



Luther's Dialectic of the Hidden and Revealed God: Implications for the Church's Mission

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Christ commanded His disciples to be His witnesses¹. The church's vocation therefore seems to be quite clear. Indeed, throughout much of its history the Christian community has responded to Christ's call with a desire to be obedient and with the conviction that witnessing Christ is essential for the salvation of humanity.

The meaning of Christ's command and the church's evangelistic heritage have, however, inspired a lively and persistent debate within the Christian community in recent decades. Missiologists, mission executives, church leaders and members of individual faith communities have expressed various opinions and pursued a variety of strategies that seek to clarify and implement the church's contemporary mission in the world and to evaluate the role of evangelism in that mission. As the debates continue and different strategies and programs are created and implemented, the crucial questions of what it means to be Christ's witnesses, whether the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world is still the church's calling and, ultimately, how salvation is understood and whether the church is to be an instrument of salvation in the world emerge and challenge

¹ Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8

the church's very identity. Contemporary Christians are also exploring what our attitude toward other religions and their practitioners should be, especially in light of a commitment to interreligious dialogue. The eternal destiny of adherents to other religions is also debated.

The claim that there is no salvation outside the church has been an integral part of the Christian tradition since the time of Cyprian (c.200-258 CE), the Bishop of Carthage in North Africa during the third century. While this assertion continues to be affirmed within the Christian community, it has also inspired substantial debate. Missiologists like Paul Knitter, a leading contemporary spokesperson of religious pluralism and inter-faith dialogue, have rejected such an exclusive claim and argued for a universalistic perspective that obviously challenges traditional understandings of evangelism and of God's relationship with humanity. The Lutheran community, especially in the northern hemisphere, is also discussing whether evangelism, inter-religious dialogue, accompaniment, or the quest for justice should be the ultimate priority of the church as it pursues its vocation. Some see all of these callings in a symbiotic relationship while others see them in tension or are inclined to insist on the priority of some over others.

It is absolutely clear that the theological, missiological, ecclesial and ecumenical implications of Cyprian's and of the Church's traditional claim that there is no salvation outside the church are varied, and this claim presents the contemporary church, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with complex challenges as the community of faith strives to carry out God's mission in the world. What, then, is the church to do? How are God's people to be witnesses of Christ? What does such a witness entail? Is the proclamation of the gospel still central to that witness? In responding to these questions, this presentation explores the Lutheran confessional heritage and the theological perspectives of Martin Luther.

For the sake of transparency, it is crucial to confirm that the assertion that there is no salvation outside the church is consistent with the Lutheran Confessions' and with Luther's evangelical perspective. I intend to propose, however, that Luther's dialectic of the *Deus revelatus* [revealed God] and the *Deus absconditus* [hidden God] provides the contemporary Lutheran communities with resources to amend and reinterpret this assertion. Such a reinterpretation is warranted as particularly Lutheran Christians seek to

be faithful to Christ's Great Commission, while avoiding the triumphal and exclusive spirit that has too often characterized the Western Church's attitudes toward other religions and, thus, its missionary enterprise. As we consider these important matters, it is advisable to remember, that Luther's dialectical doctrine of God also affirms the Christocentric perspective and the evangelistic commitment that is inspired by faithfulness to Christ's call to be His witnesses. Such faithfulness necessitates the church's continuing conviction that the gospel remains God's ultimate and absolutely essential good news that is addressed to all of humanity.

Luther clearly affirms the assertion that there is no salvation outside the church. It is either explicitly or implicitly articulated in much of his theological corpus. Nowhere is it stated more clearly, however, than in a normative text of the Reformation movement, a text that was ultimately included among the Lutheran confessional writings, namely, the *Large Catechism*. In his discussion of the third article of the Creed, Luther makes a variety of statements which clarify his position. While criticizing the Roman church for fostering human works as a means of obtaining grace and salvation and thereby obscuring Christ's redemptive activity and the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification, Luther asserts:

Where he [the Holy Spirit] does not cause it [the Word] to be preached and does not awaken the understanding of it in the heart, all is lost....For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, apart from which no one can come to the Lord Christ.²

Stressing the necessity of forgiveness in the lives of sinners, he warns: "Outside this Christian community, however, where there is no gospel, there is also no forgiveness, there is also no holiness."³ However, his clearest statement occurs in the conclusion of his explanation of the Creed when Luther praises the Creed as a careful explication of the essence, will and work of the Holy Trinity. He points out that

...we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were in not for the LORD Christ, who is the mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.⁴

² Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), The Large Catechism, The Creed, III, 436,45. Hereafter referred to as *Book of Concord*.

³ *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, The Creed, III, 438,56.

⁴ *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, The Creed, III, 440,65.

The saving self-revelation of God in Christ occurs only within the community of faith.

Hence, Luther concludes with this striking assertion:

These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God—nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the LORD Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁵

It is not surprising that Luther makes this bold assertion, for it is clearly consistent with the chief articles of his evangelical theology, namely, his Christology and the related doctrine of justification. The very heart of his theology therefore informs his thinking. In order to illustrate the theological logic of Luther's conclusion it is advisable to review briefly the chief contours of his justificatory thought. On the basis of his biblical studies and his own spiritual struggles, those *Anfechtungen*⁶ which were a consistent aspect of his faith journey, Luther articulated a doctrine of justification which he considered to be a faithful explication and proclamation of the gospel. St. Paul was Luther's chief teacher and provided him with the "grammar of faith," as Kenneth Hagen has argued.⁷ The impact of St. Augustine is, of course, also readily apparent in Luther's thought. The Reformer maintained that since the fall all human beings are sinners whose nature is radically corrupted by original sin, which is hereditary and which manifests itself in sinful deeds.⁸ While humans have difficulty obeying the second table of the law, especially as Luther explicates the Decalogue in his Catechisms,⁹ they are absolutely incapable of fulfilling the first table, especially the first commandment.¹⁰ Thus, natural human beings are concupiscent, that is, they are inclined to sin, and they are enemies of

⁵ *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, The Creed, III, 440,66.

⁶ See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, tr. by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 76-82. Brecht provides a concise but helpful discussion of the role of the *Anfechtungen* in Luther's spiritual quest.

⁷ Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as Seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993).

⁸ *Book of Concord*, The Smalcald Articles, III,1, pp. 310-311, 1-3.

⁹ *Book of Concord*, The Small Catechism, The Ten Commandments, pp. 351,1-354,22; The Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, pp. 386,1-431,333.

¹⁰ *Book of Concord*, The Smalcald Articles, III,2, 312,4.

God who have lost the freedom of the will and the image of God. Echoing St. Augustine, Luther insists that while Adam and Eve were able not to sin (*posse non peccare*) as well as to sin (*posse peccare*), their progeny are no longer able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). Hence, they stand under God's just condemnation and are wholly dependent on God for their salvation. God has, of course, redeemed humanity through the Christ, who is fully divine and fully human,¹¹ who became incarnate and took on humanity's sin and punishment and who was victorious over all the powers that separate human beings from God.¹² It is only because of Christ's redemptive work that life and salvation are once again human possibilities. They cannot be earned or merited, however, but are free gifts received in and through faith, for the sake of Christ.¹³ Faith is absolutely essential, for only faith trusts God's promises and, therefore, receives what is promised. Faith is not a human work, but, like all other life-giving and life-sustaining blessings, it is a gift of God. It is created in individuals by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. Those means, the Word and the sacraments, are God's gifts to the church and are available only in and through the community of faith. Thus the church is the arena of God's justifying activity. Those who come to faith receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation and are incorporated into the church, the body of Christ. There their faith is also nurtured through the Word and the sacraments. The members of the church, both individually and corporately, then become means of the means of grace and agents of salvation to those who are not yet part of the body of Christ. This is, for Luther, the church's ultimate purpose and function.

Luther's conclusion that those outside the church face God's wrath and condemnation therefore reflects his evangelical theology. The Reformer was convinced that Christ alone redeems (*solus Christus*). The benefits Christ has won for us are received only through faith (*sola fide*) because of God's grace (*sola gratia*). Faith is created by the Holy Spirit only through the means of grace. Those means are available only in the church. All who receive the gift of faith become members of the church where

¹¹ Luther's most incisive Christological writings dealing with the two natures of Christ are his Eucharistic treatises which he addressed to Huldreich Zwingli and his supporters. See especially "That These Words of Christ, 'This is my Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics" and "Concerning Christ's Supper" in Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, eds., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), Vol. 37. Hereafter referred to as LW.

¹² *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, Creed, II, 434,25-435,33.

¹³ *Book of Concord*, The Smalcald Articles, II, 301,1-5.

their faith is then nurtured through Word and sacraments. It is for these reasons that there is no salvation outside the church. Luther's conclusion thus has a very clear theological logic. The various assertions that Luther made which led him to that conclusion are, indeed, necessitated by his evangelical theology, except the last one. This contention will be supported later in this lecture. However, a significant dilemma of Lutheran, evangelical theology must first be addressed because it is related to Luther's notion of the *deus absconditus* [the hidden God], and it has implications for the topic under discussion.

The dilemma is inherent in the Lutheran doctrine of justification, and it is related to the assumption that some are saved while others are not. The Lutheran, or evangelical, doctrine of justification asserts that God alone saves and justifies, that God has already redeemed humanity in Jesus Christ and that the justification of all is God's intention. Yet, the Lutheran tradition has also consistently maintained that there is no salvation outside the church and that all are, therefore, not saved or justified. The dilemma is that God, who has already redeemed all in Christ, apparently does not justify all. As has already been noted, Luther argued that since the fall all human beings who are not regenerated are enemies of God who cannot obey God's will and fulfill the law. Therefore, only God can and does save. No one can do anything to prepare for or merit salvation. In light of their sinful nature, all human beings are the same in God's sight and equally incapable in matters of salvation. Why, then, does God overcome the enmity and rebellion of some, grant them faith and justify them but not others? In response to this crucial and troubling question, Philip Melancthon, Luther's most gifted and influential Wittenberg colleague, proposed that there are three causes of conversion, the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and the human will which does not resist God's activity. Thus humans themselves are the reason why some are saved and some are damned. The passivity or the active resistance of the will determines the eternal destiny of each individual. God cannot be blamed for the fate of the condemned. Melancthon's solution was rejected by most of his colleagues, although it addressed the dilemma noted above and avoided the doctrine of double predestination. His position was criticized as synergistic by many of his fellow evangelicals, and it was rejected in the Formula of Concord.¹⁴ Seeking to avoid any hint

¹⁴ *Book of Concord*, Formula of Concord, Epitome, II, 491,1-494,19; Solid Declaration, II, 543,1-562,90, especially pp, 560,86-562,90.

of synergism, the Lutheran confessional writings maintain that the blame for people's condemnation must be ascribed to the devil and the perverse human will, even as they reject that the human will somehow cooperates with God in conversion.¹⁵ This is also Luther's most consistent position.¹⁶ However, this explanation is found wanting. After all, the will of every unregenerate human being is perverse and at enmity with God, and the devil always opposes God's saving and justifying activity. There is, therefore, no essential distinction between one person and another. Furthermore, only God can and does save and justify. Human beings cannot cooperate with God in their salvation or their justification. Indeed, any attempt to do so is a usurpation of God's role and fails to let God be God. Hence, the questions persist. Why does God overcome the opposition of the devil and of the fallen human will in some and not in others? Why does God justify some and not others? Is it because God is only able to justify a certain number, or does God will to justify some and to condemn others? Did Christ redeem all of humanity or is Christ's atonement a limited atonement? Is it simply impossible to resolve the dilemma raised by the Lutheran doctrine of justification, or does the Lutheran heritage necessitate a doctrine of double predestination, even though the sixteenth-century confessors¹⁷ and Lutherans since then have rejected that doctrine? Luther himself apparently did not share the concerns of his colleagues and heirs regarding double predestination and affirmed it in his debate with Desiderius Erasmus. By doing so, Luther addressed the dilemma, although in a way that is inconsistent with his own theological method as a theologian of the cross and troublesome in light of his understanding of the gospel. The proposal that I am going to make in this presentation affirms the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, avoids the doctrine of double predestination and addresses the dilemma, but in a way that differs significantly from Luther's solution. Yet, it clarifies and affirms the very heart of the church's mission.

Having argued that the assertion that there is no salvation outside the church appears to be a logical theological consequence of Luther's justificatory thought and

¹⁵ *Book of Concord*, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XIX, 235; Formula of Concord, Epitome, XI, 518, 13-519, 15; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, II, 547, 17-549, 24, 552, 44-45; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, XI, 653, 78-82.

¹⁶ LW 31, 58-60; LW 32, 226; LW 33, 65; *Book of Concord*, The Smalcald Articles, III, 1, 310, 1-311, 11.

¹⁷ *Book of Concord*, Formula of Concord, Epitome, XI, 517, 1-520, 22; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, XI, 640, 1-656, 96.

having noted the challenging dilemma raised by his assertion that we are saved by grace through faith alone, it is now necessary to explore the Reformer's dialectic of the hidden and revealed God¹⁸ as a theological resource that sheds important light on the assertion that there is no salvation outside the church and on the dilemma why some come to faith and some apparently do not. This dialectic also has the potential of expanding the theological, ecumenical and missiological horizons of contemporary evangelical theologians without necessitating a universalistic position. While this dialectic is apparent throughout Luther's vast corpus of writings, he explores the hidden and revealed God quite intentionally and extensively in the "Heidelberg Theses" (1518) and in the *Bondage of the Will* (1520). Hence, these two writings serve as the chief sources of the discussion that follows.

The *Deus revelatus*, the revealed God, is a particular focus of attention in the "Heidelberg Theses." Romans 1:19-25, I Corinthians 1:17-31 and the theophany recorded in Exodus 33:18-23 clearly inform Luther's striking assertions. With his penchant for paradoxical thinking, Luther proposes in the "Heidelberg Theses" that God's ultimate self-revelation is in hiding. He cautions those who wish to be theologians of the cross, that is, true theologians, not to focus on the invisible things of God revealed through God's mighty works of creation, such visible things as God's "virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth....The recognition of all these things does not make one worthy or wise."¹⁹ The reason why true theologians should not be preoccupied with the invisible things of God revealed through God's mighty acts of creation is explained by St. Paul in Romans 1. It is because humans have misinterpreted these natural revelations, have not honored God, have become fools while claiming to be wise and have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal men or birds or animals or reptiles." Thus God gave them up to their sins "because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator,..."²⁰ St. Paul notes in this passage, and Luther agrees with him, that while God is revealed in the wonders of creation, human beings have misinterpreted and misused that revelation and have become idolaters, making God into their image rather

¹⁸ See Isaiah 45:15.

¹⁹ LW 31, 52; Explanation of Thesis 19.

²⁰ Romans 1:23; 25.

than recognizing God as God wishes to be known and confessing God to be God. For this reason, asserts Luther, God has chosen to reveal God's essence in a radically different and surprising way, in what the Reformer calls the back or invisible things, namely, in weakness, in folly, in the incarnation and on the cross. Luther clearly reflects Paul's insights in Romans 1 and in I Corinthians 1 as he notes:

Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering. As the Apostle says in I Cor. 1:[21], "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross.²¹

It is crucial to note Luther's emphases in this passage. God is revealed and wishes to be recognized in the suffering, humility and shame of the cross. However, God is hidden in suffering. Hence, God is revealed by hiding, and only this revelation is sufficient and redemptive. Those who seek to know the invisible things of God, namely, God's glory majesty, wisdom and justice, through the wisdom of natural revelation are chastised as theologians of glory by Luther. They will never know God, at least not as Savior. On the other hand, those who focus on the incarnate Christ suffering the shame and humiliation of the cross are theologians of the cross and recognize the very nature and work of God in God's hidden revelation.

What kind of God is revealed by hiding on the cross as the Incarnate One? In Christ theologians of the cross see God as God wants to be seen, as a God who exercises power in weakness, whose glory is shame and humiliation, who brings life by means of death, whose suffering leads to resurrection, whose divine majesty is clothed in human flesh. It is no wonder that Luther maintains paradoxically that God is hidden in God's ultimate self-revelation. That is why faith is absolutely necessary. Only faith recognizes God in the crucified Christ. It is, however, only in the Christ that God chooses to be revealed. It is only through the Christ that God and God's will are known. Luther supports this assertion by noting Philip's request to Jesus in John 14:8: "Lord, show us

²¹ LW 31, 52-53, Explanation of Thesis 20.

the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” Jesus responds: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father;...” [John 14:9] Luther concludes, therefore: “For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ,...”²² In the Christ God is revealed by hiding, and in Christ God is revealed as the One who saves.

While Luther’s focus in the “Heidelberg Theses” is on the *Deus revelatus*, the Reformer presents a challenging, yet fascinating, depiction of the *Deus absconditus* in the *Bondage of the Will*. This lengthy and complex work is one of Luther’s most important and profound theological treatises which not only illustrates the boldness and dialectical creativity of his thought, but which also raises crucial questions regarding the theological consistency and validity of his biblical exegesis in this treatise. The radical nature of Luther’s understanding of the hidden God, the *Deus absconditus*, is surely evident in this work.

Luther warns that the theologian and believer must distinguish between the God preached, or revealed, and the God hidden, “that is, between the Word of God and God himself.”²³ The hidden God, or “God himself,” does many things and wills many things that are not revealed, even in Scripture.²⁴ Hence, God is hidden “behind and beyond Scripture.”²⁵ While he does not say so explicitly, the implication of Luther’s arguments is that the hidden will and the hidden deeds of God are not even apparent in and through God’s ultimate self-revelation, namely, Jesus Christ. While the Reformer also insists that human beings must leave this hidden, majestic God alone²⁶ and focus on the Word which witnesses the Incarnate Word, he ignores his own advice and explicates what the *Deus absconditus* wills and works. In doing so, Luther becomes a theologian of glory who seeks to look into the face of God rather than a theologian of the cross who focuses on God’s back and, hence, on the visible things of God. Thus Luther contradicts his own

²² LW 31, 53, Explanation of Thesis 20.

²³ LW 33, 140.

²⁴ LW 33, 140.

²⁵ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 277.

²⁶ LW 33, 139: “God must therefore be left to himself in his own majesty, for in this 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.” See also LW 33, 140.

theological method as he explores the hidden will of God and asserts boldly that God wills to reject many even as God wills that all sinners be saved in the revealed will. Luther essentially posits a doctrine of double predestination in the *Bondage of the Will* and maintains that the condemned suffer their fate in accordance with God's inscrutable will. Indeed, he affirms St. Augustine's assertion that God works both good and evil within people,²⁷ although he nuances that assertion later in the treatise and explains that God uses the evil that is already within a person to work evil by means of that individual.²⁸ In order to support his position regarding God's will to condemn, Luther cites scriptural evidence and points out that God hardened Pharaoh,²⁹ foreknew that Judas would betray Jesus³⁰ and loved Jacob but hated Esau.³¹ He also examines the passages from Isaiah 45 and Romans 9 regarding the potter and the clay.³² The Reformer stresses that this majestic, hidden will has no standards but itself³³ and that God is no more unjust when God condemns the undeserving than when God graciously rewards the undeserving.³⁴ The impact of St. Paul's discussion in Romans 9 is clearly evident as Luther seeks biblical warrant for the doctrine of double predestination. Thus Luther's chief theological mentors, Paul and Augustine, are obvious resources as he carries on his literary dialogue with his famous antagonist, Erasmus of Rotterdam.

While elucidating God's hidden will, Luther is also careful to dictate what the human response to the will and work of the *Deus absconditus* must be. Although he does not follow his own advice in the *Bondage of the Will*, he insists that since God is God and humans are creatures, they cannot probe into the mystery of God's hidden will,³⁵ nor dare they question or judge it.³⁶ Rather, they must "pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone,..."³⁷ God cannot be approached in God's majesty but only

²⁷ LW 33, 58.

²⁸ LW 33, 178.

²⁹ LW 33, 179.

³⁰ LW 33, 194-195.

³¹ LW 33, 195-202.

³² LW 33, 203-206.

³³ LW 33, 181: "He is God, and for his will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it, since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things. For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as a cause or reason, it could no longer be the will of God."

³⁴ LW 33, 207.

³⁵ LW 33, 188.

³⁶ LW 33, 61, 139, 290.

³⁷ LW 33, 140.

“insofar as he is clothed and set forth in his Word, . . .”³⁸ The hidden will of God can only be revered, feared and adored.³⁹ The ultimate human response to the hidden God as well as the revealed God is, therefore, faith. Thus, Luther maintains that it is the “highest degree of faith” to believe that God is merciful when God saves so few and damns so many.⁴⁰

As one considers the challenging nature and content of Luther’s notion of the *Deus absconditus*, the question arises why the Reformer found it necessary to articulate these ideas. A careful reading of the *Bondage of the Will* suggests the following answer. Methodologically, Luther obviously viewed the content of his argument as an effective and convincing response to the anthropological assertions of Erasmus. However, he also had important theological reasons for stressing the majestic and hidden God and the related doctrine of double predestination. For Luther, the doctrine of justification and, hence, the gospel were at stake in his debate with Erasmus. Therefore, he sought to reject the freedom of the will⁴¹ and to stress that humans are totally dependent on God for their spiritual destiny.⁴² He also wanted to emphasize the necessity of faith in matters of salvation and justification.⁴³ Perhaps most importantly, he eagerly defended the absolute freedom and non-contingency of God so that God is not only able to make promises but to keep them as well. After all, the eternal destiny of humanity depends on God’s freedom and power to save and justify.

How does this analysis of Luther’s notion of the hidden and revealed God address the assertion that there is no salvation outside the church; how does it shed light on the church’s calling to be Christ’s witnesses today; and what insights does it provide for addressing universalism and for relating to people of other religions? It is not surprising that in their own time and place Luther and most of his European contemporaries, whether they were supporters or opponents of the Reformation, agreed with the historic assertion that salvation is limited to the community of the faithful, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. This was neither a new nor a radical claim, and the church was

³⁸ LW 33, 139.

³⁹ LW 33, 139, 140, 188.

⁴⁰ LW 33, 62, 174.

⁴¹ LW 33, 64 and numerous other citations throughout the *Bondage of the Will*.

⁴² LW 33, 191.

⁴³ LW 33, 62.

convinced that it was called to witness Christ to the nations. The claim that the church is the realm of salvation had been made since the time of Cyprian, and at the beginning of the fourteenth century Pope Boniface VIII had even asserted that all human beings must be subject to the bishop of Rome in order to be saved.⁴⁴ Many of his contemporaries rejected Boniface's exalted vision of papal authority, but few extended salvation beyond the borders of the church. It is, of course, much more difficult to defend these traditional salvific boundaries in the contemporary, twenty-first century context when ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue are affirmed as ideals by many Christians and when absolute truth claims, a tendency toward exclusivity, or signs of religious imperialism are considered to be problematic or are rejected altogether by many within the church and surely within society in general.

Is it possible, then, to question and even reject these exclusive claims of Luther and of the broader Christian tradition without denying central affirmations of that tradition? At first glance, it surely appears that Luther's doctrine of justification and his dialectic of the hidden and revealed God unequivocally support the assertion that there is no salvation outside the church. However, if one nuances these doctrines carefully, especially the Reformer's notion of the *Deus absconditus*, and considers their varied implications, it is possible to challenge contemporary students and heirs of Luther to expand their theological and missiological perspectives.

It must be stressed, first of all, that evangelical theology clearly affirms the uniqueness of Christ as Savior and as God's ultimate and absolutely trustworthy self-revelation. Humanity's salvation is achieved and assured by Christ's redemptive work. Hence, it is impossible to embrace a radical universalistic position on the basis of Luther's and the Lutheran Confessions' theological insights.

Evangelical Lutheran theology also necessitates the joyful claim that there is salvation within the church. After all, the church is the sphere of the Holy Spirit's activity where the means of grace, the Word and the sacraments, are proclaimed and celebrated. It is precisely through those means that the Holy Spirit promises to create and nurture faith. Within the church forgiveness of sin is granted to all who trust God's promises. Although they remain sinners as well as saints, people of faith or members of the church are

⁴⁴ See Boniface VIII's bull "Unam Sanctam" from the year 1302.

renewed and made holy through the Word and the sacraments, their very nature is transformed, and they bring forth the fruits of faith with which they serve God and their neighbors. Their eternal destiny is assured by the gracious gifts that they receive freely for the sake of Christ. There is, therefore, salvation within the church.

Evangelical theology is, by definition, Christo-centric. In Christ God's will for humanity is revealed with certainty and clarity and through Christ God has accomplished God's saving acts. The gospel is, therefore, the good news of Jesus Christ and, thus, brings life and salvation. People of faith proclaim this gospel within the church because they are nurtured by that proclamation. They are also freed, inspired and commanded to proclaim it in the world with the conviction that God has saved all, that Christ is not only their Savior and Lord⁴⁵ but the Redeemer of all, and that the benefits of Christ's redemptive work are intended for all.

A Christo-centric, evangelical perspective therefore insists that the will of the *Deus revelatus*, the God revealed in Christ, is to save the whole creation. That will has not been abrogated or superseded. It is also important to add that God is not limited by God's revelation, as Luther asserts so strikingly in the *Bondage of the Will*. God is, after all, also *Deus absconditus* whose majestic will is hidden beyond revelation. While the Reformer could not resist the temptation to explicate God's hidden will in his diatribe against the *Diatribes* of Erasmus, it is more consistent with his theology, particularly with his theology of the cross and his Christology, to leave the hidden will of God alone and to approach God as the God who is clothed in the Word, specifically in the Word Incarnate. When one does this, one sees God's back,⁴⁶ not God's face, and meets God as Savior. Hence, God's hidden will remains hidden, even in Christ, although God's will revealed in Christ is trustworthy. It is also consistent with Luther's theology to distinguish but never to separate the *Deus revelatus* and the *Deus absconditus*. Luther is not a dualistic but a paradoxical theologian. Therefore, it is theologically defensible to assume that the hidden will of God does not contradict the revealed will. It is also necessary to leave God's hidden will alone, with the faithful assumption that humans will not know this will

⁴⁵ Luther defines "Lord" as "Redeemer" in his explanation of the second article of the Creed in the Large Catechism. See, *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, The Creed, II, 434, 27.

⁴⁶ See LW 31, 52, "Heidelberg Theses", Explanation of Thesis 20. See also Exodus 33:18-23 which informs Luther's theological insights.

until they are enlightened by God with what Luther calls the “light of glory.”⁴⁷ In the meantime, they trust that the revealed will sheds light on the hidden will.

The following consequences can be drawn when one assumes such a theological stance. First, believers, particularly evangelical theologians, will resist the temptation to describe what God’s hidden will is. Rather, they will humbly and necessarily accept the reality that God chooses not to reveal God’s face, only God’s back, and that much about God remains hidden beyond revelation. They will, therefore, let God be God, both when God is revealed and when God chooses to remain hidden. Secondly, people of faith will approach the hidden God as they do the revealed God, namely, in and through Christ and with the Christological assurance that it is God’s will to save. Thirdly, on the basis of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as well as the dialectic of the hidden and revealed God they will confess that God alone can and does save and that God does so in and through the Christ. With such a perspective evangelical Lutheran Christians, who strive to be theologians of the cross, will proclaim Christ, even as they avoid speculating about the fate of those who have not yet come to faith and who do not confess Christ. Because they focus on the God revealed in Jesus Christ but also recognize that this revealed God remains hidden as well, they need not assert the condemnation of such people. They need not insist that there is no salvation outside the church. Rather, knowing that only God saves and confessing that they cannot and dare not delve into God’s hidden will, they leave the fate of those who are not members of the church in God’s hands. They do so with the assurance that in Christ God has saved all and with the expectation that God intends to bless all with the benefits of Christ’s redemptive acts. That expectation is warranted because the hidden God is none other than the revealed God, and people of faith consider God’s hidden will in light of God’s revealed will.⁴⁸ Hence, they must be open to the possibility that the hidden God has done and will continue to do surprising things for the sake of God’s creation. There is, after all, much that God has chosen not to reveal even in the Word.⁴⁹ If part of the hidden will of God is

⁴⁷ LW 33, 292.

⁴⁸ A practical manifestation of this perspective is the church’s stance regarding the fate of infants who have not received emergency baptism.

⁴⁹ The authors of the “Formula of Concord” also caution evangelical Christians to leave God’s hidden will alone and to find comfort and assurance in God’s revealed will. Yet, they assume that some will be saved and some will be condemned, although they reject the doctrine of double predestination. See, for example,

to justify people in ways of which believers are not aware, that is God's prerogative. As Luther argues so consistently, the person of faith is called to believe and to confess that God's actions are just, no matter what God does, because God is just. God's promises in Jesus the Christ, witnessed by the prophets, apostles and believers throughout the ages, are not abrogated, even if God has another way of justifying, of granting the gifts of Christ's redemptive work, to people. God has kept God's promises in the past and continues to keep them. The church is a visible manifestation of that fact. Thus, God's revealed will is trustworthy, and God's self-revelation in Christ is sure. God's hidden will, no matter what it is, will not contradict God's revealed will. Christ is the believer's assurance of that fact and so is the believer's faith.

While Christians do not have to insist that there is no salvation outside the church since the eternal fate of all is in God's hands, it is crucial to note as well that people of faith who affirm the gospel and the dialectic of the *Deus revelatus* and the *Deus absconditus* cannot become universalists. They cannot claim with certainty that there is salvation outside the church, even as they need not assert that there is no salvation outside the church. To do either would make them theologians of glory rather than theologians of the cross. It would make them theologians who insist that they have looked into the face of God and that God's hidden will has been revealed to them. It would make them theologians who were not satisfied with seeing God's back, with seeing God revealed in the crucified and risen Christ. People who do not want to be theologians of glory but who desire to be theologians of the cross are called to proclaim Christ joyfully and humbly, with the assurance that it is God's will to save and that God creates and nurtures faith through that proclamation. They are called to witness Christ because they are assured that He is Savior and that the Holy Spirit creates faith in and through the proclamation of Christ, through the gospel. People of faith are certain of this. This is the gift that they have received, not to hoard, but to share, and so they point people to Christ, faithfully, humbly and with the confidence that He is God's ultimate gift to humanity and the whole creation. The rest must be left in God's hands because God alone saves, justifies and converts. Humans, even believers, cannot determine their own fate or the fate of others.

Book of Concord, Epitome, XI, 517,1-520,22; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, XI, 643,13-645,29, 649,52-651,68.

That is God's prerogative. The revealed God assures believers that God is Savior. The hidden God prevents them from limiting God's freedom or possibilities, especially in matters of salvation. Their concern and their calling are to be God's instruments of grace in the world, and they are assured that they are precisely that when they are Christ's witnesses. Thus people of faith joyfully confess that there is salvation in the church, even as they resist the temptation to insist that there is no salvation outside the church. The recognition that God is both revealed and hidden inspires and frees them to do so.

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