ecumenical tradition, **we affirm the anthropology of the unquiet heart**, summed up in Augustine's well-known prayer: "*You have made us for Yourself and our heart finds no rest until it rests in You*" (*Confessions* I. 1). **What is most fundamental about human persons is their need and desire for God.**

2. With the tradition, **we affirm the reality of original sin**: the powerful energy of human need and desire, meant to bind us to God, has been diverted from its true object. Moreover, we put our trust not in the goodness of God who "*satisfies the desire of every living thing*" (Ps 145:16), but in our own power: this is the pride whose flip-side is despair. **Thus we**

**lust for things that will kill us; we come into greedy conflict with one another; we deny our own dignity; and we offend God, whose love is spurned by our sin.** This is the shared plight of the whole human family; we are all born into it, and we are deformed and limited by it in many diverse ways.

3. With the whole church **we confess that God has acted in Jesus Christ to free us from the wrong and misery of sin.** In Christ crucified and risen we are received into God's favor, we are crowned with undeserved honor and dignity as God's children, and we receive the Holy Spirit who struggles with our desires and teaches us to fear, love, and trust God. **All Christian spirituality is a spirituality of faith, hope, and love**, the Spirit-wrought human acts and affects by which we respond to God's gift and cling to Christ day by day.

4. With the great tradition, we affirm that **true Christian spirituality is ecclesial spirituality**: we find Christ in the assembly of God's people gathered around word and sacrament (*the congregatio sanctorum*: *Augsburg Confession*, art. 7). The Spirit brings us to Christ by bringing us to the church: "*He leads us first into His holy assembly, and lays us on the bosom of the church, and in this way He preaches to us and brings us to Christ*" (*Large Catechism*, Creed, Art. 3, par 37). **Relationship with Christ is thus personal but not private: it binds us to fellowship with Christ's body and to a concrete ecclesial way of life.**

5. **At the heart of the new life of God's people is the privilege and vocation of prayer.** This prayer is both corporate and individual, ordered and spontaneous, and encompasses praise and thanksgiving, confession and intercession. God mercifully hears the cries of all creatures, yet to pray "*in the name of Jesus*" (Jn 16:24) and to cry out "*Abba, Father*" through the gift of Christ's Spirit (Gal 4:6) is the special dignity of the baptized. Faith in God's mercy takes form as prayer: "*What is such faith, if not sheer prayer?*" (Luther. *Sermons*, v.70). **Prayer is the heart of Christian life, the primary enactment of faith, and the first and most distinctive service which Christians owe the world.**

6. **As sinners, we must learn the art of prayer from Holy Scripture, the corporate worship of the church, and the example of**

**the saints who have gone before us.** With the ecumenical tradition, we recognize that a special role is played in this learning by the Psalms of Israel, and the prayers and canticles of the New Testament, and especially the Prayer which Jesus taught his disciples.

7. With the great tradition, we refuse to isolate Christian prayer as a “religious” act from human life in the social world. **Prayer is confidence and hope in God set against the distortion of life by sin: it thus goes together with self-discipline and availability to the need of the neighbor.** Self-discipline means resisting the domination of one’s life by distorted need and futile desire, in confidence in God as our true Good; availability to the neighbor’s need is likewise rooted in confidence in God’s abundance, in light of which we need not regard others as threatening competitors for scarce resources. **In both these ways, faith enacted in prayer has public, social consequences.**

8. We share with the tradition a twofold realism: realism about self that knows the ambiguity of all our virtues and achievements, and realism about God’s bountiful goodness that hopes for great things despite self. **Christian spirituality knows that we never outgrow utter dependence on sheer mercy; it knows also that because of that mercy, humility is not incompatible with extravagant hope.**

9. Most deeply, **Christian spirituality is participation in the life of the Triune God.** United with Christ by the Spirit through faith in the promise, we seek to be formed in Christ’s image and to glorify the Father with him, in every dimension of our personal existence: in the shaping of our character, in the inward struggle with secret thoughts and desires, and in our outward behavior in the public world. **Christian spirituality is thus a sign of the Kingdom of God,** of the life of the age to come when “*God will be all in all*” (1 Cor 15:28).

### *III. The Shape of Spiritual Formation*

1. The theme of “formation” is deeply rooted in the New Testament witness, perhaps especially in Paul. He addresses the Galatians as “*My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you*” (Gal 4:19), and exhorts the Romans: “*Do*

*not be comfort to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Rom 12:2).

Christian formation both personal and corporate, involving our inmost heart, our outward behavior, and the way we live together.

**Formation is the work of the Spirit who brings us to Christ and joins our lives to his, so that in struggle and newness of life we bear the image of the crucified and risen Lord and make him known to the world.**

2. Formation implies *discipline*, to be “formed” is to undergo a shaping and ordering of life that does not leave all options open. The theme of discipline sometimes evokes fear of legalism and spiritual tyranny among Lutherans, yet **if we cannot speak of discipline, we have no protection against rank consumerism.** Christian spirituality is not a search for new gratifications for the “*fat relentless ego*” (Iris Murdoch), but *metanoia* and *metamorphosis* (cf. Mk 1:15; Pm 12:2), death and resurrection.

3. We believe that Lutheran teaching about the “external” or “bodily” word makes an ecumenically relevant contribution to this theme (**Augsburg Confession**, art. V; **Smalcald Articles**, III, art 8, par 3-13). **Christian spiritual formation is essentially sacramental:** it is intentional engagement with what Luther loved to call the “bodily word,” the array of outward words and signs — rituals, discourse, persons, artifacts, and institutions — through which the Holy Spirit makes Christ known in and through the church.

4. **The bodily word is discipline just because it is public and external:** it is out there in the world, obviously and tangibly other than the self. **Spiritual formation is being formed by a word encountered in the public, bodily world out beyond the self.** The public, ritual character of preaching and sacrament; the material elements of water, bread, and wine; the words, gestures and presence of the pastor pronouncing absolution; the textual givenness of Holy Scripture; the witness of believers different from us in time, culture, and social position; and the corporate objectivity of liturgical form, all represent different forms of this bodily “otherness” with which God’s word comes to us. We are disciplined away from idolatry, from manufacturing a God whose function is to gratify the ego, by this public, bodily *concreteness* of Christ’s presence *pro nobis* in word and sacrament.

5. Within this sacramental context, **Christian spirituality must be understood as baptismal struggle and hope.** Baptism, our foundational meeting with the bodily word of Christ, initiates a protracted conflict over the “formation” of our lives. To “return to Baptism” in daily remembrance is to return to this struggle, for Baptism’s “*work and power are nothing other than the slaying of the old Adam and then the resurrection of the new human being, both of which go on in us our whole life long*” (*Large Catechism*, Baptism, par 65). This daily return to Baptism receives a special concretion in Individual Confession and Absolution, which is therefore of great importance for spiritual formation in the church.

**6. The baptismal struggle goes on in every dimension of our existence:** in public, as we strive to live as God’s children in human societies and cultures (and even church bodies!) whose life is distorted by sin (the world); in our own hearts, as we struggle with wrong desire and distorted need (the flesh); and in our fundamental orientation to reality, as we cling to the truth of the gospel against the power of deception (the devil). **Against these foes, Baptism is the standing promise that, in the mercy of God, we shall bear the form of the crucified and risen Christ.**

7. We share with the ecumenical tradition a sense of the normative shape of Christian formation. **The new humanity is formed in us in the midst of the baptismal conflict through the interaction of word and prayer,** as God draws near through word and sign, and we respond by giving thanks and asking for what we need. Spiritual formation is intentional entry into this formative dialogue, so that, in Luther’s words, “... *our dear Lord Himself may speak to us through His holy Word and we respond to Him through prayer and praise*” (*Luther’s Works* 51, 333).

**8. The primary locus of such formation is common worship, especially the communal celebration of the Holy Eucharist.** In the full service of Holy Communion, in which the Proclamation of the Word and the Prayer of the Church are juxtaposed with the Great Thanksgiving and the Communion of the Faithful, the dramatic interplay of divine generosity and human participation is enacted in all its complexity with unsurpassable depth and power.

9. The pattern of Eucharistic worship is extended into daily life in the interplay of word and prayer, in the “feeding” and “chewing” on the word of God (*lectio divina*) which evoke and sustain prayer. As Augustine put it, “*When you read, God is speaking to you; when you pray, you are speaking to God*” (PL 37:1086). **This interplay of word and prayer, *meditatio* and *oratio*, constitutes the normative pattern of Christian spiritual practice in the ecumenical tradition.** We believe that there are solid theological reasons for the pervasiveness of this pattern set forth in our Lutheran tradition in the doctrine of the bodily word.

**10. This norm permits great diversity:** the interplay of word and prayer can be embodied in multiple and various concrete forms of practice. Lutherans are not restricted to modes of practice already familiar in Lutheran circles; in spirituality, as in doctrine and worship, the Lutheran Church “*claims as its rightful inheritance all that is truly ecumenical in the Church of every age and every land*” (*Service Book and Hymnal*, Preface, vi). Contemporary efforts to recover the Daily Office and the ancient practice of *lectio divina* are especially congruent with basic Lutheran commitments.

11. Inevitably, an individual’s spiritual discipline will reflect individual needs, dispositions, and gifts. **But every Christian’s personal discipline should be founded on the remembrance of Baptism, centered in Eucharistic worship, and reflect the normative pattern of Christian formation.** That is, it should involve daily engagement with God’s word as an “external word” concretely other than the self, and it should involve the practice of prayer as thanksgiving, and praise, confession and intercession.

12. Christians should beware of making or heeding exaggerated, sectarian claims for particular forms of spiritual practice or particular types of spiritual experience. **Only word and sacrament and the pattern they imply are for everyone:** they give us a sufficient focus for a shared identity and a normative framework within which diversity can be reconciled and celebrated.

13. As faculty in a seminary of the church, we are especially conscious of the importance of intentional spiritual formation for pastoral ministry, the diaconate, and other forms of church leadership. **Seminary students must receive the encouragement, urging, and instruction they need in order to find a stable and enlivening pattern of spiritual practice capable of sustaining them over the long haul in life and ministry.** Leaders in the church must also be encouraged to seek forms of spiritual practice that place them at the *center* of the Christian tradition which they are to represent and interpret.

#### *IV. Spiritual Direction as Gospel Ministry*

1. The guidance and help of a spiritual director may be one way in which Christians encounter “the word out beyond the self” We welcome the development of ministries of spiritual direction in our church; however, spiritual direction needs to be defined and shaped in a theological context. **A spiritual director is a Christian believer, ordained or not, who is called by God and the church to offer guidance and help to fellow-believers through the embodiment of God’s word in close pastoral relationships of a special kind.**

2. Spiritual direction thus understood is a form of gospel ministry: a spiritual director is neither one who takes power over the lives of other Christians, nor merely a “facilitator” or therapist; rather, **a spiritual director is one called to accompany fellow-believers on the way of discipleship as a witness and speaker of the word of Christ.**

3. Like all gospel ministry, authentic spiritual direction is *ecclesial* ministry. **Those who believe themselves called to this ministry should seek acknowledgment and confirmation of their call by the pastors and people of the church.** Not every ordained person has the gifts for this ministry, so this rule applies also for the ordained. Such acknowledgment might take many forms and might often be informal rather than institutionally formalized, but it should be such that a spiritual director can say in good conscience that his or her ministry is *recognized by the Christian community.*

4. Because spiritual direction is gospel ministry, **spiritual directors need theological training.** Because spiritual direction is ecclesial ministry, **spiritual directors need to study the spiritual and pastoral traditions of the ecumenical church.** Such formation can take place in many different settings; seminary study may be valuable for many, but need not be the only model. Careful thought and creative improvisation are needed to make widely available the theological formation that spiritual directors need.

5. Because spiritual direction is not ultimately a matter of technical expertise, but gospel witness on the part of sinful, frail, tempted believers, **spiritual directors need spiritual direction.** All those who engage in the ministry of spiritual direction should themselves receive direction, as well as the support and accountability of peer supervision, and should take part in Individual Confession and Absolution on a regular basis with a competent and trusted confessor.



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