

ULTIMATE REALITY AND MEANING IN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS: NO OTHER GOD, BUT THE INCARNATE HUMAN GOD

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Introduction

Martin Luther understood well the hubris of human reason, and its perpetual presumption to grasp God in his transcendence. To counteract this, Luther points forcibly to the incarnate Deity as the definitive revelation of God in the gospel. Whoever wants to find God must shun the Majestic God, God in his naked immediacy, and assume the way of the Divine from below, i.e., from the Incarnate Son. God is to be found where he wills to be found, that is, "through and in this humanity."¹ A true theology, which he calls "theology of the cross" (*Theologia Crucis*), must observe this rule: grasp God in the way Scripture teaches us—cling to the God at his mother's breasts, and to the God who hung on the cross and was raised from the tomb.² Any attempt to execute an opposite movement will either end in utter ignorance of God or dash us against the terror of the hidden and naked God's majesty.

¹WA 10, 1, 1, 208, 24 (Postils and Sermons, 1522). See Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther's Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 10. In this paper, the American Edition of Luther's Works (ed. J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehman [St. Louis: Concordia, 1958-]) is abbreviated as LW; the Weimar edition (Weimar: Herman Boehlau Nachfolger, 1883-) is abbreviated as WA; Studiensausgabe (hrsg. von Hans-Ulrich Delius [Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1979-]) is abbreviated as StA.

²LW 26, 18-19; WA 101, 77-78 (Gal., 1535); LW 31, 53; WA 1, 363, 14 (Heidelberg Disputation, 1517). See also Walter von Loewenich, where he states: "The theology of the cross is a principle of Luther's entire theology, and it may not be confined to a special period in his theological development. . . . Hence, our investigation has to do not with a specific stage of development, but with the demonstration of a theological thinking" (*Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976], 13); Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 148-175; Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 2; Charles Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 7-8; Roland Bainton, where he observes that Luther was lecturing on the Psalms at the time when he coined the term "*theologia crucis*" (*Here I Stand* [New York: Mentor, 1950], 51); Hermann Sasse, "*Theologia Crucis*," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 11 (1968): 121-122.

Thus, Luther declares: "Outside of Christ there is no God."³ The metaphysical mystery of Christ's personal union Luther conceives primarily in terms of redemption. It is imperative, according to Luther, not to focus on a prior doctrine of God, but rather cling to the God who hides in the humanity of Jesus, to the incarnate God, the God with whom we have to do so as to be safe and saved. He writes: "There is no more effective consolation than that Jesus is completely human."⁴ Hence for him, the ultimate reality is the incarnate Deity, but the ultimate meaning lies in the redemptive work that this Deity performs for our good. Luther is more interested in Jesus Christ, not as a "private person" but as a "public person," regarding what he has achieved "for me."⁵ Christology and soteriology form such a seamless garment in Luther's thought that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ. This explains why Luther stresses in his *Smalcald Articles* that the "one article on which the church stands or falls" is not the doctrine of justification, but the "dear article on Jesus Christ."⁶ Driven by the soteriological relevance of the person of Jesus Christ, Luther claims that "Christology is the subject of theology."⁷

Luther and Chalcedonian Christology

Luther's Christology is not derived from ecclesiastical arguments and decisions *in se*, but rather from the biblical representation of Jesus Christ. Jesus in the Bible enacts both a divine and human life. In so speaking and acting as God and as man, Christ reveals both the divine and human nature, and yet he is one and the same person. "First he speaks as God, then as man. So I learn my article that Christ speaks as God and as man . . . as if he was a true man; but if he were always to speak as true man, we could never discover he is also God."⁸ Holy Scripture, for Luther, is the prior norm for reading the creeds and councils of the church. Luther is not against church dogmas as such, but only against a theology that derives dogmas from the church, untested

³WA 39², 25, 17: "*Et bene notandum est et maxime observandum, quod extra Christum non est Deus alius.*"

⁴WA 9, 441, 21.

⁵LW 26, 298; WA 40¹, 448, 2ff (Gal., 1535).

⁶StA 5, 356, 9.

⁷LW 34, 208; WA 50, 267, 18 (The Three Symbols, 1538); cf. LW 24, 23; WA 45, 481-82 (Jn., 1537-38)).

⁸WA TR 2, 16: 1265. Also cited in Ian D. Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 209.

by the church's norm. Luther writes:

These then are the four principal Councils and the reasons they were held. The first, in Nicaea, defended the divinity of Christ against Arius; the second, in Constantinople, defended the divinity of the Holy Spirit against Macedonius; the third, in Ephesus, defended the one person of Christ against Nestorius; the fourth, in Chalcedon, defended the two natures in Christ against Eutyches. But no new articles of faith were thereby established, for these four doctrines are formulated far more abundantly and powerfully in St. John's gospel alone, even if the other evangelists and St. Paul and St. Peter had written nothing about it, although they, together with the prophets, also teach and bear convincing witness to all of that.⁹

For Luther, the basic Christological question concerning the person of Christ is settled at Chalcedon (A.D. 451).¹⁰ But he interprets it with strong leanings toward the Alexandrian tradition, affirming the substantial unity of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. He has little in common, however, with the classical monophysites; his emphasis on the humanity of Christ precludes monophysitism.¹¹ He accentuates the unity principle, not by an emphasis on Christ's divinity, but rather by an emphasis on his humanity. Christ's humanity is "the holy ladder' to his divinity."¹² Paul Althaus rightly identifies a movement in Luther's Christology "from below to above": "from Christ as man to Christ as God and thereby to God."¹³ Luther affirms:

For the Scripture begins quite gently, leading us to Christ, as to a human person and then to a Lord, reigning above all things, and then to a God. Thus I came to recognize God. The philosophers and those versed in the knowledge of the world, on the contrary, have tried to begin from above, and so they have been confounded. One must begin from below and rise up.¹⁴

Luther stands firmly on the principle that the finite is capable of the

⁹LW 41, 121 (On the Councils and the Church, 1539).

¹⁰See Leslie Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: S. P. C. K, 1952), 76; Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ*, trans. J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 18-19; Siggins, 223, noted that Luther doubted the adequacy of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, e.g., the traditional meaning of "person" presents a difficulty for Luther since it may carry more than one sense, even in Christological statements.

¹¹See LW 22, 110, n. 83; LW 24, 90-91, n. 52.

¹²LW 29, 111; WA 57, 111 (Heb., 1516); see also LW 41, 100-110.

¹³Paul Althaus, *The Theology of the Martin Luther*, trans. R. C. Schultz (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966), 181-188.

¹⁴See WA 12, 585-91 (Church Postils, 1523) as cited in Lienhard, 189.

infinite. It is precisely in the finite human person that the infinite God dwells: "For God has portrayed Himself definitely and clearly enough in the Word. Therefore it is certain that he who bypasses the person of Christ never finds the true God; for . . . God is fully in Christ, where He places Himself for us."¹⁵ This then leads to Luther's Christological affirmation: "Yet these two natures are so united that there is only one God and one Lord, that Mary suckles God with her breasts, bathes God, rocks him, and carries him; furthermore, that Pilate and Herod crucified and killed God. The two natures are so joined that the true deity and humanity are one."¹⁶ Yet, following the Chalcedonian creed regarding the natures of Christ, Luther is obliged to distinguish between the humanity and the divinity. He asserts against Schwenckfeld that Christ is a "creature" according to his humanity, and he is a "creator" according to his divinity. Writes Luther:

Schwenckfeld does not see this; so when he hears the Fathers say that Christ is a creature according to His humanity, he immediately attacks, distorts, and misuses the phrase for his own ends. Even if the Fathers should say: Christ is a creature according to His humanity, this can be tolerated in some way; but Schwenckfeld wickedly remarks: Therefore Christ is simply a creature. Why do you not add: Christ is a creator according to His divinity?¹⁷

Biblical Support: Psalms 8 and 110

Commenting on Ps 110:1 in 1532, Luther finds two natures of Christ declared in the verse. The first "lord" designates Christ as true God; the second "lord" designates Christ as true man, denoting that the Messiah, or Christ, was promised to the fathers, especially to King David, from whom he was to descend. This psalm clearly contains a powerful statement about the person of Christ—namely, he is both David's promised son according to the flesh and God's eternal Son, as well as the eternal king and priest—and about his resurrection, ascension and spiritual kingdom.¹⁸ Christ and the apostles after him often cite this Psalm in the NT because it constitutes the core and foundation of the Christian faith. It confirms the article of faith concerning the person of Christ, his kingdom, and his righteousness. Furthermore in his

¹⁵LW 24, 23; WA 45, 481-82 (Jn., 1538).

¹⁶LW 22, 492-93 (Jn., 1537).

¹⁷See WA 39², 99, 10-15 (*Die Disputation de divinitate et humanitate Christi*, 1540). Cf. LW 26, 273; WA 40¹, 427.

¹⁸LW 13, 228; WA 41, 80, 13-16 (Ps 110, 1532).

comments on Ps 8:1 in 1537, Luther ascribes two different titles to Christ's two natures.¹⁹ The first title, "Lord," is ascribed to the divine majesty, not to any creature, and it means "the right, true and eternal God." The other title, "Ruler," is attributed to Christ's human nature, for in Scripture it is a common name used for princes or heads of household. Since the King is called "Lord, our Ruler," says Luther, it follows that he must be true God and true man. The unity of the person of Christ is affirmed in that Christ is Lord and God according to his eternal and divine nature; he is Ruler according to his human nature and, indeed, became man to be our sovereign Ruler. As the second person of Godhead, the incarnate Son ascribes all things to the Father as the Originator; in his humanity he begins his kingdom in the earthly Zion through the gospel.²⁰

Philosophy and Theology: Man and Personal Union

The personal union must not be conceived as supporting union, for the two natures are united personally in the unity of the person of Christ. Philosophic logic cannot express adequately the unity of two natures; in philosophy, God and humanity are two persons, but in theology they constitute one and the same person.²¹

One is the person of humanity, the other is the person of divinity. However, both humanity and divinity are in Christ. Therefore, there are two persons in Christ. Response [Luther's]: This is the fallacy of composition and division. In the former you divide human and divine nature; in the latter you join them. This is a philosophical solution, but we express it theologically. I refute the consequence because the humanity and divinity constitute one person in Christ. But these two natures are distinct in theology according to their natures and not to the person. They are indistinct, but two distinct natures, although indistinct persons. They are not two distinct persons, but are distinct and indistinct; that is they are distinct natures but indistinct persons.²²

For Luther, "man" signifies an existing person in philosophy; but in theology it means "a certain divinity in Christ."²³ The syllogism

¹⁹LW 12, 98 (Ps 8, 1537).

²⁰LW 12, 50 (Ps 2, 1532).

²¹WA 39², 95, 32ff.; 98, 6ff.

²²WA 39², 100, 6-12: "*M. Lutheri contra Schwenkfeldi Argumenta contraria. alia est persona Deus, alia homo. Christus et homo et Deus. Ergo sunt in eo duae personae. R. In Philosophia est verum.*" See also WA 39², 100, 9-23.

²³LW 38, 253 (The Word Became Flesh, 1539).

cannot capture the mysteries of faith, especially that of Christ as both God and man—a divine subject. Luther writes:

“Man” in philosophy according to its own nature does not signify the Son of God or a divine person. This is the very thing that we call the communication of idioms. The syllogism is not admitted into the mysteries of faith and theology. Philosophy constitutes an aberration in the realm of theology.²⁴

Furthermore:

We say that man is God, and we witness to this by the word of God without a syllogism, apart from philosophy; philosophy has nothing to do with our grammar. You should note this because “man” is and should mean something beyond what it means in the tree of Porphyry, even if it is truly said that God was made man, as they and I say. For here it means something greater and more comprehensive.²⁵

The communication of properties requires that the term “Christ,” when understood as meaning both God and man, carries a “new” content, designating a concrete unity. Such newness cannot be admitted into the philosophical context of meaning, for in theology, “the words used in philosophy become new.”²⁶ As Luther says: “The same thing is not true in different professions.”²⁷ There is “an identity of words” in both disciplines, but there is “a difference in meaning” of the same proposition. Luther clearly repudiates the equivocation of the “Sorbonne theologians” in the following passage:

We say: God is man, which is a simple proposition, not two-fold as the Sorbonne has made it. We condemn the latter. Every man is a creature, this is a simple proposition; this is true in philosophy, but in theology it is false, which is proved in the minor premise, that is Christ is man. The Sorbonne compels us to make all words ambiguous. This is to be resisted. It is not to be allowed that in this proposition, that is, God is man, one may unite theology and philosophy because a distinction is made between man and man. The man who uses words univocally speaks consistently, but not the equivocator, and by the fact that they equivocate they destroy their argument.²⁸

The term “man,” when used in philosophy, indicates the person himself; but in theology, the term, when applied to Christ, designates the

²⁴LW 38, 272.

²⁵LW 38, 247.

²⁶LW 38, 274.

²⁷LW 38, 239.

²⁸LW 38, 273.

divine person who assumes into himself the human nature. Theology is not directed toward the abstract humanity in itself. It is directed toward the concrete reality where human nature is assumed by the divinity.²⁹ Whereas in philosophy, these two terms "man" and "humanity" are one and the same, this is not so in theology.³⁰ "Man" signifies a person, and therefore must not be confused with humanity.³¹ Humanity, for Luther, means the human nature that has been assumed by Christ the person. Consequently, one cannot say that the Son of God has assumed a man; otherwise there would have been two persons.

The hypostatic union, for Luther, means that the Logos always exists in union with the flesh. It is an event in history, but from all eternity Christ's divinity must not be conceived apart from his humanity and vice versa.³² When Scripture speaks about the divine nature united with the human in one person, then it is speaking of Christ as "composite and incarnate, . . . his whole person."³³ Luther does not divorce Christ from God as Philip of Bethsaida did. Rather, Luther follows the rule: "Outside of Christ there is no God."³⁴ Luther, employing the Cappadocian image of iron and fire, explains: "Anyone who touches the heat in the heated iron touches the iron and whoever has touched the skin of Christ has actually touched God."³⁵ Contrary to the Enthusiasts, Luther writes:

We cannot touch or grasp the divine majesty, any more than we would wish to touch or grasp a devouring fire. . . . That is why he has presented his flesh to us, in order that we may attach ourselves to it and to a certain extent be able to touch and comprehend it. . . . Therefore do not listen to those who say that the flesh avails nothing. Reverse this word and say that God without the flesh avails nothing. For it is on the flesh of Christ from the virgin's womb that your eyes must be fixed, so

²⁹WA 39², 117, 33-35.

³⁰WA 39², 116, 3.

³¹WA 39², 118, 3-4.

³²See Lienhard, 342. It must be borne in mind that Luther did not use the term "hypostatic union"; rather he used the term "personal union." However, both carry the same meaning. For a study of *extra-Calvinisticum*, see David E. Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology. The Function of the So-called Extra-Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 1966). The Logos, for the Calvinists, is infinite, and thus must exist *extra Carmen*, unlimited by its union with the flesh. The Lutherans counter the *extra-Calvinisticum* by coining the phrase "*totus intra carnem and nunquam extra carnem*."

³³LW 26, 265; WA 40¹, 415, 30.

³⁴WA 39², 25, 17.

³⁵LW 26, 266; WA 40¹, 416, 10-12; cf. LW 24, 65; WA 45, 520.

that you may take courage and say "I have known nothing of God, either in heaven nor on earth, apart from the flesh, sleeping in the Virgin's womb." . . . For otherwise God is always incomprehensible, it is only in the flesh of Christ that he can be grasped.³⁶

Christ: The Person and Work

Luther develops his Christology by his soteriology, understanding Christ's person in terms of his work of redemption. This is evident in his explanation of the Second Article of his *Small Catechism*, where he quickly comes to soteriology because this is at the heart of his Christology:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I may be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.³⁷

Luther was not concerned with the constitution of Christ in the abstract, but rather with the "for me" aspects of his person, with the work that he performs as a whole person. The metaphysical mystery of the hypostatic union is considered solely in the act of salvation.³⁸ As early as 1509, Luther notes in the margin of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard: "It is not so much a physical or logical determination as a theological one. It is as if someone were to say: 'What is Christ?' to which the logician replies: 'He is a person, etc. . . ,' while the theologian says: 'He is the rock, the cornerstone, etc.'"³⁹ While philosophy concerns itself with God's ontology, theology concerns itself with God's acts, the end of which is our salvation. Christology and soteriology are so intertwined in Luther that salvation is only found in Jesus Christ.

³⁶See WA 25, 106, 33-107 as cited in Lienhard, 342.

³⁷See Luther's "The Small Catechism," 1529, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1959), 345.

³⁸Yves Congar, "Considerations and Reflections on the Christology of Luther," in *Dialogue Between Christians* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 377. Klaas Zwanepol rightly observes in Luther an interplay between Christology and soteriology ("A Human God: Some Remarks on Luther's Christology," *Concordia Journal* 30 (2004): 42).

³⁹See marginal gloss on *Sentences*, *Lib. III*, d. 23 in WA 9, 91, 22-24 as cited in Congar, 70-71.

Christ has two natures. What has that to do with me? If he bears the magnificent and consoling name of Christ, it is on account of the ministry and the task which he took upon himself; it is that which gives him his name. That he should by nature be both man and God, that is for him. But that he should have dedicated his ministry and poured out his love to become my savior and my redeemer, it is in that I find my consolation and well-being. To believe in Christ does not mean that Christ is a person who is man and God, a fact that helps nobody; it means that this person is Christ, that is to say, that *for us* he came forth from God into the world; it is from this office that he takes his name.⁴⁰

The soteriological relevance of Christ lies in what he achieves "for me" or "for us," not so much in what Christ as such has accomplished. Not until we appropriate the "for me" meaning of Christ's act of his self-humiliation do we grasp the import of Christ as our ultimate reality. In achieving our redemption, Jesus Christ as One indivisible Person, divine man as well as incarnate God, has humbled himself. His humiliation is his direct action as a whole person, an "altogether pure and innocent Person" who is constituted as "God and man."⁴¹ This humiliation was, for Luther, credited not only to Christ's humanity, but also to his divinity. Christ himself affirms that it is an active deed of his One indivisible Person, "not by compulsion but out of His own free will."⁴² "For in My own Person of humanity and divinity I am blessed, and I am in need of nothing whatever. But I shall empty Myself (Phil. 2:7); I shall assume your clothing and mask; and . . . suffer death, in order to set you free from death."⁴³ This condescension is the condescension of both the innocent Son of God and innocent Son of Man, becoming the Person of the sinful race, suffering and dying on the cross.

Communication of Properties

The doctrine of communication of properties is used by Luther to indicate how he conceives Christ's Person in terms of his redemptive work, his incarnate deity in terms of his salvific purpose. Although

⁴⁰See WA 16, 217, 33ff. as quoted in Congar, 374. For the new Finnish interpretation of Luther's doctrine of salvation as *theosis*, see Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); William T. Cavanaugh, "A Joint Declaration? Justification as *Theosis* in Aquinas and Luther," *Heythrop Journal* 41 (2000): 265-280.

⁴¹LW 26, 288; WA 40¹, 448.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

Luther affirms that the work of Christ to conquer sin and death could be done only by Christ's divinity, he further contends that Christ's divinity must not be conceived apart from his humanity so that the act of his divinity was essentially that of his whole person, both human and divine. The unity of Christ's Person is affirmed in the fact of his conquest of sin and death, even though strictly speaking, the act is of his divinity. "The humanity would not have accomplished anything by itself; but the divinity, joined with humanity, did it alone; and the humanity did it on account of the divinity."⁴⁴ When Luther speaks of Christ as a whole person, he speaks of him as the doer of the divine action, even though "abstractly" speaking, the act is performed only by the deity.⁴⁵ In this way what is communicated to Christ's humanity is not merely his divine nature but the divine saving deed, as if the deed were performed by the man Jesus: "Thus it is said: the man Jesus led Israel out of Egypt, struck down Pharaoh, and did all things that belong to God."⁴⁶ "Whatever this person, Christ, says and does, is said and done by both" natures through the doctrine of communication of properties.⁴⁷

⁴⁴LW 26, 267; WA 40¹, 417-418.

⁴⁵LW 26, 265; WA 40¹, 415.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷LW 41, 100-111. Cf. LW 24, 106; WA 45, 557. For a detailed study of Luther's usage of the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*, see Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God according to Martin Luther's "Theologia Crucis"* (New York: Lang, 1995), 68-86; and idem "Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond: Luther's Understanding of the *Communicatio Idiomatum*," *Heythrop Journal* 45 (2004): 54-68. Thomas G. Weinandy writes of Luther: The *communicatio* motif is "not divine and human attributes predicated of the one person of the Logos, but rather the mutual interchange and communication of the divine and human properties from the one nature to the other" (*Does God Change? The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* [Still River: St. Bede's Publications, 1985], 105); Wolfhart Pannenberg holds the same view as Weinandy (*Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977], 299-300). In regard to the question of God's suffering, see Reiner Jansen, who states: "However, Scripture witnesses now that God's Son suffers. Though this refers first of all to Christ's humanity, his divinity is meant at the same time," which is to be explained *via* the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum* (*Studien zu Luthers Trinitätslehre* [Frankfurt: Lang, 1976], 116). Ted Peters brings Lutherans into conversation with Reformed theologians on the issue of divine passibility (*God—the World's Future* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992], 198-200). Both Jürgen Moltmann (*The Crucified God* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974], 205) and Eberhard Jüngel (*God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 300, 343, 379-380) endorse Luther's assertion that God's suffering has an ontological status.

Law and Gospel

If the ultimate meaning of Christ's person lies in what Christ graciously does, then the question is, What was his redemptive act on our behalf? In particular, what was required for Christ to remove our curse so as to bring to us his blessing? "He Himself is Lord of the Law; therefore the Law has no jurisdiction over Him and cannot accuse Him, because He is the Son of God. He who was not under the Law subjected Himself voluntarily to the Law."⁴⁸ To be sure, Christ "in his own person" as God's Son does not commit sins. By entering into our place, he truly takes upon himself all our sins, and therefore makes himself a sinner, "not only adjectivally but substantively."⁴⁹ In our stead, he is "not acting in his own person now; now he is not the Son of God, born of the virgin, but he is a sinner,"⁵⁰ who bears the sins of the world "in his body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood."⁵¹ Luther explains:

When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we should not be liberated from it by anything, He sent his Son into the world, heaped all the sins of men upon him and said to him: "Be Peter the denier, Paul the persecutor, blasphemer and assaulter, David the adulterer, the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that you pay and make satisfaction for them." Now the Law comes and says: "I find Him a sinner, who takes upon Himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins than those in Him. Therefore let Him die on the cross."⁵²

In the case of Christ, the law rages even more fiercely than it does against us accursed and condemned sinners. "It accused Him of blasphemy and sedition; it found Him guilty in the sight of God of all the sins of the entire world."⁵³ It "frightened Him so horribly that He

⁴⁸LW 23, 369-370; WA 40¹, 564. For a thorough study of Law and gospel, see Thomas M. McDonough, *The Law and the Gospel: A Study of Martin Luther's Confessional Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963). See also Dennis Ngien, "Theology of Preaching in Martin Luther," *Themelios* 28 (2003): 33-39.

⁴⁹See Robert Bertram, where he cites LW 26, 288; WA 40¹, 448 ("Luther on the Unique Mediatorship of Christ," in *The One Mediator, The Saints and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, ed. H. G. Anderson, J. Francis, and J. A. Burgess [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992], 256).

⁵⁰LW 26, 277; WA 40¹, 432-434.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²LW 26, 280; WA 40¹, 437-438. See also Siggins, 241.

⁵³LW 26, 369-370; WA 40¹, 564.

experienced greater anguish than any man has ever experienced. This is amply demonstrated by His blood sweat, the comfort of the angel, His solemn prayer in the garden (Lk. 22:41- 44), and finally by that cry of misery on the cross (Matt. 27:46): 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?'⁵⁴ This "remarkable duel" occurs and in it "the Law, a creature, came into conflict with the Creator, exceeding its every jurisdiction to vex the Son of God with the same tyranny with which it vexed us, the sons of wrath."⁵⁵ Consequent upon his conflict with the law, Christ

suffered its extreme fierceness and tyranny. By performing and bearing the Law He conquered it in Himself, and then, when He rose from the dead, He condemned the Law, our most horrible enemy, and abolished it, so that it can no longer condemn or kill us. Therefore it is Christ's true and proper function to struggle with the Law, sin and death of the entire world, and to struggle in such a way He undergoes them, but, by undergoing them, conquers them and abolishes them in Himself, thus liberating us from the Law and evil.⁵⁶

Blessing and Curse

Christ interposes himself in the path of the law and suffers it in order to bestow his blessing upon us. The secret of the victory is that it occurs "in his body and in himself." The blessing is locked in mortal combat with the curse in "this one person." Robert Bertram explains:

Both sets of contraries are really his. If the sin had not been his, as truly as the righteousness was, the law could easily have avoided its blasphemy against him by cursing only the one and not the other. However, "he joined God and man in one person. And being joined in us who were accursed, he became a curse for us; and he concealed his blessing in our sin, death, and the curse, which condemned and killed him."⁵⁷

When two such extremely contrary things come together in Christ, for Luther, it must be the divine powers—divine righteousness, life and blessing—which triumph over the lesser contraries— sin, death, and curse. Christ, clothed in our sin, confronts the curse through the cross in order to triumph over it. In Luther's words:

Thus the curse, which brought divine wrath against the whole world,

⁵⁴LW 26, 272; WA 40¹, 567-568.

⁵⁵LW 26, 369-370; WA 40¹, 564. Cf. Philip Watson, *Let God Be God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1947), 116.

⁵⁶LW 26, 373; WA 40¹, 568-570.

⁵⁷Bertram, 259-260.

has the same conflict with the blessing, that is, with eternal grace and mercy of God in Christ. Therefore the curse clashes with the blessing and wants to damn it and annihilate it. But it cannot. For the blessing is divine and eternal, and therefore the curse must yield to it. For if the blessing in Christ could be conquered, then God Himself would be conquered. But this is impossible. Therefore Christ, who is divine power, Righteousness, Blessing, Grace, and Life, conquers and destroys these monsters—sin, death, and the curse—without weapons or battle, in His own body and in Himself as Paul enjoys saying.⁵⁸

Community of Will Between Father and Son

What predicates humanity's sin of Christ is the same will that Christ, who "is God by nature" shares with his Father. Both the Father and the Son will that Christ become the "associate of sinners."⁵⁹ "Of his [Christ's] own free will and by the will of the Father he wanted to be the associate of sinners."⁶⁰ "[O]nly by taking hold of Christ, who, by the will of the Father, has given Himself in death for our sins," is humanity "drawn and carried directly to the Father."⁶¹ The "majesty of God," which for Luther corresponds to the hidden God, the intolerable deity of his *The Bondage of the Will*, becomes for believers the majesty of God who lovingly conquers humanity's sin in his Son. This work is appropriate only to the Divine majesty and is not within the power of either man or angel—namely, that "Christ has abolished sin."⁶² The majesty of God, before whom we face only terror and judgment, now, in Christ, encounters the sinner as the majesty of the loving and merciful God. "The indescribable and inescapable mercy and love of God" is revealed in the fact that "the Supreme Majesty cared so much for me, a condemned sinner and a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3) and of eternal death, that He did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up into a most shameful death."⁶³ "Our God, however, has His honour in this that for our sakes He gives himself down to His utmost depth, into flesh and bread, into our mouth, heart and bosom, and more, for our sakes He suffers himself to be dishonourably treated both upon the cross and

⁵⁸LW 26, 281-282; WA 40¹, 440-441.

⁵⁹LW 26, 278; WA 40¹, 434-435.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹LW 26, 42; WA 40¹, 97-98.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³LW 26, 292; WA 40¹, 454-455.

altar."⁶⁴ Accordingly, to know Christ aright is

to know him as the one who died for me and took upon himself my sin. . . . There Christ is God and has put himself in my death, in my sin, and so gives me his loving favor. There I recognize how he befriends me and the utter love of the Father is too much for any heart. Thus I lay ahold of God where he is most weak, and think, "Yes, this is God, this is his will and his good pleasure, what there Christ has done for me. . . ." Therefore God is to be known alone in Christ.⁶⁵

Hiddenness: Precise and Absolute

Luther uses a variety of terms in making this distinction. Brian Gerrish notes that his term "naked God" corresponds to Luther's "hidden God," who

is God in himself, a strange terrifying and unapproachable abstraction. This being so, it appears that one must take into account, not only a dual relationship of God to the world, but also a concept of God as absolute God, out of relation to the world. This God, too, stands in antithetical relation to the revealed God, for the revealed God is the clothed God—the God who is not naked, but clothed with his Word.⁶⁶

"God clothed" is set against the "naked God"; the "revealed God" against the "hidden God." In addition, Gerhard Forde mentions a third pair of terms that sets the "preached God" against "God not preached."⁶⁷

While the three sets of terms are interchangeable, only two kinds of hiddenness are entailed. The first kind is God's hiddenness in his revelation, which may be called the *precise* hiddenness.⁶⁸ God wills to be

⁶⁴See WA 23, 157, 30 (That These Words of Christ, 1527) as cited by Norman F. Nagel, "Martinus: Heresy, Doctor Luther, Heresy! The Person and Work of Christ," in *Seven-Headed Luther, Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary 1483-1983*, ed. P. N. Brooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 41. Cf. LW 27, 72.

⁶⁵See WA 10¹, 277, 18ff. as cited in Nagel, 41. See also Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 59.

⁶⁶Brian Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *JR* 53 (1973): 267. See LW 2, 46-47; WA 42, 284-295 (Gen., 1535-1545).

⁶⁷Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 25. Cf. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 215-218.

⁶⁸See Eberhard Jüngel, "*Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos*," in idem, *Entsprechung, Gott-Wahrheit-Mensch. Theologische Erörterungen* (München: Kaiser, 1980), 238ff; see also idem, where he speaks of the "human" hiddenness as the "specific hiddenness of God under His opposite" (*The Freedom of the Christian: Luther's Significance for Contemporary Theology*,

known in the precise hiddenness, that is, in the human form, Jesus Christ. Gerrish explains: "His wisdom is hidden under folly, his strength under abject weakness. He gives life through death, righteousness to the unrighteousness, he saves by judging and damning."⁶⁹ The second kind of hiddenness has to do with God hidden "behind and beyond the word." Luther finds this distinction between the hidden and revealed God in 2 Thess 2:4:

And lest anyone should think this a distinction of my own, I am following Paul, who writes to the Thessalonians concerning the Anti-Christ that he will exalt himself above every God that is preached and worshipped (2 Thess. 2:4). This plainly shows that someone can be exalted above God as he is preached and worshipped, that is, above the word and rite through which "God is known to us and has dealings with us; but above God as he is not worshipped and not preached, but as he is in his own nature and majesty, nothing can be exalted, but all things are under his mighty hand."⁷⁰

This hiddenness is called the *absolute* hiddenness that Luther confronts most acutely in his discussion with Erasmus on why, if there is no human freedom, some believe and others do not. The specific text in question is Ezek 18:23: "I desire not the death of the sinner, but rather that he should be converted and live." Erasmus contends that if God does not desire the death of the sinner, human free will must be the cause of it. Luther, however, saw that Erasmus's inference of free will from this text has confused law with gospel, thereby turning the marvelous delight of the gospel promise into a terrifying statement of law. For Luther, the Word "I desire not the death of the sinner" is not an abstract statement about God not preached; rather it is "the sweet voice of the gospel, that is true of the preached God."⁷¹ Luther states: "For he is here speaking of the preached and offered mercy of God, not of the hidden and awful will of God by which he ordains by his own counsel which and what sort of persons he wills to be the recipients and partakers of his preached and offered mercy."⁷² God not preached, revealed, or worshiped poses a limit for proper theological discourse. We are to leave the absolute God alone and cleave to the God clothed in his Word. "God must be left to himself in his own majesty, for in this

trans. R. A. Harrisville [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988], 33-35).

⁶⁹Gerrish, 268.

⁷⁰LW 33, 139.

⁷¹Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 24.

⁷²LW 33, 138-139.

regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him. But we have something to do with him insofar as he is clothed and set forth in his Word, through which he offers himself to us and which is the beauty and glory with which the psalmist celebrates him as being clothed."⁷³

The distinction between the hidden God (hidden in the second, absolute, sense) and the revealed God (hidden in the first, precise, sense) does not mean two deities, but one and the same who "works life, death and all in all." God himself is defined as "hiddenness"; divine hiddenness belongs to divine essence. As Luther puts it: "God is the one who is hidden. This is His peculiar property."⁷⁴ By indicating that hiddenness belongs to God's essence, Robert Jenson notes, Luther continues the medieval tradition of identifying God's deity by means of mere negatives such as invisibility, intangibility, and ineffability.⁷⁵ "For what God is in His nature, we cannot define. We can well determine what He is not."⁷⁶ God "cannot be comprehended in His unveiled majesty" because the true God's majesty is his hiddenness, ungrasped by any but himself. "God sees that this way of knowing God (in his naked majesty) is impossible for us; for, as Scripture states (1 Tim. 6:16), He dwells in unapproachable light."⁷⁷ God affirms himself as the sovereign subject of theology, not an object of human subjectivity. But Luther breaks with the tradition by redefining God's hiddenness (in the first, precise, sense) as God's will to hide himself in the antithesis of the cross of Christ. Since God's hiddenness is the predicate of God's deity, God's self-revelation in Christ is not an abolition of his hiddenness. Rather God reveals himself by precisely hiding so that his hiddenness is also a predicate of his revelation. Jenson writes: "God reveals himself by hiding yet again, by exercising his very deity, but now hiding under the opposite of all that sheer omnipotence which hides him and is his mere deity, under weakness and forgiveness and death."⁷⁸ Luther

⁷³LW 33, 139-140.

⁷⁴LW 6, 148; WA 44, 110, 23ff. (Gen.).

⁷⁵Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 27. See also Gerhard Ebeling, where he wrote of the speculative mystical theology of Neoplatonism which seeks to hear the uncreated Word, to seek God "in total immediacy, naked man meeting naked God" (*Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson [London: Collins, 1970], 230ff.).

⁷⁶LW 2, 46; WA 42, 294 (Gen.): "*Nam quid Deus in natura sei, definire non possumus. Hoc bene possumus definire quid non est.*"

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Jenson, 28.

has God say: "From an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless I will remain the same God."⁷⁹ God, in his own life, corresponds to Christ coming and being crucified. God really is what he has shown himself to be, according to which the absolute hiddenness of God cannot be understood as a hiddenness that possibly contradicts his revelation.

The absolute hidden God is not the ultimate reality of our faith and, therefore, does not concern us. Luther keenly observes "this general rule: to avoid as much as possible any questions that carry us to the throne of the Supreme Majesty. For there is a great danger in involving one's self in the mazes of the Divine Being."⁸⁰ This understanding is furnished in his Christological interpretation of Ps 51:1, where he declares that the "absolute God" (or "naked God") and the human creatures are the "bitterest of enemies."⁸¹

From this absolute God everyone should flee who does not want to perish. . . . Human weakness cannot help being crushed by such majesty. . . . We must take hold of this God, not naked but clothed and revealed in His Word; otherwise despair crushes us. . . . The absolute God is like an iron wall, against which we cannot bump without destroying ourselves. Therefore Satan is busy day and night, making us run to the naked God so that we forget His promises and blessings shown in Christ and think about God and the judgement of God. When this happens, we perish utterly and fall into despair.⁸²

Not only does the majesty of the naked God destroy the creature, but also the revealed God is hostile to anyone who refuses to receive him as he is offered in the gospel. Eberhard Jüngel, in commenting on Luther's understanding of the correspondence between the hidden and the revealed God in their apparently contradictory acts, indicates how both the majesty of the hidden God and the Word of the revealed God teach the *Socratic dictum*: "What is beyond us is none of our business":

The revealed God is hostile to that person who has become his own enemy. For whoever elevates himself above the preached God so as to rise to the God beyond us thereby rises above the (revealed) one, and elevates himself, even that of the revealed God. In this self-elevation, he fails. He makes himself God's enemy, even that of the

⁷⁹LW 5, 45; WA 43, 459. See Jüngel: "Briefly, the differentiation between God and God can never be understood as a contradiction in God" (*God as the Mystery of the World*, 346).

⁸⁰LW 2, 45; WA 42, 294-295.

⁸¹LW 12, 312.

⁸²Ibid.

revealed God. So in this lies the identity of the hidden God and the revealed God. The hidden God directs us away from himself, so that the person elevating himself to him must necessarily become God's enemy and insofar likewise directs us away from the hidden God. The revealed God points us to himself and insofar likewise directs us away from the hidden God. The revealed God directs us to his revelation in the man Jesus, where he awaits people as a friendly God. The hidden God and the revealed God correspond to each other, precisely in the center of this apparent contradiction. Both teach us to understand: "What is beyond us is no business of ours."⁸³

Both as the hidden deity and as the revealed deity, the One God directs us away from himself when we seek to grasp him above his human life, toward himself as he defines himself in the incarnate Word.

The Hiddenness of Love

The distinction between hidden God and revealed God constitutes for Luther a paradox, in virtue of which even in God's human or precise hiddenness God remains the divinely unsearchable and unapproachable majesty in whose presence humanity would be annihilated unless we take refuge in God's love that has appeared in Christ. God's gracious act of hiding in the cross uncovers for faith the hiddenness of love which is painful or passible. The precise hiddenness in the cross of Christ is thus for Luther a predicate of the revelation of God's love. In Jenson's words: "[God] defines his hiddenness, and thus he makes it speakable, and speaks it, as the hiddenness of love."⁸⁴ The incarnate Christ is the happening of God's love—a love that suffers God's own wrath so as to create a people of mercy. God in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, this flesh and blood God, the revealed God, in suffering for us overcomes the hidden God and abolishes the terror of the hidden God forever.⁸⁵ Christ has entered the

⁸³Jüngel, "*Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos*," 241. Cf. John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed: The Reinterpretation of Luther's Deus Absconditus for Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1953), 55-70.

⁸⁴Jenson, 28.

⁸⁵Gerrish, 222. See Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering of God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *ChrCen* 103 (1986): 285-286. Goetz is right to identify the hidden God as "an inscrutable impassible, divine sovereignty" who devours sinners without regret. But he fails to grasp Luther's emphasis which sets the revealed God against the hidden God. God as sheer naked and impassible abstraction is an inescapable terror for us, which can only be overcome by the revealed God. Luther's affirmation that God suffers is set in the context of the distinction between the revealed God and the hidden God. The mask of the impassible and naked God is overcome as the believer is grasped by the preached or clothed God who truly suffers. Faith lays hold of the crucified God

terrifying abyss of the absconding God as he laments in the cry of dereliction on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Ps 22)." The Son's true "image" is seen in his willingness to communicate the essence of God's love by being forsaken. There in Gethsemane, Christ "struggles with himself"; he struggles against the hidden God, suffers and overcomes the hidden God for us on the cross. The depth of God's love is disclosed precisely in this distinction in God wherein "God struggles against himself" for our sake.⁸⁶ Faith grasps the true essence of God's love within this distinction; it lays hold of the crucified God who has conquered the impassible, naked God for us in concrete actuality. God's "omnipotent love" suffers and conquers his own wrath when his very Son accepts the forsakenness, "thereby proving that He is the dearest Son, who gives this to all if we but believe."⁸⁷ So Luther's inquiry into the atonement is "not whether there is a blood precious enough to pay God or even to the devil, but whether God can actually give Himself in such a way to save us."⁸⁸ Reconciliation with God is made possible because the "incarnate and human God," who is "the image of the grace of God against sin,"⁸⁹ has acted to conquer the hidden God, thereby removing from us the terror and inscrutability of the hidden God (i.e., the absolute God).⁹⁰ It is God in hiding himself in Christ that overcomes his absolute hiddenness. It is only in Christ where God is revealed, that an enormous antinomy between God hidden and God revealed occurs and is finally resolved. God incarnate in Jesus has reconciled two sets of contraries—divine blessing and curse, divine mercy and wrath, eternal life and death.

Parallel, Not an Identity

The revealed God is economic and immanent: since God is known through his works, the God-at-work (economic) is the God-revealed who is none other than the immanent God. The God of the gospel corresponds to the immanent God whose essence is located in the

who has conquered the impassible God for us in concrete actuality.

⁸⁶See WA 45, 370: "*da (Gethsemane) streydet Gott mit Gott.*"

⁸⁷LW 42, 107; WA 2, 691, 18-19.

⁸⁸Gerhard Forde, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 2: 51.

⁸⁹LW 42, 107; WA 2, 691, 17.

⁹⁰Forde, *Theology is For Proclamation*, 22. See also idem, where he states: "The *deus nudus*, the *deus absconditus*, the God of wrath, has virtually to be overcome by the 'clothed God.' . . . Theological theory cannot tear the mask from the face of the hidden God. One cannot see through God's wrath" ("Reconciliation with God," in *Christian Dogmatics*, 2: 71).

incarnate Son. Because the absolute hiddenness of God causes us to flee from the hidden God's death-causing powers to the revealed God in Jesus Christ, some interpreters have understood the distinction between God hidden and God revealed to be the distinction between law and gospel.⁹¹ However, since law and gospel belong to the work (alien and proper) of the revealed God, there is here only a parallel, not an identity. The distinction, then, between law and gospel must not be equated with the distinction between God hidden and God revealed because law and gospel both belong to the revealed God. Both law and gospel, in Luther's view, are instruments for the salvation in Christ, the law being merely the alien work of the God of the gospel. The negative aspect of the absolute God and of the law is not the same. The law condemns, truly condemns, but so that we might be saved. The paradox of God's being is that God kills in order to make alive (1 Sam 2:6). "Therefore you are being afflicted by this prison (i.e. the law), not to do you harm but to re-create you through the Blessed Offspring."⁹² The law is not against God's promises, but leads to those promises. In Galatians Luther writes of God's double activity:

This does not mean that it was the chief purpose of God in giving the Law only to cause death and damnation. . . . For the Law is a Word that shows life and drives us toward it. Therefore it was not given only for the sake of death. But this is its chief use and end: to reveal death, in order that the nature and enormity of sin might thus become apparent. It does not reveal death in a way that takes delight in it or that seeks to do nothing but kill us. No, it reveals death in order that men may be terrified and humbled and thus fear. . . . Therefore the function of the Law is only to kill, yet in such a way that God may be able to make alive. Thus the Law was not given merely for the sake of death; but because man is proud and supposes that he is wise, righteous, and holy, therefore it is necessary that he be humbled by the Law, in order that this beast, the presumption of righteousness, may be killed, since man cannot live unless it is killed.⁹³

The annihilating knowledge of God revealed in the law is causally useful if and when it drives us into the arms of Christ. God corresponds to himself precisely in these two contradictory activities: the alien work and the proper work; the former leads to the latter.⁹⁴

⁹¹See Bernhard Lohse, where he argues that Luther's distinction between God hidden and God revealed corresponds to his distinction between Law and gospel (*Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. R. C. Schultz [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 171).

⁹²LW 26, 335; WA 40¹, 516-518.

⁹³LW 25, 9; WA 46, 10-11 (Rom., 1516).

⁹⁴Althaus, 32.

Predestination

Luther is not speculating when he speaks about God's wrath or the inscrutability of God's absolute hiddenness. He insists that this God is attested by Scripture (e.g., Matt 22:14). The hiddenness of the hidden God lies not in his wrath, which is known, but rather in the basis for this wrath. Why, Luther asks, in responding to Erasmus, does God save so few and damn so many? The question of election is raised by the gospel itself. Why do some and not others receive the benefits of Christ? Luther speaks of how he has stumbled in utter despair over the problem of predestination.⁹⁵ The fact of God's election is revealed, but the why of God's nonelection is hidden. What is revealed is the basis for God's election, God's love; what is hidden is the reason why God also works nonelection. God reserves to himself his sovereign freedom to determine *who and what*. The hidden will is the divine counterpart of human inquiry: Why some and not others? To pursue this question according to unbelief, Luther avers, only runs one against the "concealed and dreadful will of God, who, by his own design, ordains whom he wills." On the other hand, faith will reverently adore this "most awesome secret of the divine majesty, reserved to himself alone and forbidden to us."⁹⁶ Luther warns against unbelief's speculation about God's justice and will, that is, to seek God's will apart from God's acts in Christ. He calls this logical casuistry a theology of glory which no longer distinguishes between God hidden and God revealed. About God himself and what he might do in his absolute majesty, we do not know. We must observe Luther's Socratic dictum: "What is above us is none of our business."

When Luther says no other God, he means the God who hides in the incarnate Son, the God with whom we have to do. What to do about the hidden will of the hidden God? Nothing, except cling to the revealed God, who is at once the hidden God. The antinomy between them cannot be resolved by theological edifice, but only by faith, fleeing from the inscrutability of the hidden God to the God of mercy in Christ. When the believer's conscience faces anxiety or terror in the face of the hidden God, God does not reach him through theological efforts, but in the flesh and blood of the crucified Christ who comes as a baby in the manger and whose life culminates on the cross. The only practically secured basis, Luther avers, is to cleave to the clothed deity, to "begin from below, from

⁹⁵See WA 18, 684, 32, as cited in Gerrish, 272.

⁹⁶Ibid.

the Incarnate Son," who has overcome the naked God for us if we but believe. This he stresses in the Preface to Romans:

When you arrive at chapter 8 [of Romans], dominated by the cross and passion of Christ, you will learn the right way of understanding of divine (predestination) in chapters 9, 10, and 11 and the assurance it gives. If we do not feel the weight of the passion, the cross, and the death we cannot cope with the problem of [predestination], without either hurt to ourselves or secret anger with God.⁹⁷

Conclusion

To seek God outside of the clothed God is to "run off to a place where there is neither Word, faith, and Spirit or knowledge of God," and eventually end up "in the midst of hell, death, and sin."⁹⁸ God's mercy has triumphed over God's wrath, and this is revealed to faith: "For all of this takes place in the heart and conscience, where there is no work and no

⁹⁷See "Preface to the Romans, 1522," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. and intro. J. Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 32. For a thorough study of Luther's doctrine of predestination, see Fredrik Brosche, *Luther on Predestination* (Sweden: University of Uppsala Press, 1978); Klaus Schwarzwallner, *Theologia Crucis: Luther Lehre von Prædestination nach De servo arbitrio* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1970); Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong* (New York: Newman, 1969); Robert Shofner, "Luther on *The Bondage of the Will*: An Analytical-Critical Essay," *SJT* 26 (1973): 24-39; Linwood Urban, "Was Luther a Thoroughgoing Determinist?" *JTS* 22 (1971): 113-139; Egil Grislis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God: The Problem of the *Deus Absconditus* in Luther's Treatise *De servo arbitrio*," *McCormick Quarterly* 21 (1967): 81-94. Gerhard Forde points out the difference between Luther and Barth, in that the former keeps intact the terror of the hidden God, asserting a real doctrine of predestination, whereas the latter attempts to theologically banish the terror of such a deity. He writes: "That Barth's attempt is valiant and brilliant goes without saying. But does it succeed? Perhaps the quickest answer is the reception of Barth's theology. It has not been perceived, finally or generally, as the lifting of the burden of 'God' from human backs. Indeed, in its insistence on 'revelation alone' it seemed to most to make the burden more oppressive. Luther's contention that one cannot penetrate the mask [of the hidden God] is borne out. Instead of banishing the *deus ipse* (God himself), one succeeds only in mixing him with the *deus revelatus* (the revealed God) and making matters worse. Only the historical, concrete, suffering and dying Jesus can save us from the wrath of the *deus ipse*. Only the revealed God can save us from the hidden God. Theology cannot do it" ("Reconciliation with God," in *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:71). Timothy George, a notable Luther scholar, observes that Luther does not shrink from a doctrine of double predestination (*Theology of the Reformers* [Nashville: Broadman, 1988], 77). McGrath shares the same view with George—both affirm the notion of the hiddenness of the inscrutable God as ontologically constitutive of Luther's theology of the cross (*Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 166-172).

⁹⁸LW 12, 322.

work enters.”⁹⁹ Faith means to flee from the absolute God to God in Christ. Faith means precisely to be grasped by the clothed God in the face of the terror of the absolute God. The annihilating being of the hidden God is overcome for the believer by the loving God—the one and same God who has reached his intended goal: to create a people no longer under God’s wrath. And faith follows in trust this action of God. The sinner in humility believes that sin no longer exists, and the divine wrath is placated on account of God’s redeeming act. This true knowledge constitutes faith and is saving where a creature knows that this conquering action has been done for him. It is only by knowing God in Christ, that is, according to Luther, the only way God wants us to know him, that the knowledge of God—“this God, this God-man”—is saving knowledge. The saving knowledge of faith in Christ is that which constitutes the ultimate reality and meaning in Luther’s theology.

⁹⁹LW 19, 60 and 44 (Treatise on Jon., 1525).