
Incarnate by the Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Relation to Ethics

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Introduction

The chosen title seeks to honor the celebration for the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. However, the statement “incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary” appears in the expanded symbol of 381, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan revision. I take it that this statement, together with Luther’s use of John 1:14, “and the Word became flesh” as a hermeneutic key, convey well the traditional Lutheran incarnational emphasis for God’s gracious activity for us.

Our task is to relate our thinking about the Holy Spirit to ethics. Granted, there seems to be a generalized aversion from Lutherans to insist on the importance of morality and ethics for fear of stressing “work righteousness.” I am not alone in saying that these fears have been exaggerated if not unfounded. Thus, one goal of this article is to show that ethical reflection and good character formation are not at odds with the practices of love coming from faith.¹

What is ethics?

Ethics studies the ways in which individual behavior and character are shaped, especially in relation to others. There is a communal dimension to ethical behavior, not just a personal or individual one.

Ethics is also about the choices that we make, choices that affect the course of our actions as well as their quality. Ethical reflection is concerned, therefore, with the actions that go on or are consistent with the choices that we make concerning our conduct. The consequences of such actions also matter whether intended or unintended. Ethical reflection helps to make us mindful that specific situations and circumstances, the context of our lives, affect both our choices and their outcomes. However, ethics cannot be reduced to, or merely understood as, a list of *dos* and *don'ts*. Ethical reflection and action have *telos* (a goal, purpose, or end).

From the Greco-Roman world, Christians inherited a preoccupation for the meaning of a good or blessed life, or “happiness”

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(*eudaimonia*), as a life goal. But how is a good life defined? What does it take to have a happy or fulfilled life? What is the best possible life that we can aspire to and have? How do the moral virtues (e.g., prudence, generosity, courage) and the intellectual ones (e.g., wisdom, understanding, impartiality) shape human well-being? And who is to say? What are our criteria?

Ethical reflection needs to develop the capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism, learning how to live an examined life. Likewise, there is an ongoing need to reflect on the place of friendship for our growth, as well as on the Christian emphases on love, faith, and hope as important topics of study.

Ethics and theology

Ethics deals with morals, the activities and practices of daily life. Morality simply makes explicit the way in which life is shaped. For Christians, morality means being formed according to Christian teachings in the way we live.

Sadly, we are accustomed to dividing theology and ethics, doctrine and morals. But rejection of the importance of morality and ethical reflection is a mistake, a misunderstanding of the place

1. This topic was originally presented at a First Call Theological Education conference at United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in the fall of 2024. It has been revised and expanded for the purpose of its publication.

of the gospel in the human experience. Teaching morality does not invalidate the gospel of forgiveness: it needs the preaching of forgiveness if we want to give goodness and character formation a fair chance. We have a problem when preaching undermines any place that morality can have in people's lives. After all, ethical direction for the Christian life is among the responsibilities of the church.

Virtues and character formation

Character is a matter of development, of growth or maturity, a consequence of habit through the practice of decision-making. It is the acquisition of good decision skills through engaging the virtues. Character takes beliefs and intentions seriously.

Virtue names the traits, skills, habits, and behaviors needed for pursuing the potentials of human nature. For Christianity, the attainment of the goals of the Christian life include the practice of the virtues that are aimed at (a) self-control, (b) attainment of a happy or good life, and (c) the good of others in community and society.

The word for virtue in Greek is *arête*, which means excellence in a general sense. For any particular thing, its excellence is to fulfill its *telos* (goal or end). For ethics, the question becomes (1) what the *telos* of human life is, and (2) what excellences enable a human being to fulfill that *telos*. Therefore, *arête* speaks to excellence of character or having good character. Character is a matter of formation, the creation of something like a "second nature" by engaging the virtues.

Unfortunately, the Greek *arête* was rendered as *virtus* that comes from the Latin *vir* and speaks to manliness, the prejudice of a patriarchal society.

Paul Wadell, a Catholic moral theologian, gives us the following working definition of ethical excellences:

The virtues are the qualities, attitudes, intentions, feelings, and habits we need to develop in order to have a rich and authentically good human life. They are the qualities of character we must possess and the acts we must perform if we are to achieve the excellence most properly ours.²

Virtues are learned first by imitating those who are more excellent than we are. By deliberate acting and repetition while perfecting one's actions, and by acquiring personal qualities that can persist through time, character is formed and then confirmed by communal interaction. Practice in virtues is also an exercise in managing our desires and passions: we either control those passions or are controlled by them. The success or failure in self-control leads either to a list of virtues or a list of vices, respectively. However, our aim should be to achieve excellence.

How do we know what is excellent? For Aristotle, this is a question about finding a balanced harmony between excesses, between

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too much and too little, a sort of "happy medium" between opposite values. According to Aristotle, virtue is an inner disposition that is acquired through practice; it is habit-forming. It is defined as the mean between two extremes, between a deficiency and an excess. It is the sort of disposition that is concerned with choice, lying in a mean of the sort relative to the context, determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which a person of practical wisdom would determine it. This is an ideal situation from the perspective of the human experience, in the context of daily life.

Some examples of the mean that avoid excesses are:

- Courage: the action and feeling between cowardice and rashness.
- Generosity: between stinginess and extravagance.
- Magnanimity: between smallness and vanity

We may say that a virtue reveals itself especially in extreme situations, or when the context demands it.

Reflections on the Holy Spirit

Is there a forgetfulness about, or being oblivious of, the Holy Spirit in Lutheran theology as many have claimed, and some still do, through the years? It seems that when Lutherans speak of the Holy Spirit, they do it in a "tempered" and "domesticated" way in the "shadow of Christ."³ However, given the research of the last few decades on Luther's and Lutheran views on the Spirit, this claim is now being contested, at least to a certain extent, since Lutherans are not silent when it comes to speaking of the Spirit. Neither neglect nor obsession, but rather the "miniaturizing" of

2. Paul Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 90.

3. Bernd Oberdorfer, "Embodied Spirit: Outlines of Lutheran Pneumatology," *We Believe in the Holy Spirit: Global Perspectives on Lutheran Identities*, LWF Documentation 63 (2021), 48.

the Spirit, as one Lutheran theologian claims.⁴ In reality, and as a document of the Lutheran World Federation states, “[t]he fact that the Spirit, according to Lutheran theology, is an ‘embodied’ Spirit does not make the Spirit superfluous or reduce the Spirit to a subordinated tool.”⁵

Holy Spirit in Scripture

There are only two references in the Hebrew Bible to the Holy Spirit, named precisely that way: Psalm 51:11 and Isaiah 63:10f. However, references to divine Spirit or human spirit are many and not always in a good way for either. Early on, Spirit was considered a power to be reckoned with. Eventually, Israel learned of God’s Spirit as a force in creation: God created the world by Word and Spirit and gives life and intervenes in history through a blast from God’s nostrils. “All the life of [God’s] creation is none other than Spirit, which [God] breathes out and breathes back in again when death occurs (Psalm 104:29ff; Job 34:14ff). Sometimes the Spirit is but a whisper (Job 26:13ff).”⁶

How do we know when the Spirit is at work and when it is not? That is why Spirit and Word often occur together. The former by itself is often God’s inconceivable movement; the latter the way by which God wants to be recognized. The Spirit is the source of both judgment and destruction as well as hope for the new. The Spirit is storm but also breeze. Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord on that terrible day of judgment will be delivered. “Then God will place [God’s] own Spirit in the hearts of [people], to destroy sin and evil and create a new heart” (Ezekiel 36:25-27; 39:28ff).⁷

Jesus said little about the Spirit but is said to have lived in the Spirit as God’s Son. John had already announced that Jesus would baptize his followers “with the Holy Spirit” (Matt 3:11). In Luke, the Spirit is at work in extraordinary ways in and through Jesus. The Spirit is God’s gift (Luke 11:13) to those who believe and obey (Acts 2:38; 5:32). A community in mission is of the Spirit.

In Paul’s letters, the Spirit is the spirit of community, the spirit of holiness, and the spirit of a new creation, the new creation that begins with the inbreaking of the Spirit in Jesus. The Spirit is also the giver of gifts (*charismata*), but it is love itself that is the first of the Spirit’s fruits. What matters is that through the Spirit’s activity and testimony Christ is recognized as Lord, upon whom the whole community is built up. For Paul, the Spirit operates in this world now, not merely in the world to come, but as a foretaste of it.

Experience of the Spirit

It is a challenge to speak properly of the Spirit and to name the Spirit’s experience. Experience of the Spirit is not like any other

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encounter. Nevertheless, we believe that the Spirit is shaping the world. The Spirit touches something at the core of our existence.

Normally we consider feelings, thoughts, and painful experiences to be springing from our innermost being, dynamics to which only the individual have access, as difficult as they are to explain or convey. But they are present to us within the overall structure of our consciousness, which includes the experience of each as an individual person, present to ourselves. The point is that there are experiences that are not identical or commensurable to external or objective realities, but which are no less present to us, to our minds.⁸ Likewise, the experience of the Spirit cannot be overlooked or ruled out as being given and therefore becoming accessible to us in its own unique ways.

We have the testimony of Scripture about the reality of the Spirit: its companionship, assistance, and even its indwelling. But unless it is experienced somehow, we may end up treating it as a myth or as merely a tale or fiction. As Lutherans, we believe in the experience of grace through faith, the activity of God in church and world, the transformative impact of the Word proclaimed in convicting and convincing people of sin and the need for forgiveness, ways through which we witness the presence of God in our midst. The experience of the Spirit is the experience of the presence of God in us, with us, for us, and all for our sake. The Spirit reveals God to us, the promise of God’s active and creative presence, even as God remains simultaneously hidden and not within our reach.

We cannot gloss over charismatic expressions of the Spirit. After all, the Spirit is a giver, bestowing gifts (*charismata*) on God’s people, for the sake of the community, to strengthen our communion (*koinonia*). The Spirit offers guidance in leading to truth (John 16:13), grants liberating experiences of grace, and bestows freedom (2 Cor 3:17). Whatever we might say about the experience of the Spirit, it is something that is given to us, in good measure, even if it is overlooked due to the pursuits of daily life, the divided attention, the business and busyness of social existence.

4. Jennifer Wasmuth, “Miniaturizing the Holy Spirit? Lutheran Identity in Pneumatological Perspective,” *Lutheran Identity: Cultural Imprint and Reformation Heritage*, ed. Klaus Fitschen et al. (München: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2023), 63-75.

5. Wasmuth, “Miniaturizing the Holy Spirit?”

6. Eduard Schweizer, “What is the Holy Spirit? A Study in Biblical Theology,” *Concilium* 128 (Seabury Press, 1979), x.

7. Schweizer, “What is the Holy Spirit?” xff.

8. See the arguments on this question by David Bentley Hart, *All Things Are Full of Gods: The Mysteries of Mind and Life* (Yale UP, 2024), 17-28.

However, as we learn from Scripture, the Spirit (as wind) blows in the direction that it wants to go (John 3:8).

The Spirit's work in Lutheran perspective

The classical *locus* of Lutheran pneumatology is article 5 of the Augsburg Confession (CA). There we read in the Latin text:

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith, where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel.⁹

Faith created by the Holy Spirit is its main work, the activity of God's creating Word. The Spirit joins the Word and the Sacraments to do the work of faith and renewal. The Spirit reveals God to the faithful, especially through the cross of Christ, the word of the cross. In Luther's understanding, the Spirit assures believers that they are children of God and also enables them to live as obedient children.¹⁰

The external word through preaching and sacraments comes first and then the internal word or inner speaking of the Spirit who convinces the hearer, and makes the external word received, believed, trusted. For Luther, the life of faith responds to the Spirit in prayer, worship, and good works. Faith remains the highest good, but prayer is important to the Christian life to drive away the devil, overcome weaknesses, and to enable believers to hold onto the promises of God. Throughout years of theological development, Luther was consistent in relating intimately the work of the Spirit to the effectiveness of the Word, the gift of faith, and the practice of love.¹¹

Gospel and ethics

We can affirm the centrality of the gospel of grace and forgiveness as we also seek to give content and structure to the meaning of love. The church can still provide meaningful ethical guidance without compromising the centrality of the gospel.¹² For instance, the confessions emphasize the importance of good works, while also warning us against relying on them for forgiveness, grace, and salvation. Still, they encourage ethical behavior, like service to others and the importance of being driven by love. The believer's life after justification was of considerable concern for the confessors.

In article 6 of the CA (Latin text) we are told that "[T]hey

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teach that this faith is bound to yield good fruits and that it ought to do good works commanded by God on account of God's will and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God.¹³ Likewise article 20 where the reformers clarify that good works are not prohibited but encouraged since they "should and must be done" for God's sake and praise (CA 20.27, 56). Article 20 takes us back to the commandments, especially to the first and second, which show us how to do good works.¹⁴

For Luther, acting righteously is at the center of the Christian life, for which the Spirit is given to us. In his *Commentary on the Alleged Imperial Edict*, which he wrote while waiting for the outcome of the Diet of Augsburg, Luther states:

For to have been redeemed from sin or to have sin forgiven must be the same as being or becoming righteous, etc. Good works, however, follow such faith or redemption or forgiveness of sin or righteousness, as the fruit of this faith. That is our teaching, as it is taught by the Holy Spirit and all of holy Christendom, and with this we remain in God's name, Amen.¹⁵

In Luther's prefaces to both the Small and the Large Catechisms, he complains about people's misuses of freedom by living shamefully. Moral life was a concern, beginning with the church's leaders and extensive to all Christians as well. An addition to the Small Catechism is the *Haustafel*, or "table of duties."

For Luther, the Scripture commends all sorts of good works, which are made explicit for our sake but also already contained in the command to love. Remarkably, his examples refer to the kind of virtues which are formative of good character. Thus, in his treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, he writes:

[F]or Holy Scripture has already abundantly commanded all good works. What good works can one think of

9. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 41.

10. Fred Perry Hall, *The Lutheran Theology of the Holy Spirit: From Luther to the Writers of the Formula of Concord*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2024), 195.

11. Lois Malcolm, "Martin Luther and the Holy Spirit," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther* (Oxford UP, 2017), 6.

12. Joel Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 50.

13. Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 41.

14. On the relation between love and the fulfillment of the law, see *Apology* 4.122f, where good works are considered a form of thanksgiving toward God and ought to follow faith.

15. *Luther's Works* 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 91.

that the Holy Spirit does not teach in Scripture, such as humility, patience, gentleness, mercy, faithfulness, faith, kindness, peaceableness, obedience, self-discipline, chastity, generosity, readiness to serve, etc., and in summary, love? [Gal 5:22–23]. What good work could one imagine that is not included in the commandment of love? What sort of a good work would it be if it were not motivated by love? For love, according to St. Paul's teaching, is the fulfilment of the whole law [Gal 5:14]—as Christ himself says in Matthew 5.¹⁶

In the *Formula of Concord* 4.8, 498, we read that “We also believe, teach, and confess that all people, particularly those who have been reborn and renewed through the Holy Spirit, are obligated to do good works.” That is a strong emphasis that faith inevitably will produce good works. But it cannot be separated from the Spirit at work leading the way to a life of service, renunciation, of taking responsibility for the other person: in brief, the stuff of excellence (*arête*) in practice, and of character formation thereof.

Conclusion

According to Luther, the Apostles' Creed is there to teach us all that we can expect and receive from God, and to help us do what the Ten Commandments require in order to love the neighbor. (Large Catechism, 2.2, 431). One problem is that we limit the understanding of the commandments to law or regulations. They are word from God, and capable to create the condition that they themselves call for. The commandments summon us to be a people for God, despite our own failures and limitations given our finitude.

One problem with an ethics based on virtue is that it cannot liberate us from sin and eternal death; only Christ can. But that is *coram Deo* (before God). When it comes to daily life, life in front of others, in relation to others (*coram homino*), ethics have an important role to play. It teaches people to embrace *epieikeia*, which translates as fairness, decency, but also as proportion and moderation in our relationship to others. The realm of ethics, and virtue ethics for that matter, is *coram mundo* (before the world).

That said, and given the context of our current lives, reflecting on the commandments, engaging in ethical reflection, practicing the virtues that shape character, while trusting God in all things related to daily living, is one urgent calling today.

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16. *Luther's Works* 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 123.