

AALC - LCMS DISCUSSIONS

**March 7- 8, 2006
St. Louis, MO**



TOPIC:

THE AALC AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

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A Christian wants to have every possible resource for living the Christian life. A Christian, by definition, wants to be christened or charismated by, or filled with, the Spirit. Paul even says, “Be ye filled with the Holy Spirit.”

I cannot pretend to be especially spiritual or to know special spiritual truths of, or secrets about, the Spirit. But I can seek faithfully to teach the public data of Scripture and Christian tradition on the doctrine and experience of the Spirit. The need for spiritual filling is particularly keen in those preparing for Christian ministry because the expectations of the people of God are so high and the needs of the world so deep; so we all seek to deliver the means of grace.

Dr. Charles Erdman, a biblical commentator, once commented: “I have become convinced that those persons are most filled with the Holy Spirit who is least conscious of it; all they know is that they wish to serve Jesus Christ, and they feel that they are unprofitable servants.” Being filled with the Spirit is often a different thing than feeling filled with the Spirit.

Erdman’s Law – “Those persons are most filled with the Spirit who are least conscious of it” – is a faithful reproduction of the New Testament teaching on the Holy Spirit. It is a relief to know that we can be normal, struggling Christian men and women and still be filled with the Spirit; *simul justus et peccator*. It is not necessary for us to glow in the dark or be radio active isotopes, radiant with victory in order to be God’s servants and be experiencing – even against our own experience – the power of God’s Spirit. Jesus’ opening teaching words in the gospel of Matthew, “*Blessed are the poor in Spirit*” (5:3), have more than one meaning. “*Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,*” is simply another way when we paraphrase, “Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the filling of the Spirit.” To want the Spirit is to have the Spirit. Luther said, “Glaubst du, so hast du,” Believe and you have it.

The work of the Holy Spirit is the honoring of Jesus Christ. The work of other spirits is the honoring of themselves or of other realities. John’s Gospel bears witness to the special work of the coming Holy Spirit, note the personal pronouns in order to make the point as clear as possible:

The counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you... When the counselor comes,...he will bear witness to me ... And when he comes he will [convict] the world concerning sin... because they do not believe in me ... When the Spirit of truth comes... he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak... He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it unto you (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8., underlines added).

The work of the Holy Spirit is the honoring of Jesus Christ. We are not necessarily in the presence of the Holy Spirit when we are in the presence of a great deal of talk about the Holy Spirit. However, wherever a church or person centers thoughtfully – that is evangelically, confessionally, and biblically – on honoring the person, teaching, and work of Jesus Christ, there we may be quite sure, we are in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not center on the Holy Spirit. That is the clear teaching of Jesus in John’s gospel and elsewhere.

The Spirit is most present where Jesus is most central. The Spirit does not mind being neglected if Jesus is not. The church does not need a new focus on the Spirit in order to be renewed, because the Spirit’s work is to focus the church’s attention ever and again on quite another center.

Reformation theology in the 16th century and New Reformation theology in the 20th century have been criticized for being “unitarianisms of the second person of the Trinity,” that is, for concentrating too much on Christ and insufficiently on God the Father and on God the Spirit. The criticism is undeserved. Where the New Testament texts are faithfully expounded, through the texts where Jesus appears, there God the Father and God the Spirit are always covered with glory. The historical Jesus is somewhat reluctant, to be too full of himself in the presence of the one whom he most often calls his Father. “*Why do you call me good?*” He said in one recorded incident; “*no one is good but God alone*” (Mark 10:18). Jesus did not want to shine at the Father’s expense. Jesus is transparent to God, focused on God, the God-intoxicated man, and there is no single encounter with Jesus in the New Testament or in life that does not also resonate with the depth of a contact with God.

Jesus also is deferential to the Holy Spirit. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus says every blasphemy uttered by the sons of men will be forgiven, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven (3:28-30); thus Jesus gives pride of place to the Spirit, to the very Spirit whose mission it is that Jesus be given pride of place.

It is well known that God speaks directly to earth only twice in the synoptic Gospels; at Jesus’ baptism and at Jesus’ transfiguration. Both times this God says the same thing, and at the Mount of Transfiguration three words are added. Here, then, is the total direct witness of God the Father to Jesus according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke: “*And a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is my priceless Son, I am deeply pleased with him.”* [adding at the transfiguration] (*Listen to him!*)

The main way that Jesus is known in the world is by the faithful preaching and teaching of scriptures gospel. Through the faithful preaching and teaching of the gospel, God has

historically released his Spirit into the lives of the church. In the tradition of the reformers we do not believe that the Spirit ordinarily comes to people apart from the ministry of Word and Sacraments. A spirit unclothed by the word (e.g., a cottage meeting for prophesying and testimony without gospel teaching) is nude and dangerous; the Word unclothed by the Spirit is cold and even killing. The Spirit through the Word is sufficient and apostolic – Holy Spirit.

Gerhard Ebeling writes that Luther's Reformation became a reformation in deed and not just in words because Luther trusted only in the Word and not at all in deeds. The preached word, for Luther, was the main means for reforming the church and thus changing the Word. He knew the breathtaking power of the Word of Christ. The Jesus of John's gospel says it best of all, *The words I have spoken to you bring God's life giving Spirit*" (John 6:63 TEV). The centurion said it well too, speaking to Jesus, *"Just say the word and my servant will be well"* (Matthew 8:8).

The Holy Spirit comes into the lives of men and women through the means of grace. It is where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments properly administered that God has promised to meet His people. The Holy Spirit always accompanies their use and through them bestows on the church all the blessings that are ours in Christ. In the all important matters of the Spirit's presence, there is nothing that searching Christian people have to do at all; there is no looking ahead to certain steps to be taken; there is simply the looking back with faith at the gifts already given in an unprepossessing Baptism. We have all the resources we need for overcoming the evil one, for resisting temptation, for being adequate in our callings, for living the moral life, for courage in failure, and for seeking justice and peace in ways of wisdom. For the Holy Spirit was placed within us at our Baptism, and faith, simple faith in Christ, the faith that sighs and says its prayers, receives the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit again and again. Law and Gospel preaching and the faithful administrations of the sacraments encourage this faith into life again and again. The Christian ministry exists, among other reasons, to preach to the people of God the privileges that are ours in Christ – purchased for us at the cross, validated at the resurrection, delivered to us in Baptism, and the Lord's Supper present God's deeds in Christ (past, present, and future) in such a way that the people of God will repent and believe again.

"Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan River to be baptized by John" (Matthew 3:13). The first thing we must allow ourselves to do is to be surprised that Jesus got baptized at all. For John preached the coming Christ as a baptizer, not a recipient of baptism. John had said that the Christ would come baptizing his people with Holy Spirit and fire, not that he would come with sinners and have himself baptized in water. But here is Jesus, in his own baptism, permanently unites water with the Spirit as the concrete locus of the church's one baptism. Baptism is where the Spirit is given to both the Messiah now and to the people of God later (Matt 28:19). Jesus inaugurates Christian Baptism in water as the place where the people of God receive the Baptism with the Spirit. Disciples are not above their Lord! Where he received the Spirit is where we receive the Spirit: in Baptism, in water. It is well known that Jesus ends his career on a cross between two thieves; it is not as well known that Jesus began his public career in a river amid penitent sinners. Jesus first goes down into the deep waters with his people, completely identifying with them, and only then does he come up and begin his ministry to them. In this baptism of Jesus is found a whole theology of the relation of minister to people, as well as

theologies of lay ministries, of mission, of social work, and of evangelism. First Jesus was with his people in deep waters, and then he ministered to them in deep teaching and touching.

The gospel narratives do not serve primarily biographical interests; they are recorded primarily to elicit faith and to build up the church. Thus the story of the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of the gospel is not intended to teach the church only what happened once to Jesus at his baptism a longtime ago. Nor is Jesus' Last Supper at the end of the gospel simply biographical information in Jesus' interesting vita. Rather, Jesus inaugurates the Church's Baptism by means of his own – just as he inaugurates the Church's Communion by means of ministry – summarizing last meal. Both of the dominical sacraments are anchored in, and inaugurated by, Jesus' own ministry.

Thus, triune Baptism happens first in the person of its inaugurator, Jesus, and Matthew intends this Trinitarian baptismal fact, to be seen and heard by all who read and hear his gospel, from beginning (3:16-17) to end (28:19). Two great things that happened to Jesus are directly related to the two great things that happen to us: through him we too are given the gift of the Spirit, and we too are given the voice of the Father's love. Here He puts His name on us.

The Reformers rediscovered the exquisite joy of being completely forgiven, and passed this joy on to us. The heirs of this Reformation have been teaching this great contribution to the church catholic to this day. One cannot read a page of Luther without feeling the forgiveness of sins. Reading Luther makes one chuckle internally, no matter how serious his subject matter, because when one reads him, one feels the good news of being a completely forgiven person who, for the sake only of Jesus Christ's perfect righteousness, is accepted by God and pleasing in his sight. All problems, external, internal, spiritual and social failure, are covered and forgiven because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ given to all, along with faith, by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Reformation recovered the apostolic treasures of grace; it gave us the glory of the objective.

But the Reformation was burned by the subjectivists. Fanatics or Schwaermer, the crazy saints, who like Karlstadt, had swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all. Reading Luther's treatise "Against the Heavenly Prophets" (1525) is like reading accounts of some contemporary Pentecostal or Charismatic communities. The legalism and excesses are a historical fact, from the first-century Corinthianism or second-century Montanism to our present. Is there anything in Christendom as horrible as meeting someone who parades as one filled with the Spirit? It is the modern day abomination of desolation. The problem that has accompanied the appreciation of the Spirit has been a theology of glory. Emphasis on the forgiveness of sins is the great contribution of the Lutheran Theology of the Cross. Can we have at the same time the Spirit's theology of glory? It is not an easy answer, but one must ask the question still.

The story of Jesus baptism and the texts of Acts and the Epistles teach us clearly that Christians are given two great gifts in Baptism: the adapting forgiveness of sins and the empowering gifts of the Holy Spirit, the objective and the subjective, grace and power, remission and mission, the presence of the cross, and the presence of the resurrection. Why, then, has the Christian Church been able to accommodate successfully only one of the two, only half of the whole, only the theology of the cross and forgiveness but not at the same time the theology of

glory and the Spirit? Can we have both theologies at the same time – of the cross and of glory – without the aridity of cold orthodoxism on one hand or the asininity of hot charismaniacism on the other?

The answer is yes. There must be a simultaneity, a *simul* of the humility of the cross and the missionary power of the Spirit. Acts 2:42 presents us a church with a quartet of ministries – ministries of the word, of fellowship, of sacraments, and of prayer. Fellowship and prayer are never elevated to means of grace! These four elements must be present and given priority. When all are present, there is a balanced church. There is the Father and the Son and The Holy Spirit. A church that is not so centered on the cross that it forgets the third article or the second half of the second article but a church that is not so centered on the resurrection and the Spirit that it forgets that the Lord has wounds and that the Spirit is a dove, not a hawk. This is a balanced church. All four dimensions, scriptural depth, social width, Eucharistic height, and prayerful length need each other in order to be balanced, alive and legitimate.

Thus the Holy Spirit is given to the church through the means of grace: through preaching, through Baptism, and through the Lord's Supper. When you and I were baptized into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we were given to the Triune God and that God was given to us. We were given the Father above us in love and beneath us with everlasting arms in forgiveness. We were given the Son beside us; we were the gift of the Spirit within us. We are covered on all sides, above, beneath, beside, and within us. We have all we need to be fruitful Christians in the world, fruitful in quite different ways, depending on our gifts, but fruitful nonetheless.

On the Gifts of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12, for it is in that correspondence that Paul explicates rather pointedly his understanding of Spiritual phenomena.

The Corinthians themselves had raised the question about Spiritual Gifts and invited Paul's response. That question hints that there were problems already in the fledgling community. Such recognition of their need enabled the apostle to deal most effectively with the errors of glossolalists. Not having access to their correspondence with Paul (7:1), we cannot know the exact formulations of their questions. Perhaps it was explained orally by those who brought the letter to the founder (16:17-18).

There appears to be in the Corinthian Church a genuine fondness for religious display or even spectacularism. Paul refused to pander to their tastes. He recalls in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, that his message was not with over powering words of human wisdom, but with the simple message of Jesus Christ crucified. Man's pretensions serve only to empty the cross of its power (1:17).

Furthermore there was a tendency of the glossolalists to interpret their gift so as to validate or enhance themselves and then to depreciate others. The results of this were to foster pride among a self defined elitist group and to create a cleavage in the fellowship of the church. Moreover, it posed a false criterion for determining the life truly lived in Christ. A fondness for

the experiential quite easily seizes upon a particular physical manifestation and equates it with spirituality and negates, or degrades the means of grace thus dividing the community into classes.

Paul excoriates this divisive tendency in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Note how he emphasizes the unity of the church. In chapter 13 he further supports his argument by the appeal to agapeity. The congregation functions as a body, or it does not function at all.

It is indicated by an examination of 1 Corinthians 12:5 that glossolalists were inclined to value ecstatic utterances above the intelligible, proper proclamation of the gospel. It does not reflect on the validity of religious ecstasy to affirm that it can never have the role in the advancement of the gospel that belongs to intelligible utterance. In the New Testament, ecstasy never takes precedence over mission. Furthermore, transformation, not ecstasy, is the more substantive and inclusive end of evangelism. This loss of perspective in Corinth regarding mission and experience compromise the community as a witnessing community.

Finally, the exercise of spiritual gifts in public worship often reduced them to spectacles of confusion. Disorderliness prevailed. In 1 Corinthians Paul laid down specific regulations to guide them on such occasions.

There may be many more reasons Paul corrects them however, he does not want them to remain ignorant about the gifts of the Spirit. Indeed, this same expression was used in other contexts when he wanted to introduce subjects of great importance (1 Thessalonians 4:13; 2 Corinthians 1:8; Rom 1:13, 11:25).

Ecstatic utterance was not the most reliable criterion of what it meant to be filled with or possessed by the Spirit of God then or now. It was capable of other origins, even those that were demonic.

The ultimate task of the Holy Spirit is to plant the confession, "Jesus is Lord" at the center of every individual's being. Whether they be lost (John 16:7-11) or found (John 16:12-25), the Spirit seeks to advance this acknowledgement and to translate it into daily experience. God uses the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified as the method to save the world.

The confession, "Jesus is Lord" is not just the initial phase of the work of the Spirit in one's life. There is no subsequent stage at which the Spirit points beyond Jesus to himself. The Spirit ever bears witness to Jesus. Every aspect of the Christian life, including the bestowal of any gift, assumes and is an expression of the gracious lordship of Jesus.

A View from the Cross: Triumphalism

Today, perhaps even more than in Luther's day, there is a tendency to identify the Holy Spirit with the unusual, the ecstatic, and what is viewed as the supernatural. As one reads the literature of these neo-pentecostals of today, we continually run across descriptions of the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our times. The evidence given for this outpouring is usually the growth of ecstatic utterance and of miracles, particularly healing miracles. In the same context

certain persons are described as “Spirit-filled”, and again the evidence is found in the unusual experiences of individuals. A theology of the Cross in no way wishes to deny that the Holy Spirit is present and active in these unusual and ecstatic events. These unusual events, in and of themselves are not evidence that this is a time when there is a greater outpouring of the Spirit than in other times. It also denies that such extraordinary events and experiences are evidence that a person is more “filled with the Spirit” than other Christians who do not share the same events and experiences.

The book of Genesis forms the basis for a theology of the cross’ view of the Spirit, where the Spirit is God’s agent in creation (Gen 1:2, 2:7). Far from being set over against the material world, the Holy Spirit was active in the creation of it. But the Old Testament never thought of creation as something that was past and finished. All existence depends upon God’s continuing creation. Psalm 104 expresses this faith very well. Through God’s activity people have food to eat and wine to gladden their hearts. Just as in the original creation, the Spirit is seen at work also in this creative activity as we read, “*When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created...*” Psalm 104:30. The Spirit may be in the extraordinary and unusual events, but this does not make the time of such events a unique “outpouring” of the Spirit, for if God’s Spirit is not being outpoured at all times, there would be no existence at all.

When the presence of the Holy Spirit is identified with the spectacular, the unusual and the ecstatic, many Christians are made to feel that they lack the Holy Spirit and its fullness. But this is not what the New Testament says. If people believe in Jesus Christ, that is in itself evidence that they are Spirit filled (1 Corinthians 12:3). Christians who show loving concern for their neighbors – taking a bowl of soup to a sick person, giving a word of encouragement to a discouraged one, visiting a lonely person, and so on, are acting in the Spirit according to the New Testament.

This brings us to the next form of triumphalism with regard to the Holy Spirit. It is the tendency of some Christians to claim superiority because they have the Spirit or more of it than others. Many Christians are made to feel inferior and guilty because they do not have in their lives the evidence of the gifts of the Spirit found in those claiming to be “Spirit-filled” ones who have the more ecstatic and spectacular gifts of the Spirit.

A theology of the cross replies to such triumphalism by first affirming that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are just that – gifts. Paul’s letters to Corinth are most relevant here, because the Corinthian church was filled with people taking pride in the manifestations of the Spirit in their lives. The Greek word for grace is *charis*. The gifts of the Holy Spirit thus are portrayed as being by grace and grace alone. No more than salvation do the gifts of God come to those who earn or deserve them.

As we search through the New Testament we find a host of things mentioned as gifts of the Spirit. It seems fair to say that the Christians saw no limits to the gifts that God bestowed upon those who believe. Paul could see his celibacy and “*his thorn in the flesh*” as gifts of the Spirit. Ability to stand in the face of adversity and persecution was a gift of the Spirit. The early Christians were continually expecting ever – new gifts of the Spirit to be manifest among them.

A third form of triumphalism involves seeing the Holy Spirit in terms of gifts to individuals. One of the major features of all triumphalist religions is emphasizing the benefits received by the individual believer. We live in an individualistic society, and it is therefore not surprising that we hear a great deal about what Christian faith will do for the individual. A church signboard read, "Go to church this Sunday, it will make you feel better." Since triumphalism is so centered on the benefits for the individual, it is not surprising that when triumphalism speaks about the Holy Spirit, it concentrates upon the glories for the individual believer that comes from receiving the Holy Spirit.

When we turn to the New Testament we do find the individual is important in the eyes of God. But what is central is the community. *"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good"* (1 Corinthians 12:7).

One of the major works of the Holy Spirit is to bring unity to the church itself. Jude can go so far as to say that those who cause division in the church are *"devoid of the Spirit"* (Jude 19). Perhaps we should not put too much emphasis upon a single verse in an obscure book of the New Testament, but there is much in the New Testament to justify this judgment.

If we look to the life of Paul, it is obvious that, after his Baptism and receiving the Spirit, life was anything but undiluted happiness and good fortune. His highlights included shipwrecks, imprisonments, beatings, stonings, hunger and thirst (2 Corinthians 11:23-29). His "thorn in the flesh" made him cry out for deliverance yet the answer was *"my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As we look back over these insights of a theology of the cross, it becomes apparent that a major flaw in all triumphalist views of the Spirit is that all sight is lost of the New Testament affirmation that the Holy Spirit is a pledge and a promise. St. Paul writes that God *"has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee"* (2 Corinthians 1:22). The NEB makes it clearer by translating the last part, *"and as a pledge of what is to come has given the Spirit to dwell in our hearts."* Ephesians 1:14 makes the same point by saying that the Holy Spirit *"is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."* In these and many other New Testament passages, it is clear that the Spirit has been given as God's pledge that the promises of God will be fulfilled. The Spirit and its gifts are the first fruits of what is to come, a foretaste of what God has in store.

The Holy Spirit is God at work in the church and the world today. Without the Holy Spirit, the church would be without power and courage to face its trials. The Holy Spirit alone brings people to faith. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit that assures that God loves us, forgives us, and is with us even when the events of our lives seem to deny all reality of God or of God's love. We do not achieve, here and now, final victory or fulfillment. But because of the Holy Spirit, we have the strength to continue on the way, pressing forward to that which God has promised.