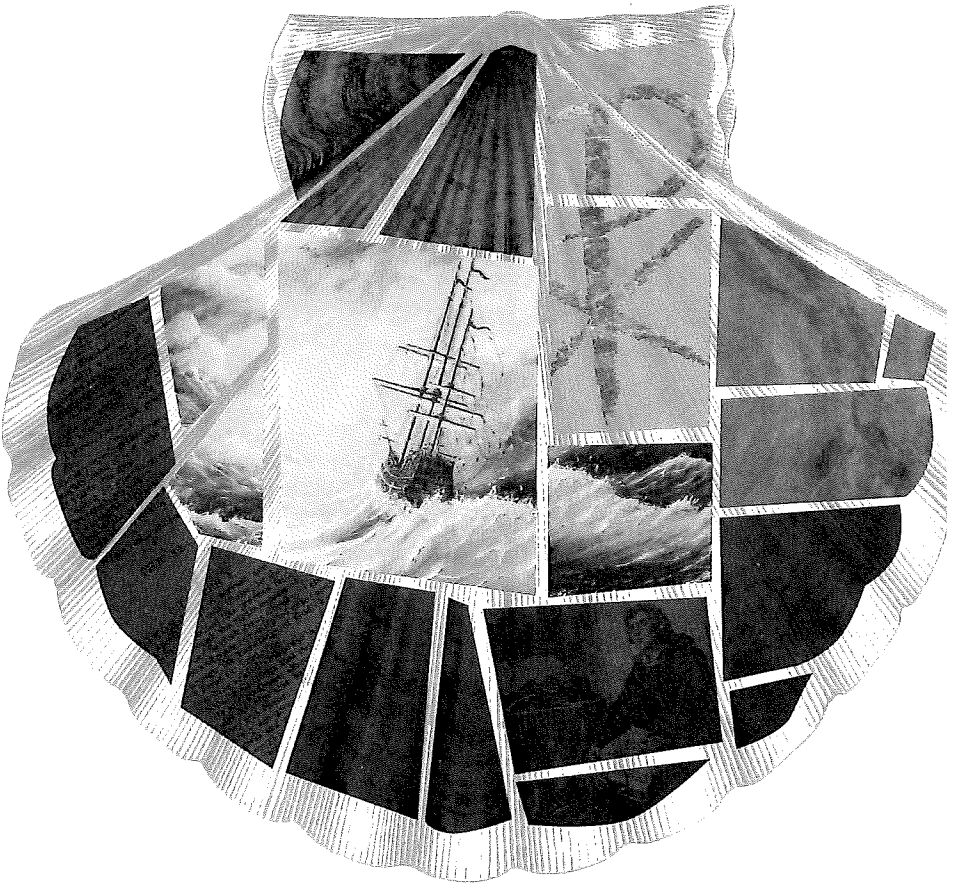
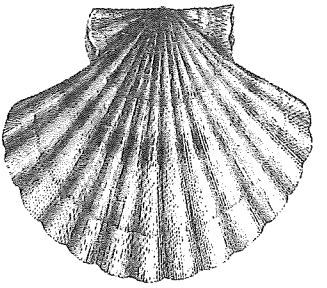


EMBRACING YOUR LUTHERAN IDENTITY

GENE EDWARD VEITH JR.

CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION

YOUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Who are you? What are you?

Those would seem to be easy questions. But they aren't. Especially today. These are questions about your identity. People today are obsessed with identity, and yet they often have a difficult time identifying themselves.

Part of the problem is that identity involves both your uniqueness and your belonging. Each of us is a unique individual, and yet each of us also yearns for connections with other people.

Many people are trying to find their identity in their sex, ethnicity, or social status. They try to define themselves—and others—in terms of race, wealth, politics, or sexual desires. This never works in the long run, since these and other external and superficial factors do not describe who you are deep down, in your inmost thoughts and feelings, in your personal uniqueness.

There is only one who knows you in that way, who knows you completely in the depths of your personal uniqueness. That would be God, who created you distinctly from everyone else and is in constant communion with your very soul. Furthermore, God designed you to be in relationship with others, with Him and with other people whom He brings into your life.

So to find our identity, we would do well to learn how God identifies us.

YOUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

It is astonishing how directly the Bible addresses the identity pre occupations of our time—ethnicity, social status, and sex—and puts them in their place:

> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27–28)

Everyone who is baptized has "put on Christ." So when God sees us, He sees us through the lens of Jesus. He sees not our sinfulness but Christ's righteousness. Christ—by becoming one of us, bearing our sin and taking our punishment—has our identity, so now we have Christ's identity. Our identity is no longer based on the world's categories.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek." Our ethnic, national, cultural, or racial identity no longer applies—neither to our relationship to God nor, as Paul is exhorting, to Christians' relationships with one another.

"There is neither slave nor free." Our social status, our economic position, and our place in society no longer define our identity. And important to today's issues, as to the slaves and other oppressed people who have always been drawn to Christianity, our identity is not to be found in our victimhood and our oppression. People in bondage could say, "My slavery doesn't define me." And a free citizen would have to say, "My privilege doesn't define me."

"There is no male and female." We are not to find our identity in sex or gender—not in feminism or the men's movement, nor in trying to change our gender or in fixating on our sexual proclivities.

It isn't that these categories don't exist or are not important. They are part of our physical creation and our social and cultural life. The Bible has much to say about them all. But they are not to define our identity.

1. Why is your baptismal identity so much more important than your ethnic, national, cultural, or racial identity?

2. Why is your baptismal identity so much more important than your status, the amount of money you have, your job, your victimhood, or your privilege?

3. Why is your baptismal identity so much more important than your sex, gender, or sexual desires?

4. What does this mean for how we identify others and how we treat them? Apply this both to fellow Christians and to non-Christians.

The ultimate signifier of identity is our name. Each of us has a distinct and individual name, according to which we are distinguished from everyone else. Our parents gave us our name, and in our culture,

our family name—either that of our parents and forebears or of th new family that began with marriage—is part of our individual name.

One of the things that happens in the rite of Baptism is that w are named. Thus, God names us. He gives us our identity. Yes, parent give the pastor the name that they have picked out for the child, or a adult being baptized formally tells the pastor what his or her name i but the statement of the baptismal candidate's name is an importan part of the rite. Historically, what a person is named at Baptism, a recorded on the baptismal certificate, became the official, legal nam This is why a person's first name has also been called the "Christia name," referring to the name given at the christening, when th person was baptized and became a Christian.

And then, most importantly, the name of God is attached to th person's name. In the rubrics of *Lutheran Service Book*, the pastor say this as he pours the water over the candidate:

> *Name*, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What makes a Baptism is not just water but the water plus the *name* of the triune God. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them *in the name* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, emphasis added).

Yes, our nationality, social position, and sex—along with many other things, such as our family, the times we live in, our cultural her itage, and our personal interests—help make us who we are. Their effacement in Baptism does not take away the created order or the social estates (family, church, and state) that God established for human flourishing. Also shaping our personal identity are the mul tiple vocations that God calls us to in these estates (such as marriage and parenthood, worker and citizen, pastor and laity). This, however, is addressed in Baptism, which is where we receive our first and most foundational calling: the call of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel as given in Baptism.

Our ID cards might record our various secondary identities. But our primary identity, the deepest reaches of ourself, our individual essence that will live forever, is to be in Christ.

5. What is your name?

6. Why did your parents give you that name?

7. Do you know what your name means?

8. You have a "Christian name" given at your Baptism (your first name), and you also have a family name (your last name). Do you know where your family name derives from and what it means?

9. What do you know about your ancestors (what country they came from, why and how they came to this country, interesting facts about them, etc.)?

If you have an ID card (that is to say, an identity card, such as a driver's license or school ID), take it out. What are the different kinds of information it records? (My driver's license gives my first and last names, my address, my date of birth, my sex, my height, the color of my eyes, and, embarrassingly, my weight. It also assigns me a *number* so that I can have an existence in the government's computers.)

10. Which bits of information on your ID identify you by what groups you belong to?

11. Which bits of information on your ID identify you as a unique individual?

12. What does your ID leave out about you?

13. Why is your baptismal identity so much more descriptive of who you really are than your ID card?

YOUR IDENTITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Your Baptism also gives you another identity: you are a member of the Holy Christian Church, consisting of everyone who has faith in Christ, from ancient times to today, connecting you to people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

And Christ so identifies with His people and is so present with them that the Bible calls the church the Body of Christ. When St. Paul develops this teaching, notice how he connects it to Baptism and contrasts it to the world's categories of identity that we discussed above:

> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:12–13)

God thus establishes in the church both unity and diversity, upholding both aspects of identity: our belonging with others and our individual uniqueness.

In our current usage, the word *member* refers to someone who formally belongs to an organization or group, as in "I am a member of

this club," "I am a member of this family," or "I am a member of thi church." We are unaware that we are using a figure of speech.

The older meaning of *member*, still sometimes used today, is a par of the physical body—a hand, a foot, an ear, an eye. To say that "I am a member of the church" means, literally, that I am an organ in Christ's body. (Not the musical instrument! More like a heart or a lung.)

Just as each organ contributes to the life of the entire body, each of us—each organ, each member—contributes to the life of the entire church. We are all different from one another, as different as a heart from a lung, and yet we all constitute one body. Thus, no one can say that he or she or anyone else in the church is unimportant. We'll let Paul explain it:

> For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.
>
> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for

> one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.
>
> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:14–27)

Modern biological science confirms what the Bible says more than Paul, in his uninspired moments, could have realized: Each one of us is composed of trillions of cells, each with its own separate life. And yet they all, working together, form one unified body, with one consciousness and one soul. That's you. And that is the church, of which you are a cell, and the unified body and the unified consciousness and soul is Christ.

That concluding statement of St. Paul summarizes both facets of identity: our unity with others in a reality greater than ourselves ("Now you are the body of Christ") and our individual selves ("and individually members of it").

Elsewhere, Paul repeats the point and shows another implication: "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:5). We are "members" (organs, cells) not only of Christ; we are also members of one another! And this affects, or should affect, how we feel about and treat our fellow Christians: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

14. If the church is a body with organs, what would be the church's brain? _____
    What would be the church's heart? _____
    What would be the church's hands? _____
    What would be the church's mouth? _____

15. The above exercise, of course, is only metaphorical. Paul follows up his "members of the body" discourses in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 with lists of offices and gifts. Read 1 Corinthians 12:28–30 and Romans 12:4–8. Keeping in mind that these speak to us of the entire church throughout time, including when the twelve apostles roamed the earth, where do you see these in your church today?

16. What aspects of yourself do you bring to Christ's Body, the church?

When we think of Christ's body, what primarily comes to mind is probably not so much the church but Holy Communion, in which Jesus gives us His body and His blood in bread and wine. This is fitting. Just as Baptism relates directly to our identity in Christ, so does Holy Communion.

Notice how Paul brings together the strands we have been talking about in his discussion of the Lord's Supper: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:16–17).

The Sacrament of the Altar is a "participation" in the body and blood of Christ. This is not the language of symbolism but the language of fact. And by participating in the body of Christ "given into death for your sins," we are incorporated (a word that literally means

"formed into a body") into the Body of Christ that is the church.

Continuing in 1 Corinthians, Paul has more to say about the Lord's Supper, which some of the Corinthians had turned into a disorderly church dinner, complete with drunkenness and discrimination against the poor (1 Corinthians 11:17–22). He says this, which again is the language not of symbolism but of fact:

> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Corinthians 11:27–29)

So it is important to discern the body in Holy Communion. Thinking of it as just bread, even symbolic bread, risks judgment. One reason we have confirmation or new member classes is to teach people to discern the body and so prepare them for Communion.

Some of our non-Lutheran friends, though, who believe the sacraments are nothing more than symbols, take this passage and interpret it in a different way. "Discerning the body," they say, refers to discerning the church as the Body of Christ! The context, they say, is the apostle's rebuke to the Corinthians for not respecting one another and not respecting the church. So what he really means is that before participating in this symbolic meal, everyone should discern that the church with everyone in it is the Body of Christ.

Well, the *immediate* context is clearly referring to the elements in the Lord's Supper. (Read that first sentence in the passage quoted above. Is there any way "the body" does not refer to "the bread"? If it refers to the church, what does the blood refer to?) But we can accept part of our non-Lutheran friends' point. Again, as Paul said earlier, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). "There is one bread" (Communion) and "one body" (the church). The two go together.

So when we take Communion, we should discern the body of

Christ in the bread. And we should also discern the church, whic Christ incorporates as His Body.

17. Most Protestants don't believe that the bread and wine of Holy Communion convey the body and blood of Christ. So Lutherans don't commune with them, nor with other Christians with whom we have doctrinal disagreements. How is this an example of "discerning the body"?

18. When you receive the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion along with the other members of your congregation, what does that mean for your relationship with them?

19. Why was it a good idea for you to go through confirmation class or other training as a preparation for receiving Holy Communion?

20. What was it like when you received Holy Communion for the first time?

YOUR IDENTITY AS A LUTHERAN

Speaking of our non-Lutheran friends, there is "one holy Christian and apostolic Church," as it says in the Nicene Creed, consisting of everyone who possesses saving faith in Christ. And yet there are many different strains of Christianity, each with different theologies and practices. We are members (organs, cells) of the universal church that has existed since the time of Christ on earth and in heaven. But since the church is embodied, we are also members (organs, cells) of particular congregations in particular Christian traditions.

In your Confirmation, you committed yourself to one of these traditions—the Evangelical Lutheran Church—and you joined one of its congregations.

If you went through confirmation as a youth, you might think that your membership (as we say) in this particular church body (as we say) is not necessarily valid, since you perhaps didn't have much choice in the matter. "This is my parents' church," you might think, "and they made me take confirmation. I need to choose for myself which is the right church for me."

But God works through parents. The most important task in the vocation of parenthood is to bring their children to Christ. They do that—or rather, God does that through them—by having their children baptized, teaching them about Jesus, taking them to church, and building up their faith.

It doesn't invalidate your physical life because your parents gave birth to you, fed you, and otherwise kept you alive. Nor does it invalidate your education because they sent you to school. And it doesn't

Confirmation, though, is, among other things, a coming-of-a ritual. Others include getting your driver's license and going through graduation ceremony. These mark your movement from childhood t adulthood. Confirmation, which often comes earlier than those oth rituals, marks you as a full-fledged member (as we say) of the churc as you reaffirm your Baptism and as you commit yourself specifical to Lutheranism.

We have been reflecting on the mind-blowing effect of Baptisı and Holy Communion. Not all Christians have that high view of thos sacraments, and so they miss out on the power and comfort that the bring. If Baptism and the Lord's Supper are merely symbols, then th identity that they bestow is also merely symbolic. Lutherans believ that the sacraments are real and that we should take what the Bibl says about them literally, and so the identity we have in Christ- through our faith in His death and resurrection for us, which is wha Baptism and the Lord's Supper create in us—is also real.

Many Protestant churches, particularly in the United States, dc not have a catechism, like Lutherans do. Members don't have a doc trine that is worked out, much less written down in a book of confes sions, as Lutherans have. And most Protestant churches don't have confirmation instruction, much less confirmation vows.

At your Confirmation, you were asked a series of questions about your faith. You were asked the questions your parents answered for you when you were baptized. You were asked if you believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as confessed in that ancient affirmation of the Trinity from the early church, the Apostles' Creed. You were asked if you believe in the Scriptures. You were asked if you believe in the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as described in Luther's Small Catechism.

Then you were asked about your intentions about how you resolve to live. You were asked if you intend to hear the preaching of God's Word and to receive the Lord's Supper faithfully. You were asked if you intend to live according to God's Word and to remain true to the triune God—and here it gets serious—"even to death."

The questions culminate with this:

Pastor: Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?

Response: I do, by the grace of God. (*LSB*, p. 273)

To suffer *all*, rather than give up this confession and this church! To be willing to *die* rather than fall away from it!

Did that kind of scare you when you said that? It did me. But it also gave me a solemn feeling about what I was undertaking. Maybe you were just rushing through the words printed down for you. But this is what you committed to nonetheless.

It astonishes me that even though they make this commitment, many confirmands abandon this confession and church as soon as the rite is over. The confirmation service is the last time we see them in church.

I guess they didn't mean what they promised.

But the fact is, many Lutherans *did* suffer all for this confession and church. And they *did* suffer death rather than fall away from it.

And you are connected with them. You are united with them in the same confession of faith, and whether you realize it or not, they are united with you. And you and they are united with Christ. This gives you an identity.

21. Did you know what you were getting into when you were confirmed?

22. I was talking about this with a non-Lutheran friend, and he was outraged. "Young people that age have no business making a commitment like that!" he said. "They are too young to commit to

anything—much less a religion—for the rest of their lives!" Do you agree?

23. Think about the people who were confirmed with you. Did some of them abandon the church as soon as the ceremony was over? Why do you think they did so?

24. What would you die for?

25. What would you live for? (Are they the same things you would die for?)

THIS STUDY

It is my impression that many Lutherans, including both recent confirmands and lifelong churchgoers, do not know all that much about their church and why it is worth suffering for, dying for, and living for.

They don't know their own heritage and why it is so precious.

The essence of Lutheranism, of course, is its theology. You learned that when you studied the catechism and went through confirmation class. I'll assume you know that, though we'll refer to it constantly.

In this study, we will focus on your Lutheran identity. That is, we will try to help you identify with Christians through the centuries and throughout the world who share your faith and your confession.

We will do a lot with history, not as a list of names and dates but as a living story of human beings just like yourself. You will learn about martyrs, battles, persecutions, migrations, and victories. You will be introduced to lots of colorful personalities, and you will learn why our church does some of the things it does.

Also, we will try to help you realize how you yourself have a place in this vast and rich spiritual tradition.

I am aware that denominations are out of vogue. I agree that being Christian, having faith in Christ, is the most important thing. But throwing out denominations has led to a generic Christianity largely void of theology. Yet we need theology so that we can navigate the spiritual issues we face today. As a result of abandoning theology, contemporary Christianity is weakened.

The word *denomination* derives from a word meaning "naming." There is nothing wrong with a church body, like a person, having a name; that is, having an identity. And the members of that church—since they belong to a common community, with a common history and common beliefs—share in that identity. This should reinforce their primary identity that they have in Christ.

The goal of this study is to build up your Christian identity by helping you cultivate a Lutheran identity.