A Lutheran Theology of the Holy Spirit:

A Creative Grammar, Messianic Holiness and a "Third Space" for Everyone

Lois Malcolm

The Olin and Amanda Fjelstad Reigstad Professor of Systematic Theology
Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The twenty-first century is defined by a confluence of profound global crises: environmental collapse, systemic economic inequity, intense political polarization, and a perilous slide toward authoritarian governance. Paradoxically, this age is characterized as both secular and post-secular. Expanding global capitalism may be rooted in limitless individual freedom and autonomy, yet this same force simultaneously erodes traditional life and community. Crucially, the very idea of radical autonomy often appears to fuel its own antithesis—namely, the rise of illiberal, authoritarian states or reactionary religious and ethnic identities—as if profound liberty invariably calls forth a resistant heteronomy.[1]

Martin Luther stands at a fascinating historical nexus that profoundly anticipates this modern tension. He is often credited with ushering in a modern sense of individual spiritual freedom, yet his political legacy has also been linked to authoritarian tendencies.[2] This inherent duality is powerfully mirrored in his distinctive theology of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology). While sometimes associated with the boundless spiritual freedom championed by later charismatic movements, Luther's later thought is more often interpreted as intentionally suppressing or strictly channeling the Spirit's radical, subjective potential.

This duality makes Luther's pneumatology acutely relevant to our own time, particularly as world Christianity is increasingly taking on a Pentecostal or charismatic character and even non-religious forms of spirituality are exploring ecstatic, and even psychedelic, experience. What might a robust, contemporary Lutheran theology of the Spirit look like today? And how might such a theology powerfully contribute to the burgeoning global conversation on the Spirit that has gained renewed critical prominence among Christian theologians?[3]

Luther's distinctive understanding of the Holy Spirit offers an urgently needed theological and ethical framework for navigating the perils of our atomized and polarized age. The key to this framework lies not in simply replicating Luther's sixteenth-century responses, but rather in attending, as Luther himself did, to the Spirit's "own grammar"—as articulated in the Creeds and Scripture—and the way it brings Christ to us today in both judgment and promise.

In this essay, I contend that Luther's distinctive understanding of the Holy Spirit offers an urgently needed theological and ethical framework for navigating the perils of our atomized and polarized age. The key to this framework lies not in simply replicating Luther's sixteenth-century responses, but rather in attending, as Luther himself did, to the Spirit's "own grammar"—as articulated in the Creeds and Scripture—and the way it brings Christ to us today in both judgment and promise. By centering the Spirit's work in the *external* Word and the corporately accessible means of grace, this grammar traces how the Spirit creates within and among us a *messianic and communal holiness*, defined by living in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. This

1. For different discussions of this dual dynamic, among others, see Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1-54; and Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 1-81, 321-346.

2. For an analysis of these two readings of Luther, see Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law,* trans. Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 125-126. Cf. more recently Christine Helmer, *How Luther Became the Reformer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 80-82.

3. For discussions of issues in contemporary pneumatology, see, e.g., Cheryl M. Peterson, *Holy Spirit in Christian Life: The Spirit's Work for, in, and through Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 1-22. See also Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 1-12, and Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 17-30.

process establishes the church as a "*third space*" that exists within, yet remains distinct from, society's political and economic spheres, thereby offering a robust hope against the despair many feel in our secularizing yet post-secular age.

Part I: The Holy Spirit's Creative Grammar and the Means of Grace

Luther's theology of the Holy Spirit is often narrowly characterized by the believer's intense, agonizing "inner conflict."[4] This profound spiritual struggle involves not only the terror of guilt, death, and hell, but also combat with Satan and, paradoxically, with God's self. It is precisely within this extreme desperation—identified as God's preparatory "alien work" of wrath—that the Spirit intercedes, working through the "strange garb" of sin and suffering to destroy the old self and establish new life in Christ.[5] While this introspective portrayal of the Spirit's work is certainly found in Luther's writings, it is neither his only depiction nor the one most thoroughly entailed by the sources that informed his pneumatology: the Creeds, Scripture, and the very proclamation of the Gospel itself.

Creedal assumptions and Trinitarian unity

In the *Large Catechism*, Luther strategically embeds the work of the Holy Spirit within a robust Trinitarian framework. The Catechism is organized around three core components: the Ten Commandments (Law), the Apostles' Creed (Gospel/Gift), and the practices of the Christian life (Means of Grace). While the Commandments articulate God's demands and judgment (the Law), the Creed reveals the foundational gift: salvation achieved through the unified Trinitarian work of creation, redemption, and sanctification.

For Luther, this structure demonstrates that the Law is not merely a negative judgment, but rather the very form God's active work takes in believers' daily life through faith. This relationship between command and gift is most clearly expressed in the First Commandment, which mandates that true faith involves absolute trust in God for all needs, viewing creatures merely as the hands and means through which divine blessings ultimately flow.

The "one God and one faith" established in the First Commandment is identical to the "three persons" described in the Creed.[6] In the Creed, we encounter the complete "essence, will, and work of God," detailed across the three articles.[7] The Father reveals his profound love through creation and by giving his Son, who is the "mirror of the Father's heart." Significantly, the Spirit then brings us into relationship with the Triune God and one another, gathering us and granting forgiveness and holiness through Word and Sacrament. This entire process connects seamlessly to the Catechism's final section on Christian practices (the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper), which serve as the concrete means for mediating the relationship between the Decalogue (Law) and the Creed (Gospel).

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The Spirit's grammar

Luther's pneumatology is defined by his insistence that the Spirit operates primarily through concrete, external means, which he calls the "means of grace." The Spirit creates, calls, and gathers the church by working through the public proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments. Through these objective means, the Spirit announces God's promise of the forgiveness of sin and the resurrection of the dead, thereby creating and increasing holiness in believers, which enables daily growth in faith and its subsequent fruit.

Importantly, what the Spirit delivers through these external means is the very living presence of Christ. This understanding led Luther to fiercely affirm the Christological doctrine of the "communication of attributes" against Protestant adversaries.[8] This teaching describes how the divine and human natures of Christ—the infinite and the finite—are wholly united without confusion or separation. This radical, integral union enables Christ to fully take on our sin and death in exchange for his righteousness and life (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13-14)—an exchange that lies at the very heart of the Spirit's work of bringing Christ to us through the Word and Sacraments. From a purely human perspective, such a union of finite and infinite is impossible. It is only made possible through the Spirit's "own grammar," which prevents establishing either a false identity or a false separation (*diastasis*) between the

4. For a depiction of "inner conflict," see Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator: Luther's Concept of the Holy Spirit*, trans. John M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1953), 3-26.

5. Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 101-172.

6. See Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; translated by Charles P. Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 432.

7. Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, 439.

8. On the "communication of attributes," see Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 335-346.

divine and human.[9]

Luther identified the Spirit's "own grammar" with the pillars of cloud and fire that guided Israel in the desert (Exod 13:21).[10] This powerful identification illustrates three key features of Lutheran pneumatology:

1. **Externality and objectivity:** The pillars were a visible, communal sign, not an internal feeling or private revelation. The Spirit's guidance is thus not found in an introspective search but in the objective reality of God's publicly proclaimed Word.
2. **Communal structure (*Koinonia*):** The pillars guided the entire assembly of Israel, creating and sustaining the covenant community in transit. Therefore, the Spirit's grammar is generative, creating a collective, communal space rather than merely isolated individuals.
3. **Direction and ordering:** By providing clear direction through the chaotic desert, the pillars functioned as the ultimate ordering structure. The Spirit, working through the external Word, provides the identity, location, and narrative that grounds the community, thereby resisting the disorientation inherent in a life without clear, divine coordinates.

Law, Gospel, and new creation

Through these external means, the Spirit's grammar is a divine work that continually creates life out of death and righteousness out of sin through our bodily union with Christ's death and resurrection. This process is illuminated by the distinction between Law and Gospel, Luther's fundamental hermeneutical key to all of Scripture. The Law functions as judge, convicting the sinner and compelling repentance (*usus elenchticus*), while also directing the justified believer toward loving service of the neighbor (*usus politicus*). The Gospel, in turn, is the Spirit's quintessential work, proclaiming the forgiveness of sins and anchoring the believer solely in Christ's merit, thus liberating them to serve.

While the Reformation largely defined this framework against the legalism of "works-righteousness" prevalent in corrupt Christendom, the present post-Christian era faces a different set of challenges. As theologian Paul Tillich observed, contemporary society struggles profoundly with "disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair" within the "demonic-tragic structures of individual and social life."[11] In this context, the emphasis must shift toward the eschatological conflict between the old and new ages. The "new creation" established by life in the Spirit is the divine reign "overcoming the tragic-demonic cleavages" present

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across personal, corporate, and cosmic realms.[12]

This "new creation" is rooted in a robust New Testament understanding of the term "forgiveness" (in Greek: *aphesis)*. More profound than mere pardon, *aphesis* signifies "release" and "freedom," echoing the messianic proclamation in Luke 4:18 to "proclaim release to the captives" (cf. Isa 61:1). This concept finds its fullest expression in the Jubilee Year, a radical societal reset announced on the Day of Atonement. Jubilee mandated the release of slaves, the forgiveness of debts, and the return of ancestral land, preventing perpetual poverty and affirming God's ultimate ownership. The Gospel, therefore, is not merely personal salvation but a cosmic and social announcement of liberation that reverses entrenched cycles of oppression and debt, mirroring the radical reset of the Jubilee.

The Spirit's work through Christ amid the two ages is perfectly captured in Luther's depiction of the "school" of the Spirit in his commentary on the *Magnificat*.[13] Mary teaches us that this school is experiential, a space where we learn God's unique way of working. Unlike humanity, which is preoccupied with "honor, power, wealth, knowledge," God actively looks into the depths—where there is "poverty, disgrace, squalor, misery, and anguish." God's continuous activity is an "energetic power" that makes something out of nothing and nothing out of something. This work simultaneously terrifies the proud who rely on their own merit (Law) and comforts the humble, the oppressed, and the poor (Gospel), thereby establishing the liberating reality of the new creation in the world through the Spirit's objective grammar.

Part II: Messianic Holiness and the Creation of Communal Space

The work of the Holy Spirit, which is sanctification, is both personal and communal: it aims at the formation of a new community centered in the Messiah's life. This new communal reality is the wellspring for a renewed ethical vision that encompasses all spheres of human existence, including economics and politics.

9. Martin Luther's *Weimarer Ausgabe* (WA), 39/II.104, 24-26. On the "Grammar of the Spirit," see Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way,* edited and translated by Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 80-82, 251.
10. WA, 39/II.104, 18ff.
11. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973), 49.
12. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, 49.
13. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works,* vol. 21, translated by Jaroslav Pelikan and A. T. Steinhaeu (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1956), 297-355.

The inner logic of messianic identity

The ethical life of this new community is structured by a dual paradox, mirroring what scholar Jacob Taubes termed the "inner logic of the messianic."[14] This logic is rooted in the divine *kenōsis* (self-emptying) of the Messiah, which is enacted for the sake of enemies and the weak. This structure is powerfully articulated in Luther's treatise, "The Freedom of a Christian," which organizes the Christian life into two inseparable movements:[15]

1. **The movement of freedom: "Lord of all, subject to none."** This inner freedom is achieved solely through faith in the Gospel, which unites the soul with the Messiah. This union enacts a powerful exchange: the Messiah takes the believer's sins and death, and the believer receives the Messiah's unconquerable righteousness, kingship, and priesthood. This act of divine grace, achieved through the Messiah's self-giving death, is the initial *kenōsis* that secures absolute, unconditional liberation for the individual.

2. **The movement of service: "Servant of all, subject to all."** Having been made limitlessly rich by grace, the Christian is compelled by this inner surplus of faith to follow the Messiah's example (Phil 2:1-11). The spiritual wealth of the first movement is translated into an outer, voluntary *kenōsis*—the self-emptying necessary for neighbor-love. Believers spend themselves freely for others, without obligation or distinction between friends and enemies. Through this self-expenditure, the good things received through faith flow outward and become "common to all."

In this dual structure, the Christian actively embodies the messianic logic: just as the Messiah "put on" our sin, the believer now "puts on" the neighbor's suffering, covering them with their own faith and righteousness. This culminates in the imperative to be "Messiahs to one another," actualizing the Messianic *klēsis* (calling) by living simultaneously in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. This actualizes the divine act of redemptive self-emptying directly in the world.

Sanctification as personal and communal holiness

Sanctification, the specific office of the Holy Spirit, establishes holiness in believers not through the demand for individual moral achievement, but by the continuous dispersal of forgiveness and liberation (*aphesis*) within the church. Such holiness is defined by *aphesis*, a term that, as we have seen, signifies liberation in light of the Jubilee tradition: the freeing of slaves, the restoration of land, and the cancellation of debts. This definition is crucial because it decouples holiness from individual moral purity and re-situates it within the eternally public dispersal of God's grace.

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The new heart and the indwelling law—the Spirit's work—restores not only individuals but also the societal contexts they inhabit.[16] As God's presence confronts systemic idolatry and injustice, the Spirit makes not only individual lives holy, but also the communal and societal spaces of their existence. Consequently, this holiness is participatory and relational, rooted in the church's shared life of repentance and absolution.

Luther depicts this holiness as "only halfway pure and holy," yet it is continually "growing" as we dwell in the capacious promise of God's merciful and just reign through the Messiah.[17] This growth is not a self-contained spiritual project; rather, it is expressed as the power to put sin to death and serve others in love in all aspects of our lives. The Lutheran emphasis on vocation—the concrete, everyday roles in which Christians are called to love their neighbors—is the primary ethical expression of the Spirit's sanctifying work. An individual's liberation is immediately channeled into service, offering a direct antidote to contemporary atomization and self-focused isolation. Through vocation, the Spirit grounds individuals and communities in an outward movement of love that connects them directly to the real needs of the world.

The church as a "Third Space": *Ekklesia, Politeia,* and *Oikonomia*

For Luther, the church's foundational mission is the proclamation of the Gospel: the declaration of God's promises in Jesus Christ. This declaration offers *aphesis* (release and liberation) from sin and all forms of oppression and promises the resurrection of the dead. Notably, this proclamation is inseparable from the "common order of love"—a communal commitment to service and sacrifice that defines the church as a servant community.

14. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004),10.

15. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress; St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955–86), **327–377.** I have taken the liberty to use "Messiah" instead of "Christ."

16. Note the corporate context for the sources for these biblical images (2 Cor 3:1-6; cf. Jer 31:33-34, Ezek 36:26).

17. Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, 438-439.

Given its servant identity, the church *must not ever* have worldly political or economic dominance; it is a Spirit-created and not a human-made institution.[18] Nonetheless, it's existence precisely as a Spirit-created reality has profound implications for the spheres of *politeia* (politics) and *oikonomia* (economics, which referred to the "household," encompassing both the family and its means for livelihood in Luther's time and in the ancient world). The baptismal confession of our shared identity in Christ necessitates a "messianic" social vision, manifesting as:

- **Politics:** A vision where true equality reigns, transcending divisions of gender, class, or ethnicity (Gal 3:28; Acts 2:17-18).
- **Economics:** A vision defined by mutual sharing and a "fair balance" in abundance and need (2 Cor 8:13-14; cf. Acts 2:45; 4:32).

Of course, the church has historically often reinforced existing hierarchies and inequities. Therefore, the church must continually ensure that its call to proclaim the Gospel is distinct from the world's self-serving definitions of "power" and "wealth," which prioritize the supremacy and abundance of a few at the expense of others (Jer 9:23-24). At the same time, even as the church resists worldly schemes, its proclamation must shape how believers responsibly use their own power and wealth in all aspects of their lives.

The church—as both public assembly (*ekklesia*) and communion (*koinonia*)—serves as a "third space" that resists both its fusion with and absolute separation from the *oikos* (household/economy) and the *polis* (politics).[19] Such double resistance is essential in our time, when the expansion of capital is often correlated with the rise of authoritarian states and varied forms of religious and ethnic nationalism—even as the latter are often seen as reactions to the former. It is precisely in a world marked by increasing economic inequity and political polarization that the church is called to be a radically open and welcoming space that fosters the personal and communal transformations needed for the revitalizing—without reducing the church to—economic and political systems.

Part III: Contemporary Relevance in a Post-Secular Age

A Lutheran theology of the Spirit speaks directly to the core existential and social crises of our time. By focusing on the Spirit's creative and communal nature, this framework offers both a robust critique of contemporary society and a hopeful, practical vision for living within it.

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Countering atomization and dyschronicity

Contemporary life is frequently marked by social atomization—a pervasive sense of disconnection from "ordering structures or coordinates that would found duration." This creates the crisis of "dyschronicity," which the philosopher Byung-Chul Han defines as a feeling that time is "whizzing without a direction" due to the collapse of grounding narratives and practices.[20]

The Spirit's creative grammar provides the essential antidote to this existential and systemic breakdown. By anchoring believers in the public, external Word, the Spirit imparts the necessary structures: the narratives of creation and redemption, and the practices of promising and forgiveness. These elements create and locate human identity, repatterning our experience of time, space, and our relationship with God, ourselves, and others.

Decisively, this grounding defines the self by God's duration and promise, resisting the relentless "acceleration" of modern capitalist societies, which perpetually demand "expanding, growing and innovating, increasing production and consumption."[21] The Spirit does not merely slow down this acceleration; it re-embeds individuals and communities within relationships defined by God's merciful and eternal presence. This Triune divine presence establishes a perpetually true freedom—a sharp contrast to the fragmented, punctiliar choices of atomized individuals whose supposed freedoms are often actually determined by economic algorithms and cultural expectations.

18. See, e.g., 2 Cor 5:1 (cf. Acts 7:48; Isa 66:1-3).

19. For divergent discussions of the three estates, see Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 61-62, and Vítor Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 241-254.

20. On "dyschronicity," see Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering,* trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), vi.

21. On "acceleration," see Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 1.

Resisting the gods of this age and cultivating eschatological hope

The work of the Spirit offers a critical lens for understanding and resisting the oppressive structures of contemporary life: the "gods of this age" tend to rule our lives economically, politically, existentially and spiritually (2 Cor 4:4; cf. Jer 9:23). The Spirit cultivates the apostolic virtues of Faith, Love, and Hope in ways that actively subvert the schemes and algorithms of this passing age:[22]

Faith (against tribalism): In the contemporary world, identity often retreats to narrow, "tribal" affiliations. The Spirit-wrought baptismal identity, by contrast, provides us with a deeply personal yet universal, Messianic identity that transcends all ethnic, social, and political markers. This conditioned universalism, rooted solely in the gospel, is the necessary counter-narrative to the increasingly balkanized landscape of identity politics and social fragmentation.

Love (against power): When the "common order of love" is prioritized above the structures of power, the Spirit directs that love toward justice rather than mere power acquisition. The Spirit's sanctifying work is the daily discipline of putting sin to death and serving in love, particularly in the economic and political spheres, which must be continuously critiqued and steered toward the neighbor's genuine welfare. The church's witness to Jubilee Year principles—the forgiveness of debts, liberation of slaves, and land reform—remains a powerful, Spirit-driven ethical vision for social and economic justice.

Hope (against despair): The rapid pace of change and the weight of social and ecological crises often lead to resignation and despair. The Spirit creates hope by enabling us to dwell in and embody the capacious promise of God's messianic reign of mercy and justice. This hope is neither passive resignation nor a naïve utopianism that collapses when met with reality. Rather, it is a wise and discerning imagination that holds onto the promise of the new creation and the resurrection of all bodies in their fullness even amidst the often-cruel exigencies of life. This hope claims God's presence here and now, even while recognizing that God's reign is yet to come. This eschatological orientation is precisely what gives believers the courage to engage in mundane acts of love and healing in the present, linking the Spirit's work directly to care for creation and those in our midst.

The relevance of Lutheran pneumatology for our time is found not in grand programs or political ascendance, but in the Spirit's own creative grammar. This divine grammar unites us with Jesus the Messiah, continually producing within us repentance, forgiveness, and the concrete service of neighbors in our midst.

The "Third Space" of witness

In sum, the Spirit establishes the church as a unique, non-conforming institution. In a highly politicized and commercialized age, the church must resist being reduced to either a political action committee or an economic venture. Rather, the Spirit empowers the church to be an open, "third space."

This unique space exists for one primary purpose: to give witness to the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. The Spirit creates this *ekklesia* (public assembly) so that through the Word and Sacraments the eschatological vision of God's new creation might be proclaimed and made visible. Moreover, as a foretaste of that vision, the church is also called, by faith, to be a *koinonia* (communion), that is, a space where the "common order of love" is embodied, imitating Christ's costly example of suffering and the cross, Luther's seventh mark of the church.

The relevance of Lutheran pneumatology for our time is found not in grand programs or political ascendance, but in the Spirit's own creative grammar. This divine grammar unites us with Jesus the Messiah, continually producing within us repentance, forgiveness, and the concrete service of neighbors in our midst. Powerfully and perpetually present, the Holy Spirit not only sustains faith, but also engenders justice-seeking love and anchors a defiant hope in a chaotic world. By calling, gathering, and sending the church, the Spirit remains essential for navigating the challenges of our secularizing yet post-secular age.

22. I have appropriated these three themes from Susan Nieman in *Left Is Not Woke* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 1-10. She analyzes these contrasts: universalism/tribalism; justice/power; and hope/despair.