



The TRANSFORMING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Introduction to This Issue

This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* explores pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit) both within the Lutheran tradition, and in dialogue with it, as a theological resource for the life of the church today. According to Luther scholar Heiko Oberman, one of the most important aspects of the Reformation was the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit, but later generations of Lutheran theologians often gave short shrift to the topic. So much so, that Lutheran theologian Paul Rajashakar once quipped that the Ephesian disciples in Acts 19:2 were the “first Lutherans” because they “have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Thankfully, this is no longer the case. As the authors in this volume show, there is a place in Lutheran theology for reflection on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

Lois Malcolm interprets Martin Luther’s theology of the Holy Spirit as a critical framework for our atomized and polarized post-secular age. Luther’s distinctive pneumatology hinges on the Spirit’s objective “creative grammar,” working through Word and Sacrament, not subjective experience. This foundation establishes a personal and communal holiness, rooted in God’s forgiveness and liberation (*aphesis*), that compels a messianic ethic of neighbor-love. The Spirit empowers the church as a vital “third space,” distinct yet inseparable from political and economic spheres. By anchoring identity in Christ’s promises, this Spirit-empowered community confronts contemporary despair with life-giving hope, sustaining faith and fostering justice-seeking love through ongoing repentance, forgiveness, and service.

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Nelson Rivera argues that there is need to speak of the Holy Spirit in relation to ethical conduct. The times that we live in challenge us to engage in this question. Lutherans are often seen as uncomfortable when addressing questions of morality and character formation. However, the Scriptures and Lutheran confessional teaching speak to the activity of the Spirit in and through us as enabling Christians for service to others and good behavior, that is, for the praxis of love that follows a justifying faith.

Reformed theologian **Monica Pierce** revisits Martin Luther’s and John Calvin’s doctrines of creation considering persistent

claims that the Reformation inspired theological dualisms that set God above the earth and humans above creation, thus contributing to ecological domination and disaster. Such interpretations represent a misreading of the reformers' accounts of divine presence in the world. Luther's christological doctrine of creation centers on the Word's ongoing, sustaining speech-act of creation, while Calvin insists on the Spirit's life-giving indwelling of all things. Read together, their complementary visions resist mechanistic and dualistic cosmologies and offer rich theological resources for articulating a faithful ecological theology.

In my article, I (**Cheryl Peterson**) show that regarding the charismata or "spiritual gifts," Martin Luther was neither the cessationist that some have claimed, nor a proto-Pentecostal or charismatic, as others have claimed. I first review and critique these two views and then offer a more nuanced exploration of Luther's understanding of spiritual gifts against the broader framework of his pneumatology and ecclesiology, drawing on his sermons and commentaries. My essay aims to reframe this topic for Lutheran leaders and others who are interested in exploring spiritual gifts for the ministry and mission of the church today.

Pentecostal theologian **Andrew Gabriel** reflects on common understandings of discipleship as being christologically focused. From a Pentecostal perspective, becoming like Christ and, therefore, discipleship must also include becoming a person of the Spirit. To this end, he draws on themes from pneumatology to inform the aims and practices of discipleship and observes that discipleship should include an emphasis on sanctification, witnessing, and transforming experiences of the Holy Spirit.

Leopoldo Sánchez points out that North American Christians are not immune to the influence of cultural narratives that promote values at odds with a biblical vision of life in the Spirit of Christ. He describes the problems raised by the turn to therapeutic individualism, Christian nationalism, and tribalism as competing narratives for Christian identity and witness in the United States. In his essay, he argues that a pneumatological reading of Martin Luther's countercultural narratives offers Christians a theological framework for embodying a strange yet winsome witness among North American neighbors today. Images of the church as a community of gracious exchanges, the house of Abraham in the world, and theologians of the cross who love the unlovable present a hopeful vision of life in the Spirit that fosters the formation of Christians shaped by community and sacrifice, an inclusive catholic hospitality, and a cruciform love beyond the love of affinity.

Leila Ortiz offers an exploration of our baptismal identity for such a time as this—in our discipleship and in our world. She invites readers to remain present even, and especially, when what is written here feels deeply challenging. Her prayer is that these words may provoke conversation, reflection, introspection, and curiosity. May it be so, with God's help and in Jesus' name.

This issue has two Focus essays. In the first, **Norma Cook Everist** reflects on four themes from her "Passions of a Lifetime" over seventy years of writing: Education, Leadership, Diakonia, and Justice. In education, curriculum is God and God's people at a certain place and time. Regarding leadership, we need to focus on power and partnership. In diakonia, we go forth to all places in the world as part of a diverse, historic, and global diaconal community. For justice, pluralism is not antithetical to community; the stranger is the test of the capacity of communities to incorporate diversity.

Rafael Malpica Padilla contends that we are living through a profound crisis of faith. Misguided theologies have resulted in the formation of a knowledge system and ecclesial praxis that is foreign to the basic principles of following Jesus found in the gospels. A large sector of the Christian church in the United States have fallen prey to a "Neo-Constantinian Repristinatio," whereby it seeks not only a privileged position in society but to rule that society. This article addresses the challenges posed by one movement among independent evangelicals: The New Apostolic Reformation with its "Dominion Theology," and its amalgamation within white Christian nationalism.

When we read "The Transforming Work of the Holy Spirit," some may hear the promise of personal transformation—something that happens to me. Others will hear "transforming" in a communal sense focused on social transformation. These essays don't divide the Holy Spirit's work into neat categories. The introduction to this issue of **Preaching Helps** features a sermon by a pastor who witnessed personal and communal transformation in Minneapolis during "Operation Metro Surge." She heard the baptismal question, "Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?" Hundreds of pastors and lay people answered, "I renounce them." It was the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

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