

MARTIN LUTHER'S HERMENEUTIC AS THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:  
PRE-MODERN LUTHER FOR POST-MODERN TIMES

By

Barry Grant Rasmussen

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Religion  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

March, 1999.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA  
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
\*\*\*\*\*  
COPYRIGHT PERMISSION PAGE

MARTIN LUTHER'S HERMENEUTIC AS THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:  
PRE-MODERN LUTHER FOR POST-MODERN TIMES

A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

Barry Grant Rasmussen ©1999

Permission has been granted to the Library of The University of Manitoba to lend or sell copies of this thesis/practicum, to the National Library of Canada to microfilm this thesis and to lend or sell copies of the film, and to Dissertations Abstracts International to publish an abstract of this thesis/practicum.

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither this thesis/practicum nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.



National Library  
of Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Acquisitions et  
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file Votre référence*

*Our file Notre référence*

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-41622-4

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>Preface</b> .....  | iii |
| <b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....  | vi  |
| <b>Glossary</b> .....   | vii |
| <b>Introduction</b>   |     |
| A Description of Luther's Hermeneutic .....                                   | 1   |
| Other Interpreters of Luther .....  | 25  |
| Thesis and Organization .....   | 35  |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Chapter 1: Law and Gospel</b> .....  | 50  |
| The Distinction between Law and Gospel as Hermeneutic .....                   | 51  |
| The Gospel-Word, Jesus Christ, is a Word of Promise from God .....            | 55  |
| The Goal of Both Law and Gospel .....   | 62  |
| The <i>Sitz im Leben</i> of the One Addressed .....                           | 72  |
| The "Law" "Kills" .....   | 75  |
| Law and Gospel Work Together .....  | 84  |
| The "Happy Exchange" .....  | 91  |
| Scripture Applied to Life: Proclamation .....                                 | 101 |
| Conclusion .....  | 107 |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Chapter 2: Justification by Faith</b> .....                                | 111 |
| The Beginning of Luther's New Hermeneutic .....                               | 111 |
| "Righteousness" .....   | 115 |
| Alien Righteousness .....   | 127 |
| The External Word: Given by God for Us .....                                  | 137 |
| Christ is Signifier and Signified .....                                       | 153 |
| Subject and Object .....  | 161 |
| Certainty of Salvation .....  | 166 |
| Conclusion .....  | 175 |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Chapter 3: The Bondage of the Will</b>                                     |     |
| Introduction .....  | 180 |
| Relationship between the Bondage of the Will and Justification by Faith ..... | 181 |
| God's Word is not a Past <i>Logos</i> .....                                   | 191 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Liberum arbitrium</i> Belongs to God Alone .....                                    | 199 |
| Raptured .....   | 203 |
| Freedom .....  | 211 |
| <i>Deus revelatus</i> and <i>Deus absconditus</i> .....                                | 221 |
| Conclusion .....   | 239 |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>Chapter 4: The Sacraments</b>   |     |
| Introduction .....   | 243 |
| The Direction of Communication .....   | 247 |
| The Ubiquity of God and the Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper .....              | 255 |
| Christology .....  | 277 |
| Present Proclamation and the Work of the Holy Spirit .....                             | 289 |
| Conclusion .....   | 297 |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>Chapter 5: The Experience of <i>Anfechtungen</i></b>                                |     |
| Introduction .....   | 304 |
| The Promises of Satan in the Experience of <i>Anfechtungen</i> .....                   | 305 |
| Experience: The Basis for Speculation or the Material of God's Creative Activity ..... | 311 |
| The Example of the Saints .....  | 320 |
| Salvation and Righteousness are One .....  | 325 |
| The Incarnation and Providence .....   | 332 |
| Conclusion .....   | 354 |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>Chapter 6: The Church</b>   |     |
| Introduction .....   | 358 |
| Adam is God's First Proclaimer .....   | 359 |
| God Speaks .....   | 383 |
| The Body of Christ .....   | 399 |
| Conclusion .....   | 415 |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>Chapter 7: The Other</b>  |     |
| Introduction .....   | 418 |
| The Creation of Faith .....  | 421 |
| An Eschatological Ethic .....  | 433 |
| The Love of God: God's Death <i>pro nobis</i> .....                                    | 449 |
| The Social Order and Change .....  | 459 |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>Conclusion</b> .....  | 467 |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>Selected Bibliography</b> .....   | 474 |

## **Preface**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank a number of people for their help in this project. First and foremost, I would like to thank my wife Karen Rasmussen. She has been a wonderful and patient support in the many hours that this thesis represents. She helped motivate me when the work was difficult and celebrated with me when it was going well. I would also like to thank my children, Amy and Michelle. It is not easy to be the children of a clergy-person and having this extra burden to deal with takes patience and maturity on their part. It is a great pleasure for me to watch them grow into fine young women. It is impossible to adequately express my gratitude to my family for their love and support.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my extended family for their interest and encouragement. My father has shown, by example, what it is to have a questioning intelligence and a healthy suspicion of authority. He has also been an example of patience which I have tried to emulate as I worked toward the completion of this project. My mother has been an example of admirable determination which never gives up. Most of all, I am grateful for their caring and for the proclamation of the Gospel which enabled me to trust God's promises. I would also like to thank my two sisters, Debbie and Deana, for their friendship and loyalty. Finally, I would also like to thank my in-laws for all their interest and encouragement. Thanks to Vernon and Arlyn Cooke, Sheryl and Murray Lengyel, and Collen and Martin Kuilman.

I am also very grateful to two of my colleagues. Pastor Ingthor Isfeld was particularly helpful in the early process of this work. He happily lent me many books and journal articles.

Besides often talking to me about theology, he also helped me with my early struggles to learn German. I would also like to express my deep appreciation for Pastor Thomas Lurvey. He has supported me in friendship and has provided a balance in my life by taking me out to play golf, bridge and racquetball. Our conversations on theology and pastoral work have been helpful in many ways.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the churches I have served as pastor. Many thanks of support and encouragement to the people at my previous congregation at First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg and to the people in the Rockwood Lutheran Parish at Teulon and Inwood. I am also grateful to the many university students who came to talk to me in my position as chaplain at University of Winnipeg. The concerns of all those people helped shape this thesis.

I am most grateful to my beloved Doctor Father, Professor Egil Grislis. He is a caring man of considerable learning and wisdom. His love of history and theology is infectious. By example, he has taught how learning about the theological struggles of past generations have relevance for the issues of our present generations. Dr. Egil Grislis has given a perspective that is passionate and, at the same time, graciously avoids extremes. On a more personal note, I am deeply indebted to him for his many kindnesses to me and my family. He has been constantly aware of my worries about my extended family. He also supported me by having a remarkable ability to know when I needed encouragement and when I needed to be challenged.

I am also deeply grateful to the teaching of Dr. Dawne McCance. Her course on Western Hermeneutics challenged my thinking at the assumption level. She introduced to me the writings of many of the contemporary major thinkers on questions of interpretation, communication and community. This present thesis reflects a number of the issues that she raised while examining

modern hermeneutical theory. I am also indebted to Dr. Aubrey Neal. He has always warmly welcomed me into his office and we have had several long conversations about hermeneutical issues. He has given me a heightened sense of the stakes involved with hermeneutical issues. Language and method can hide human actions and intentions with demonic results.

## Abbreviations

|      |   |
|------|---|
| CR   | Corpus Reformatorum   |
| LW   | Luther's Works  |
| WA   | D. M. Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. (Weimar, 1883-) |
| WABr | D. M. Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel.   |
| WADB | D. M. Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Deutsche Bibel. |
| WATr | D. M. Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Tischreden.     |

## Glossary

The use of technical terms and concepts in a study of this type is necessary for the sake of the precision of analysis. The terms and concepts defined below have also been explained in the text of the study at least once. In the text, I have often explained the use of these concepts as they apply directly to whatever subject is under investigation.

**Alien righteousness (*iustitia Christi aliena*):** This refers to the righteousness possessed of and gifted by Christ. Salvation occurs because someone other than the believer is righteous. Righteousness is not a possession or attribute that can be presented before God. Nevertheless, since Christ is present to the believer in faith, Christ's righteousness becomes the righteousness of the believer. [See glossary on *Happy Exchange*]

**Alien work:** This refers to God's work of wrath. This "alien work" is done before God's "proper work." Thus, God makes alive by killing, brings heaven by going through hell, and gives mercy from wrath.

**Anfechtungen:** Since God gives the Gospel-promises under a form which is opposite to experience, faith in God engenders its own experiences of intense trial and temptation. Luther calls these experiences *Anfechtungen*. This experience is a necessary corollary to faith.

**Communicatio idiomatum:** A doctrine derived from the Council of Chalcedon, to help explain how Jesus Christ could be human and divine at the same time. While affirming that Jesus is both human and divine it denies that one can say that one action of Jesus is human while another action of Christ is divine. Luther applies this doctrine so that it refers to the relationship between Jesus Christ and the believer. He also employs it to refer to the relationships that exist within the **Body of Christ**, the Church.

**Coram Deo (presence before God):** Luther continually wrote that all theological talk should be made with the awareness of being in the presence of God. It changes the nature of conversation that takes place in the political realm, where concepts and issues are examined *coram hominibus*. In the face of God, the issue is faith or sin. In the presence of one's neighbours, the issue is sinning or not sinning.

**Coram hominibus (presence before our neighbours):** This refers to a way of living which

makes the favour of one's neighbours paramount. One gains identity and salvation through one's interaction with the projects and agendas of one's neighbours.

**Curved into oneself (*incurvatum in se*):** This is a concept that Luther borrowed from St. Augustine to describe the human condition. It refers to a self-centredness that is not aware of its own sin and which attempts to be the author of its own salvation. It is a universal human condition which only God can change from the "outside."

***Deus absconditus (God hidden):*** This is an important concept that Luther wrote about in various ways. It communicates the idea that God is not available to human seeking or speculation. For Luther, this is not because of human limitations but is the result of God's active hiding. This hiding occurs in revelation. (See glossary on *sub contrario*) The distinction between the *Deus absconditus* and the *Deus revelatus* was a scholastic distinction which primarily functioned to theologically guarantee divine freedom.

***Deus praedicatus (Deus revelatus):*** This is the God encountered in the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the God who becomes present in the "Word" which is "Gospel."

**External Word (*extra nos*) (alien):** That the Word is external or "outside of us" is a corollary of the view that the human problem is being hopelessly self-centred. Salvation has to come from outside of us. It implies a criticism of maieutic learning which understands the Word acting as a midwife for those truths which are within us.

***Facere quod in se est:*** "Doing what is in one." In Nominalist soteriology, this concept was an important element of the distinction between the *potentia Dei ordinata* and *absoluta*. (See glossary) Since God is free, security before God was sought through the doctrine that God had graciously "ordained" to grant grace to those who had done all that was in one. This made the standards of God self-referential and recognized that there were differences in human abilities and temperments.

**Gospel:** Quoting Luther: "For gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) is a Greek word and means in Greek a good message, good tidings, a good report, which one sings and tells with gladness." In this news, the dead Christ has bequeathed to all believers his righteousness, salvation, and life. [Preface to the New Testament (1546)]

**Happy Exchange (*feliciter commutans*):** This is a concept that can be traced back to St. Augustine. On the cross, Jesus Christ takes human sin and God-forsakenness and exchanges it "for us" with his life, righteousness and salvation.

**Kills (mortifies):** Luther is convinced that the Word of God must first "kill" the self-centred human being before a new redeemed person can be created. Luther calls this an eternal death which must be distinguished from physical death. This eternal death is the end of all attempts to be

a god who creates and redeems the self.

**Law:** Luther used more than one concept concerning God's Law. Unless otherwise indicated, references to the "Law" in this work will refer to Luther's *theological use* of the "Law." The *theological use* of the Law tells human beings what to do and makes life into a task. For Luther, this is an expression of God's wrath which functions to bring to nothing all of humanity's projects for redemption. The "Law" must not be confused with the "Gospel" which makes life a gift.

***Potentia Dei absoluta:*** The distinction between the *potentia Dei ordinata* and the *potentia Dei absoluta* was a scholastic distinction associated with the distinction between the *Deus absconditus* and the *Deus revelatus*. The distinction between the *potentia Dei ordinata* and the *potentia Dei absoluta* was made so that God would not ultimately be put into debt to those who had met the requirements that God had ordained to be necessary for the reception of saving grace. The *potentia Dei absoluta* was the power by which God is absolutely free from debt to humanity.

***Potentia Dei ordinata:*** The distinction between the *potentia Dei ordinata* and the *potentia Dei absoluta* was a scholastic distinction associated with the distinction between the *Deus absconditus* and the *Deus revelatus*. The distinction between the *potentia Dei ordinata* and the *potentia Dei absoluta* was made so that God would not ultimately be put into debt to those who had met the requirements that God had ordained to be necessary for the reception of saving grace. The *potentia Dei ordinata* is the power by which God has graciously entered a covenant with humanity.

***Pro nobis:*** This Latin phrase was used by Luther to communicate that the "Word" is spoken to particular people at particular times. Such a concept should be contrasted with a "Word" which is passively available for insightful human searching. That the "Word" is spoke *pro nobis* theologically ensures that God is the active party in salvation and gives the Christian message an existential focus.

**Proclamation:** This is the actual speaking of the "Gospel" which brings faith, grace and Christ.

**Proper work:** This refers to God's works of love and mercy. This proper work of life and salvation occurs only after God has performed an "alien work."

***Quadrigo:*** In medieval exegesis, it was commonly agreed that there were four senses to Scripture. There was the **literal** sense, which is what the text literally said. There was the **tropological** sense, which was the moral sense of the text. Scripture could also be interpreted **allegorically**, where the literal sense was understood to be referring to another meaning. Finally, the **anagogical** sense was where certain passages were interpreted to indicate the grounds for Christian hope.

***res significans (signa) and res significata (res):*** This is an Alexandrian distinction, whereby the *res significans* refers to the signifier and the *res significata* is that which is signified.

***Sola fide (gratia) (Christus) (scriptura)***: Paradoxically, Luther writes about several “*solas*”. Salvation is by grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone and Scripture alone. The reason Luther can say this is that grace, faith, and Scripture cannot be separated from Christ.

***sub contrario***: Literally, this means “under the opposite.” Luther used this phrase to communicate the idea that God reveals the elements of faith “under the opposite.” God is revealed in a human being who dies on the cross. Life, mercy and love are revealed through death, guilt and sin.

**Theology of the cross (theologian of the cross) (cross)**: This is a theology that begins with an awareness that God has attacked sin by being put to death on the cross. This is contrary to expectations. That eternal life is the result of such a death is contrary to experience.

**Theology of glory (theologian of glory) (glory)**: This is a theology which extrapolates an image of God from human experience. Cain is a theologian of glory. From his intuition that God should be worshipped, he deduces that God will judge him favourably after his sacrifice. Cain images God as a righteous judge. The search for **glory** is identified by Luther as a self-seeking venture.

**Word**: Luther uses “Word” in a particular manner. It has an incarnational sense and refers to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God’s communication to humanity.

**Wrath**: From the perspective of faith, God’s wrath can be equated with the *theological use* of the “Law.” [See glossary] It destroys all attempts to be god and allows God to create a redeemed believer through the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

## INTRODUCTION

A Description of Luther's Hermeneutic<sup>1</sup>

This thesis will examine Martin Luther's hermeneutic by focusing on how it relates to his theology. As such, this thesis will explore the relationship between doctrine and experience in Luther's writings. It will attempt to do this by exploring selected key theological concepts. Each concept, which has the status of doctrine for Luther, will demarcate the chapter boundaries. The first chapter will examine Luther's distinction between "Law" and "Gospel". The following chapters, in turn, will analyze: Luther's doctrine of justification by faith; his understanding of the human

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Hagen continuously reminds his readers that Luther lived many years before Schleiermacher. See, especially: Kenneth Hagen, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1974). Hagen does this in order to alert us to the fact that much of modern scholarship has taken up Schleiermacher's project of constructing a general hermeneutic. This project addresses the phenomenon of understanding itself and includes a focus on the nature of language and the nature of the mind of the author. (See: Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift, *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 13.) Hagen claims that it is a mistake to assume that Luther's hermeneutic is also engaged in the same project and to avoid confusion, even suggests that the word "hermeneutic" should not be used in Luther scholarship. Luther is primarily concerned with soteriology. Nevertheless, this thesis, which is engaged in a discussion of Luther's relevance to modern theology, will use the concept "hermeneutic" to help describe the encounter between God in Christ Jesus and humanity. In the course of the work, this will be identified as a hermeneutic of proclamation and will be contrasted with what will be identified as hermeneutics of signification. See page 4, note 7.

will versus the will of God; his doctrine concerning the Sacraments; the experience of *Anfechtungen*; his doctrine concerning the Christian Church; and his perception of believers' relationships with others. Before turning our attention to the relationship between his hermeneutic and his theology, we will briefly describe Luther's hermeneutic in general terms.

Luther's hermeneutic does not start with the desire to construct a general theory of understanding so as to create an archeology which "digs" behind the *involucrum*<sup>2</sup> of God. The "coverings" or "wraps" of God are placed between God and humanity by God. For Luther, they are fixed there in order to serve the proclamation of the "Gospel" of Jesus Christ. Thus, an archeology which attempts to "unearth" human understanding from and for communication will not, in the process, unmask God. Rather, God has actively chosen to be present to humanity in Christ Jesus.

Any correspondence between human cognition and God cannot be used as a method to construct new towers of Babel.<sup>3</sup> According to

---

<sup>2</sup> The Latin word "*involucrum*" can be translated variously as "veils," "wraps," and "coverings." The operative idea is that God is being covered from the view of prying eyes. Sometimes, in Luther's cruder moments, he also calls the visible *involucrum* of God the *posteriora*, or the back or hind parts of God. According to Gerhard O. Forde, such language is purposely offensive in order to give a clear message to all who would reach up to see God on their own accord. See: Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p.78.

<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine, using the Scripture that states that humanity was created in the image of God, sought analogies between the life of human beings and the life of God. In his *de Trinitate*, he illustrates the unity of the Trinity through the following analogies from human experience: the

Jüngel, all theological talk is metaphorical in nature.<sup>4</sup> Inasmuch as such a statement communicates that one cannot get behind the *involucrum* of God, it follows Luther's hermeneutical concern. Such a statement also continues the tradition exhibited in St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas where the metaphorical nature of speech

---

unity of thinking, speaking and willing; the lover, the beloved and the love between them; memory, intelligence and will; mind, knowledge and love; or being, knowing and willing. According to Henry Chadwick, St. Augustine was in the habit of warning his congregation against the dangers of being too anthropomorphic when applying some analogy from the realm of human life to God. (See: Henry Chadwick, "Augustine" in *Founders of Thought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.273.) However, this is not a great danger in St. Augustine's use of analogy. For instance, the variety of human images used above speaks against any easy identification between God and the images of God in human life. St. Thomas of Aquinas continued this tradition with his use of the *analogia entis*. In his *Summa Theologiae*, he argues that since every effect which is less than its cause cannot represent it adequately, it is impossible to predicate anything univocally of God and creatures. God's wisdom is different than human wisdom. At the same time, St. Thomas disagrees with those who say that the word "wise" is used equivocally since then "we could never argue from statements about creatures to statements about God". Analogy is used as something which is neither univocation nor equivocation. Nevertheless, St. Thomas' use of analogy functions to illustrate the distance between God and humanity and therefore curtails all speculation concerning the relationship between what can be known about creatures and what can be known about God. This is shown in that St. Thomas goes on to state that words such as "wise" or "good" are used primarily of God and only derivatively of creatures. Yet, we only know about wisdom or goodness from God's creatures. See: St. Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q.13, aa.5-6. {*The "Summa Theologiae" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 1, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, Ltd., 1920), pp.158ff.} Luther continues this tradition in as much as its purpose is to curtail human speculation about God through language. What is new here is that, for Luther, it is not a question of creaturely limitations but is a question of God actively hiding.

<sup>4</sup> See: Eberhard Jüngel, "Metaphorische Wahrheit: Erwägungen zur theologischen Relevanz der Metapher als Beitrag zur Hermeneutik einer narrativen Theologie" in *Entsprechungen: Gott-Wahrheit-Mensch*, (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1980), p.110. Jüngel writes: "Theologische Sprachlehre hat zudem aufgrund der Notwendigkeit, daß die Ausdrücke unserer Sprache zur Bezeichnung theologischer Sachverhalte oft genug eine neue Bedeutung annehmen müssen, der metaphorischen Rede eine dogmatisch grundlegende und deshalb hermeneutisch entscheidende Funktion zuzuerkennen, die mit dem Verständnis der Metapher als einer bloß rhetorischen Figur nicht zusammenstimmt."

about God primarily serves to show the limits of language.<sup>5</sup> However, according to Luther's hermeneutic, if used as a starting point of some project to get behind the "masks" of God, such an overestimation of the scope and power of metaphorical language must be deemed a tool of a "theology of glory."<sup>6</sup> No coherence between the nature of language and the nature of the revealing God can be made in Luther's hermeneutic.<sup>7</sup> God "hides" so that God can become present in the proclamation of the "Gospel."<sup>8</sup> In Christ, God is presented to a humanity hopelessly "curved into itself."<sup>9</sup>

Luther's hermeneutic does not receive its power from examining

---

<sup>5</sup> See footnote #3 above.

<sup>6</sup> The "theology of glory" is a technical phrase which was used in opposition to a "theology of the cross." Although Luther seldom used these phrases, the "theology of the cross" (*theologia crucis*) is paradigmatic for Luther's entire theology. The earliest and clearest explicit expression of this distinction was spoken at Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. A "theology of glory calls the bad good and the good bad, while a theology of the cross calls a thing what it is." (WA 1,362,20ff. A theologian of glory attempts to do what is in him or her (*ut faciet quod in se est*) in order to reach "glory." (WA 1, 373,12ff.) This includes the use of metaphorical language. The theologian of the cross: "*Sed quiabilia et posteriora Dei per passiones et crucem conspecta intelligit.*" (WA 1,362,2-3)

<sup>7</sup> Richard Palmer notes that the construction of modern hermeneutical models have indirectly and essentially become debates on the nature and scope of hermeneutics itself. Luther's hermeneutic and its relationship with the nature of language, revelation and communication indirectly contribute to this modern debate even in its pre-modernity. See Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p.67.

<sup>8</sup> "Gospel" in Luther's hermeneutic has a precise meaning which has broad ramifications. It refers to the presence of Christ in the Word. This Word is a promise of mercy and must be distinguished from a word of "Law."

<sup>9</sup> Luther's hermeneutic is intimately tied to his anthropology. The root of all sin and the human problem that God is rescuing us from is that human beings are *incurvatum in se*. See glossary.

the limit, nature and function of metaphorical speech about God. The limited place metaphor has in his overall hermeneutic can be seen in the careful way he places boundaries around the use of allegory, even when it is found in Scripture.<sup>10</sup> After noting that St. Paul uses allegory in his letter to the Galatians, Luther teaches in his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1535):

Allegories do not provide solid proofs in theology; but, like pictures, they adorn and illustrate a subject. For if Paul had not proved the righteousness of faith against the righteousness of works by more substantial arguments, he would not have accomplished anything with this allegory.<sup>11</sup>

In his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1519), Luther states that it was only

---

<sup>10</sup> In medieval hermeneutics of the Bible, allegory was the most common form of metaphorical speech. According to Henri de Lubac, the medieval Church believed that the mysteries of Christ and the Sacraments of the Church had to be communicated through allegory. Lubac writes: "Pierre de Poitiers reprend avec une légère variante la définition de Bède, que vingt autres lui ont transmise: «Allegoria est, cum verbis sive rebus mysticis occulta Christi et Ecclesiae sacramenta significantur»" After giving several other quotations from a variety of sources, Lubac continues: "Il est inutile de multiplier les citations. En revanche, il importe d'observer quelques particularités de langage, afin d'éviter de fausses pistes..... Seulement ces deux séries sont dans le plus étroit entrelacement; car ainsi que le disait saint Paul, le Christ et l'Église ne sont qu'un seul grand mystère: c'est le mystère de leur union. Or en cela réside tout le mystère de l'Écriture, tout l'objet de l'*allegoria*." Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'écriture*, Tome II, (Aubier: Éditions Mouton, 1959), pp. 501-502.

<sup>11</sup> WA 40 I, 657,13-16; LW 26,435-436: "Allegoriae non pariunt firmas probationes in Theologia, sed velut picturae ornant et illustrant rem. Nam si iustitiam fidei contra iustitiam operum fortioribus argumentis Paulus non probasset, nihil efficeret hac Allegoria." Luther's campaign against allegorical interpretations appealed to the authority of St. Augustine who formulated the principle that allegorical interpretations could not be used to prove anything in doctrine or church practice. For example, Luther criticized the allegorical interpretation of Luke 17:11-19 that was used to support Medieval practices of auricular confession (leprosy = sin and "go tell the priest" = confession). cf. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532*, tr. James L. Schaaf, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 20.

because the Galatians were already believers that they could be instructed with allegory.<sup>12</sup> Within these limits, allegory can be used to teach "in a beautiful way that the church should not do anything but preach the "Gospel" correctly and purely and thus give birth to children."<sup>13</sup> For Luther, it is God's speaking in the "Gospel" which gives birth to children of God. This should not be confused with a power inherent in metaphorical speech.

In a study which concludes that the future of the Christian community may humanly depend on "the retrieval of premodern hermeneutics in a form suitable to our postcritical age,"<sup>14</sup> George A. Lindbeck describes these hermeneutics as being centred on practice rather than theory:

Premodern Christians for the most part practiced scriptural interpretation rather than discussed it, but when they did turn to method, their approach was on the whole what we have indicated: descriptive rather than prescriptive.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> WA 2,550,8: "Quia Galatae fideles erant, allegoricis doctrinis erudiri potuerunt." See also: Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1942), pp. 50ff. The question of when Luther changed from his medieval understanding of allegory to the one described briefly here is one that Ebeling raised in this landmark work. These questions have generated a great deal of scholarly discussion in the last few years. For a description of that debate, see: Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), p. 14n53.

<sup>13</sup> WA 40 I, 664,27-28; LW 26,441: "Pulchre ergo ista Allegoria docet, quod Ecclesia nihil facere debeat quam recte et pure docere Evangelium atque ita generare liberos."

<sup>14</sup> George A. Lindbeck, "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment" *Pro Ecclesia* 5 n2 (1996) 144-160, p. 160.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

Lindbeck continues by stating that the modern mistake of giving priority of method over practice has caused disparate communities to arise over doctrines of inspiration and revelation.<sup>16</sup> Thus, according to Lindbeck, not only does there continue to exist the struggle between conservatives and liberals but "in our day, structuralist, Marxist, Freudian, and deconstructionist critical theories have been added to the agenda."<sup>17</sup>

Luther practiced a pre-modern hermeneutic.<sup>18</sup> His hermeneutic is not an attempt to construct a theory for explaining how words, events, and others are understood. Rather, it begins and ends with the encounter between God and human beings that occurs in the proclamation of the "Gospel" of Jesus Christ. Luther's hermeneutic is, in this way, descriptive. It describes what takes place in that proclamation. Such an encounter creates faith or the fear of the Lord which, according to Scripture, is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom.<sup>19</sup> The background for Luther's hermeneutic is such faith. Faith arises from hearing the Word which, for Luther, is an encounter with Christ. To listen to Christ who speaks in Scripture,

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Luther was a medieval Christian in the questions he asked. See: Otto Pesch, "Die Frage nach Gott bei Thomas von Aquin und Martin Luther," *Luther* 41 (1970) 1-25.

<sup>19</sup> See Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." All Scripture passages are taken from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise stated.

"you must hear Him and not master Him or prescribe method, goal, or measure to Him."<sup>20</sup>

The wisdom and faith resulting from hearing God's Word must be distinguished from understanding. In his early lectures on the Psalms, Luther even goes so far to assert that "faith does not illuminate the understanding but rather blinds it, [illuminating] the disposition (*affectum*)."<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the wisdom which results from God's Word must also be differentiated from whatever understanding and wisdom that arises from human language. Luther continues: "not so the word of the letter and of human wisdom, which empties faith, because it makes faith understand what it says and because it shows itself to be a lamp to the eyes."<sup>22</sup> Living by the promises of God<sup>23</sup> is not to live by the light of understanding, but is like walking on an unknown dark path at night led by somebody's voice.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> WA 33,364,11-13; LW 23,230: "in solt ir hören und nicht meistern, im nicht weise, zeil oder mass geben."

<sup>21</sup> (Translation mine.) WA 4,356,23-24: "Sic enim fides non intellectum illuminat, immo execat, sed affectum." Luther continues by saying that the heart hears the Word and follows it to salvation without knowing where the Word might be leading: "hunc enim ducit quo salvetur, et hoc per auditum verbi. Audiens enim affectus verbum incipit ire post ipsum nesciens quo." WA 4,356,24-26.

<sup>22</sup> WA 4,356,27-28; LW 11,486: "Non sic verbum litere et humane sapientie, quod evacuat fidem, quia comprehendere facit quod dicit et lucernam oculis sese ostentat."

<sup>23</sup> "Gospel" refers to the promises of God for Luther.

<sup>24</sup> WA 4,356,19ff.

Yet, at the same time, Luther often claims that those who do not have faith in the promises and mercy of God lack understanding. Luther charges these people with reading Scripture with a veil (*velo*) before their eyes:

Therefore they are unable to come to a proper judgement about anything, neither about sin nor about holiness.<sup>25</sup>

So, then, Luther paradoxically asserts that faith blinds understanding and, at the same time, that those who do not have faith lack understanding. For Luther, the relationship between faith and understanding is asymmetrical. This is caused by God's active hiding from human understanding in order to create faith. Understanding comes from looking at events of the past and present. This increase in knowledge might be helpful for actions and decisions taken in the present and the future. The examination of causes, effects, and consequences, however, place such understanding in the realm of the "Law". The "Law" has an if-then structure which both accuses the one addressed and guides future action.<sup>26</sup> According to Luther, attempts to find or "see" God behind "Law" will be met with one of the "masks" or "veils" of God.

One of these "masks" will be worshipped as a god and a pattern

---

<sup>25</sup> WA 40 II,97,15-16; LW 27,77: "Ideo, ut de nulla prorsus re, ita neque de peccato neque de sanctitate recte iudicare possunt."

<sup>26</sup> Luther has more than "use" of the "Law." The "theological use" is primary for Luther where God accuses the sinner. However, Luther also talks about a "civil use" of the "Law," keeps order in society by punishing evil-doers. Although subject to debate, there is some evidence that Luther has a "third use" of the "Law" which is given to believers to help guide them in their actions toward others. See page 55, footnote 141 above. See, also, page 56, footnote 145.

of "righteousness" and "salvation" will reflect the precepts of this god. According to Luther, the judgement of God is to give humanity up to the "righteousness" and "salvation" of these strange gods who punish.<sup>27</sup> The "righteousness" and "salvation" arising from the "masks" of God will also be coherent with the evidence produced by the world:

The consciousness that God is angry and that He is an irate Judge of sin is innate in the human heart. His wrath is evident in the world; we see Him punishing one here, another there. In such circumstances it is impossible for man to be happy. He is in constant fear that God is standing behind him, cudgel in hand, ready to strike him down.<sup>28</sup>

This understanding is ultimately self-serving. It is constantly concerned about "God's" judgement on the self. It is this understanding, arising from the evidence of the world, which faith blinds.<sup>29</sup> Instead, the "mask" (*persona*) of God given in the proclamation of the "Gospel" is Jesus Christ. Jesus does not signify God but is God. Here lies the asymmetry. The gods hiding behind the voice of human conscience signify an almost infinite variety of values, knowledges and goods which function as judges on

---

<sup>27</sup> See: WA 47,104,26-27.

<sup>28</sup> WA 47,98,17-21; LW 22,375: "Nun stickt das in aller menschen herzen, das Gott zurne und ein zorniger Richter sei uber die Sunde, wie wir den seinen zorn in der welt sehen, das er einen hie und den andern dortt strafft. So kan der mensch nicht frolich sein, sonder mus sich imerdar furchten, das Gott mit der keulen hinder ihme stehe und zuschlagen wolle."

<sup>29</sup> "Therefore there was no need of a judge any more, but now the Son has been sent that we might know that our thoughts be put to death." LW 22,376.

human identity and hopes.<sup>30</sup> God, proclaimed in Jesus Christ, is not a Judge:

It is not My purpose to judge you, nor is it the Father's purpose to judge you....No, the wrath is gone, and now He is filled with sheer love. He also sent Me, not to judge the world but to save it.<sup>31</sup>

The reason for this is that the believer in the "Gospel," the promise and mercy of God in Christ Jesus, actually participates in the life and destiny of Christ. According to Luther, Christ proclaims:

'For the world has me; I am its God. And he who has the Son of God and believes in Him cannot be judged, for the Father has abolished judgement through the Son.' Otherwise Christ, the beloved Son, would also have to be condemned, which is impossible.<sup>32</sup>

In this participation, faith is not a condition of salvation but describes what is meant by salvation.

Oswald Bayer also compares Luther's hermeneutic with the hermeneutical assumptions of modernity. He begins by noting that there is a divergence between the modern suppositions voiced so well by Rudolf Bultmann and that which is seen in the Wisdom

---

<sup>30</sup> The "veils" of God include such values as Truth, Love, Community, Science, Authenticity, Justice, Peace, Harmony, etc.

<sup>31</sup> WA 47,98,36-40; LW 22,375-376: "Es ist nicht die meinung, das ich euch richten woltte, noch das Euch der Vater auch richten woltte,... sondern es ist der Zorn hinweg, und lauter liebe in ihme, und er hat mich auch drumb gesanth, das ich die welt nicht richtete, sondern selig machete."

<sup>32</sup> WA 47,99,13-17; LW 22,376: "Den sie hatt mich dan, der ich ir gott bin, und wer den Sohn Gottes hat und gleubet an in, der kan nicht gerichtet werden, den durch in hat der vater das Gerichte auffgehoben. Sonst musste der liebe sohn Christus auch verdampft werden, aber es ist unmuglich, das ehr sollte verdampft werden."

literature of Scripture. This Wisdom literature states outright and assumes throughout that knowledge and wisdom arise from an encounter with God. The Wisdom literature of both Testaments does not present the modern poles alternating between an existential personal decision and some expression of an objective outer reality.<sup>33</sup> Concerning the Wisdom literature of both testaments, Bayer claims:

In ihnen fallen Anrede und Beobachtung, Verstehen und Erklären, Erklärung und Erzählung nicht auseinander.<sup>34</sup>

Bayer, attempting to follow Luther, goes on to combine Scripture's Wisdom literature with the First Commandment which contains God's promise: "I will be your God." This promise of God is not an encounter of a "personalist-binary" type but includes God, world, and the self.<sup>35</sup> The First Commandment thus refers both to God's

---

<sup>33</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Theologie: Handbuch systematischer Theologie*, Band 1, herausgegeben von Carl Heinz Ratschow, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), p.431-432. Bayer writes: "So halten die Weisheitstexte des Alten und Neuen Testaments dazu an, die moderne Alternative verstehender Interpretation personalistischen Existenzvollzuges einerseits und erklärender Wissenschaft objektivierender Weltbetrachtung sowie eines objektivierenden Weltumgangs andererseits zu vermeiden."

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.431. My translation: [ "In them, address and observation, understanding and explanation, declaration and narration do not fall asunder." ] All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.432. Thus, for Luther, God's creation is God's address to the creature. Bayer, in another place, writes: "Indem Luther von Gottes Urzusage »Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott« her den Schöpfer als den glaubt, der mich zusammen mit allen Geschöpfen angedet hat und anredet, bereitet er jedoch keineswegs den Weg vor, den das personalistische Denken unseres Jahrhunderts zu gehen versuchte. Droht dem personalistischen Denken in seinem gleichsam absolut gewordenen Bestehen auf der Anrede und einem Verständnis der Wahrheit als »rein« personaler »Begegnung« die Gegenwart des Schöpfers in seiner Schöpfung zu verblassen, so kann Luther diese Gegenwart als frei gewollte Immanenz nicht stark genug betonen." Oswald Bayer,

activity in Christ and Creation. Wisdom, faith and true doctrine begin with hearing God's promises that are inherent in this activity. It is a promise directed to particular people with a particular history and, for this reason, cannot be reduced to a method concerning encounter in general. Luther's hermeneutic is an attempt to describe that particular encounter.

The discordance between modern hermeneutical assumptions and the hermeneutic found in Wisdom literature parallels the dissimilarity between Luther and those same modern theologians and interpreters of Scripture. Luther's hermeneutic does not force the interpreter to choose between "existential significance" and objective doctrines about God, church, or ethics. The reason for this is that Luther's hermeneutic is not one which attempts to find a method or key to move from the sign to meaning. In this regard, his hermeneutic takes a fundamental departure from the Alexandrian tradition which searches for a way to move from that which signifies to that which is signified.<sup>36</sup>

Rudolf Bultmann's hermeneutic of demythologization is a profound modern expression of the Alexandrian tradition of signification. In a study praising Bultmann's hermeneutic as one which accurately reflects the situation of Jesus' first disciples

---

*Schöpfung als Anrede*, (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1986), pp.83-84.

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that St. Augustine's Alexandrian hermeneutic was, nevertheless, radically different from modern hermeneutics which search for meaning and sense. For St. Augustine, Scriptures were primarily read to increase charity rather than to gain meaning.

as witnesses and proclaimers, Paul Ricoeur delineates two moments in comprehension concerning Scripture:

Two thresholds of meaning must be distinguished, the threshold of 'meaning,'... and that of 'signification,' the moment when the meaning is actualized in existence. The entire route of comprehension goes from the ideality of meaning to existential signification. A theory of interpretation which at the outset runs straight to the moment of decision is too fast. It leaps over the moment of meaning, which is the objective stage, in the nonworldly sense of 'objective.'<sup>37</sup>

This movement from the "ideality of meaning to existential signification" is viewed as a by-product of the hermeneutical circle existing between subject and object. In this circle, according to Ricoeur, there is a primacy of the object or text, but that "this primacy of meaning over understanding, is performed only through the understanding"<sup>38</sup>:

...to understand the text, it is necessary to believe in what the text announces to me; but what the text announces to me is given nowhere but in the text. This is why it is necessary to understand the text in order to believe.<sup>39</sup>

The movement from an "ideality of meaning" to the new life created by the existential appropriation of such a transcendent object requires the utilization of some hermeneutic of signification.

Luther's hermeneutic concerning the Word of God is different.

---

<sup>37</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974),p.397.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.,p.390.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

For Luther, that which is signified is none other than that which signifies.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Luther's hermeneutic should not be described in terms which, in the language used by Ricoeur above, map out the "entire route of comprehension" going from "the ideality of meaning to existential signification."<sup>41</sup> Luther's hermeneutic reflects an incarnational understanding of the relationship between that which signifies and that which is signified. This is based on Luther's appropriation of Chalcedonian Christology which claims that the historical Jesus does not signify God but is God.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, cannot point to some greater reality

---

<sup>40</sup> See Oswald Bayer, *Theologie: Handbuch systematischer Theologie*, Band 1, herausgegeben von Carl Heinz Ratschow, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), p.443. Bayer writes: "Luther blieb mithin zunächst noch ganz im Rahmen des antiken Sprachverständnisses, vor allem des stoischen, das sich der Signifikationshermeneutik Augustins vererbte, die das noch heute weithin übliche Verständnis der Sprache beherrscht... Daß das signum selbst schon die res ist: das war Luthers große hermeneutische, seine im strengen Sinne reformatorische Entdeckung."

<sup>41</sup> See Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538*, (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), p.18. Hagen writes: "Luther was primarily interested in the Word, *Christus*. *Christus* is not a *sensus*, a meaning; he is the *res*, the reality of the truth of God. He is the thing itself (*res*), not the occasion for questions... Interest in the various levels or senses of meaning of the text is a literary exercise (*ad litteram*) that does not necessarily engage the Spirit and faith and can be done by the *impii*, according to Luther."

<sup>42</sup> David S. Yeago identifies Luther's Christology as belonging to what modern scholars call "Neo-Chalcedonian". This reading of Chalcedon achieved conciliar approval at the second Council of Constantinople (522) and was further developed through the writings of Leontius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus. Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, which Luther knew intimately, quoted from John of Damascus extensively. Yeago identifies four characteristics of this Christology which are lifted up by Luther: 1) the man Jesus is true God; 2) there is a unity of nature between the sending Father and the sent Son; 3) the Son of Mary and the Son of God are unified in one identity; 4) the flesh of Christ is deified and life-giving. See David S. Yeago, "The Bread of Life: Patristic Christology and Evangelical Soteriology in Martin Luther's Sermons on John 6" in *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 39 (1995) 257-279; pp.268ff.

beyond himself.<sup>43</sup> The Word of God is active in creation and redemption.

Luther avoids returning to some hermeneutic of signification by describing a circle between the text spoken in the past and this promised future. Jesus Christ is the embodied voice of God. He is the physical presence who can be historically followed. By being both the fulfillment of God's promise and a figure of the past, Jesus is both that which signifies and that which is signified. There exists a hermeneutical circle between "letter" and "Spirit," in that both "letter" and "Spirit" are Christ. Following St. Augustine, the distinction between "letter" and "Spirit" in Luther's hermeneutic is identified as the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel."<sup>44</sup> Christ is the "Law" which tears down all human

---

<sup>43</sup> St. Augustine's hermeneutic is dependent on his trinitarian metaphysic which makes a distinction between the Trinity of manifestation (οἰκονομία) and the ontological Trinity (*theologia*): God *pro nobis* and God *in se*. The activities of the Trinity in Mission are *signs* which point toward the ontological Trinity. In the same way, temporal faith in the "God for us," points toward eternal truth and knowledge. See: Barry G. Rasmussen, "God *in se* and God *pro nobis*," *Consensus: A Canadian Lutheran Journal of Theology* 24,2 (1998) 71-91. St. Augustine, while careful not to create a disjunction between the Trinity of the *oikonomia* and the *theologia*, constructs a metaphysic which has faith signifying something beyond itself by having the Trinity in mission point beyond itself toward the ontological Trinity. In Luther's hermeneutic, faith does not have such a signifying role. (Luther complains often about people who try to "rise higher than faith." See, for example: LW 22,307.) The *res significata* and the *res significans* are the same in Luther's hermeneutic as he describes the creation of faith.

<sup>44</sup> See Chapter 1 below, where the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" will be examined, including its relationship to the distinction between "letter" and "Spirit." When considering St. Augustine's influence: "The question is not whether a theologian is indebted to Augustine but rather what is the degree and nature of his indebtedness." David C. Steinmetz, *Misericordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes von Staupitz in its Late Medieval Setting*, (Leiden: Brill, 1968), p.33.

attempts to reach God, salvation and righteousness and is the "Gospel" which gives God, salvation and righteousness.

Luther's identification of the Word of God with Christ also adds a level of complexity to the relationship between Scripture and God's Word. According to Luther, the Word was spoken well before Scripture or even the world came to be.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, however, Luther would often refer to Scripture as God's Word.<sup>46</sup> At still other times, Luther will work with Scripture in such a way that, at one moment, the Word of God refers to Jesus' speaking to another person in the text, and in the next, the same words refer to Jesus' speaking the Word to Luther and his congregation.

Gerhard Ebeling notes that Lutheran Orthodoxy tried to describe these dynamics of Luther's hermeneutic by a formula which is still sometimes used today: "Scripture contains or witnesses to the Word of God."<sup>47</sup> This solution, as Ebeling recognizes, is one that suggests that some factor outside Scripture might be needed to

---

<sup>45</sup> See WA 46,542,34-543,1: "und Sanct Johannes hat es aus Mose genomen, aber Moses feret nicht also heraus, wie S. Johannes, der da spricht, das im anfang, ehe die welt, himel und erden oder einige Creatur geschaffen, da sei das Wort gewesen, und dasselbige Wort sei bei Gott gewesen, und Gott sei das Wort gewesen, dis wort sei von ewigkeit gewesen."

<sup>46</sup> One example is found in LW 22,343: "When I study God's Word, I find that Christ not only has the form of a serpent without venom; but I also feel a power in Him which will cure me of venom."

<sup>47</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, tr. James W. Leitch, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p.312.

find or extract the Word of God from the many words of Scripture.<sup>48</sup> If, indeed, some method or technique is needed to extract the Word from the text, then at some level, Luther's hermeneutic would remain a hermeneutic of signification.

However, as Randall Zachman observes, it is important for Luther that no one but Christ can testify to his own redemptive work.<sup>49</sup> The Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, is not only a communication from God but is also a person who died and was raised from the dead in a particular time and place.<sup>50</sup> Thus, there are two "offices" of Christ.<sup>51</sup> There is Christ's work and there is his

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Ebeling voices his appreciation of this solution but also adds that what is lost is a stress on proclamation. A suitable return to Luther's dedication to proclamation would ensure that: "...that the Word is thus no isolated bearer of meanings, but an event that effects something and aims at something." Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, tr. James W. Leitch, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p.313, n1.

<sup>49</sup> Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.58. Zachman, quoting Luther, grounds this assertion through trinitarian logic: It is only God who sees that a man who dies is actually God and the redeemer of the world. Therefore, this fact is not available to human reason or speculation but must be proclaimed by the Word. See WA 26,41,16-19: "Ratio humana non potest dicere, quod homo, qui moritur, sit deus, redemptor mundi pro peccatis et dono vitae aeternae, deus quidem videt, sed nos non. Ergo necesse est testimonium verbi, quod nobis annunciet hoc, tum aliam cogitationem induo."

<sup>50</sup> God speaks through Christ. For an eloquent explanation of how it is *Deus ipse loquens* in Christ and that this speaking must be the starting point of Luther's hermeneutic, see: Regin Prenter, "The Living Word" in *More About Luther*, (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1958), pp.65-80.

<sup>51</sup> "Offices" is an ancient Christian term which reflects an understanding that there is a divine connection between function and a "telos" which is good.

testimony of redemption.<sup>52</sup> These cannot be divided.<sup>53</sup> The work and testimony of Christ cannot be divided by any interpretative scheme which distills the Word from Scripture, experience or Creation.<sup>54</sup> Luther's hermeneutic reflects this Christology.

Luther's hermeneutic is thoroughly trinitarian in shape.<sup>55</sup> The Father speaks the Word to the body of Christ who encounter this Word and respond with the "groanings" of the Spirit which are too deep for human words.<sup>56</sup> Thus, there are two related hermeneutical

---

<sup>52</sup> See: Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.58.

<sup>53</sup> As there is a *communicatio idiomatum* between the two natures of Christ in Luther's interpretation of the catholic christological tradition, so here, there is a *communicatio idiomatum* between the work and the testimony of Christ.

<sup>54</sup> Given the situation of 16th century Europe, Luther stated a preference for the testimony of Christ: "If I had to do without one or the other - either the works or the preaching of Christ - I would rather do without the works than without his preaching." (*Preface to the New Testament (1546)*), Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p.117.

<sup>55</sup> The importance of traditional Catholic trinitarian thinking for Luther's hermeneutic has significance for ecumenical discussions between Lutherans and Catholics on issues that have divided the two Communion. One such issue is whether the Eucharist is a sacrifice or a testament. Egil Grislis notes that the essential difference between these two views is grounded on a conflict on atonement. Catholic theology perceived it as a continuing reality while Luther, with his nominalist training, regarded the atonement of Christ as an once for all sacrifice. (See: Egil Grislis, "Catholic Sacrifice or Lutheran Testament? The discussion of the nature of the Eucharist needs to understand and respect both traditions," *Compass* January/February (1992) 58-60.) The interpretation of Luther's hermeneutic outlined above, which views both the work and the testimony of Christ as redemptive, has potential for effecting progress in understanding on both sides of this ecumenical issue. The concerns of both sides are acknowledged: The cross of Christ is an unique event and the atoning activity of Christ is a continuing reality.

<sup>56</sup> See WA 40 I,649,27-30: "Verbum enim procedit ex ore Apostoli et pertingit ad cor audientis; ibi Spiritus sanctus adest et imprimit in cor illud verbum, ut sonat. Hoc modo omnis Doctor pius est parens, qui per ministerium verbi generat et format veram figuram Christiani

circles in operation. On the one level, when the meaning of the text is examined, that which is signified is the same as that which signifies. Both are Christ, the Word of God. On another level, when the content of the text or Word is sought, Scripture interpretes itself.<sup>57</sup> Christ bears testimony to his own work. These circles overlap each other so that the distinction between subject and object does not take priority on either level.<sup>58</sup>

The sense in which Scripture can be said to contain the Word of God is in the sense that the Sacraments contain Christ. The inherited formula Luther utilized for his description of the

---

animi.”

<sup>57</sup> According to Ulrich Asendorf, the Lutheran church has understood Luther's *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres* so that it operates in opposition to the catholic understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. Asendorf states that this is a view which is too narrow. Using the research of Kenneth Hagen, he observes that the monastic traditions concerning the *sacra pagina* and *enarratio* are the basis of Luther's views concerning the interpretation of Scripture. (See: Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as Seen in his 'Commentaries' on Galatians 1519-1538*, (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), pp.35ff.) The person meditating on Scripture is not in a neutral position in order to "comment" on the meaning or effects of Scripture. Rather, Scripture comes alive in the person through the activity of God. Ulrich Asendorf, "How Luther Opened the Scripture," *Lutheran Quarterly* 9 (1995) 191-199.

<sup>58</sup> See B. A. Gerrish, "Doctor: Doctor Martin Luther, Subjectivity and Doctrine in the Lutheran Reformation," *Seven-Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary 1483-1983*, ed. Peter Newman Brook, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 1-24. Gerrish notes that Luther has been employed as the theological authority for liberal subjective theologies and philosophies. He has also been accused by Roman Catholic thinkers as being the primary source of secular and Protestant subjectivisms: "Protestants found themselves thanking Luther for freedom to believe the exact opposite of what Luther believed." (p.12) Against these charges, Gerrish points out that Luther did defer to Scripture as a shared outside authority. He also often stated that there was a correct doctrine and interpretation of Scripture and that the range of acceptable opinion was rather narrow.

soteriological effect of the Sacraments, was that the finite could hold the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*).<sup>59</sup> However, as Christ encounters human beings through the Sacraments and through Scripture, the infinite Word of God also spills over the sides of its container as a living Word. It is not a self-contained object that can be observed and interpreted so that one, through such interpretive efforts, might move from some "ideality of meaning to existential signification." In Luther's hermeneutic, it is Christ who interprets. Not only does Christ bear testimony and interprets his own work, he also interprets the life of the one who has received this testimony. The interpreter of Scripture is interpreted. In his *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi* (1540) Luther writes that: "... omnia vocabula in Christo novam significationem accipere in eadem re significata."<sup>60</sup> The interpreter of Scripture receives a new "significance."

This insight is one that carries several related meanings. The first sense is one that can be observed in many relationships. The

---

<sup>59</sup> See Ulrich Asendorf, "Das Wort Gottes bei Luther im sakramentalen Zusammenhang patristischer Theologie: Systematische und ökumenische Überlegungen zu Luthers Schrift „Daß diese Worte Christi“ (1527)," *Kerygma und Dogma* 39 (1993) 31-47. Asendorf's study shows that the Word of God cannot be separated from the real-presence of Christ in the Sacraments. The similarities between Luther and Iraneaus concerning Christ's real presence in the Word and the Sacraments are related to the similarities between Marcion and some of Luther's opponents. Both Luther and Iraneaus insist that the Word and Christ cannot be separated. Such separation creates a *docetic* Christ.

<sup>60</sup> WA 39 II 94,17f. "...all names in Christ, likewise in what they signify, receive new meanings."

opinion, judgement or interpretation of one person by another often reveals more about the person doing the interpreting than the person who is so judged. This insight can be extended to the interpretation of events and texts. This sense of the interpreter being interpreted is a function of Luther's asymmetrical hermeneutic.<sup>61</sup> The same thing happens when God is interpreted through the Word. The images resulting from these interpretations determine identity and hope, with tragic consequences.<sup>62</sup> These gods do not rescue humanity "curved in onto itself."<sup>63</sup> For the creation of faith, the interpreter is also interpreted in a more active sense. The proclamation of the Word, which must here be identified as the proclamation of "Law" and "Gospel" interprets human life in two ways. It "destroys" or "mortifies" the pretensions of the conscience's attempts to reach salvation, righteousness, and God. It also mercifully grants a new identity, righteousness, salvation, and God in Jesus Christ, who, apart from all expectations, died on the cross "for us." Thus, the interpreter of God's Word is

---

<sup>61</sup> See pp.7-10 above.

<sup>62</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach learned this part of Luther's hermeneutic well and he applied it to belief in all gods. What is not noticed by Feuerbach and all subsequent interpreters of Luther who use his insight is the asymmetry in Luther's hermeneutic here. The conscience and experience produce all kinds of images of God. God's judgement is to give humanity these images as gods.

<sup>63</sup> Being *curvatum in se* is a key insight of Luther's description of the human problem of sin. This self-centredness makes it impossible for human beings to enter into loving relationships that are not primarily self-serving. This includes the relationship with God and relationships with others.

interpreted in two senses. The interpreter is passively interpreted because God "hides" and is actively interpreted by the proclamation of "Law" and "Gospel."

The active voice of Luther's hermeneutic insists that Christ is not restricted to be a figure of the past. Primarily, he is not someone who once communicated something about God. Rather, Jesus Christ remains present through the Word and through the Sacraments.<sup>64</sup> Since Jesus died but lives, his presence now is eschatologically shaped. The present encounter with Jesus Christ is directed towards a future which is understood as the fulfillment of what occurred in his death and resurrection.<sup>65</sup> This future is connected to the present by a Word of promise given by God. The promised future is related to the historical events of Christ's death and resurrection by the confession that Jesus lives.

This orientation towards the future and the eschatological

---

<sup>64</sup> See, for example: Oswald Bayer, *Promisso: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), p.303. O. Bayer writes: "Im Singular von „Wort“ zu reden, erlaubt nur der Blick auf Christus [WA 2,111,27-33]; das verbum ist das Verbum - wozu sich Luther bezeichnenderweise auf eine johanneische „Ich bin“-Formel stützt: „Das broet, das wort und die speysz ist niemandt, dan Ihesus Christus unser herr selbst, Wie er sagt Johan. VI. Ich bin das lebendige broet...“ [WA 2,111,27f.]. See also: David W. Lotz, "Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority" *Interpretation* 35 (July 1981) 258-273; p.271. Lotz writes: "This 'real presence' of Christ in Scripture is the bedrock, the fundament, of Luther's teaching on biblical authority."

<sup>65</sup> See Klaus Dirschauer, "Den Reformator wieder zu Wort kommen lassen: Gedanken zu Martin Luthers Eschatologie," *Luther* 53 (1982) 122-137. Dirschauer examines the eschatological structure inherent in Luther's handling of a number of theological themes and concludes that the "die Auferstehung des Fleisches" means that "Der Tod ist der letzte Feind Christi, Christus der Feind des Todes." Jesus' resurrection is an event which has eschatological implications.

discontinuity with the past should not only be applied to "morals, discipline and charismatic gifts" but should also be extended to doctrinal truth.<sup>66</sup> God is not limited by universals and therefore some universal pattern of causation from past to future cannot be used as the ground for gaining knowledge of God's activity.<sup>67</sup> This hermeneutic, which insists on an eschatological discontinuity with the past, is grounded in Luther's doctrine of God. However, it is not grounded in God understood as Supreme Being. The starting point, for Luther, is that statements concerning the nature of God's Being need to be understood in terms of God's mission of redemption. Stephan Pfürtner notes this distinction in Luther's hermeneutic and his doctrine of God and contrasts it with that found in *high scholasticism*:

The paradigm determining understanding and language is not God as Supreme Being but the God whom he has experienced in his most profound experience of threat and assailment, the God who has accepted him with endless and unfathomable commitment through his faith in Christ, and who counts him righteous, the God who has revealed himself by acting on him through the promise of justification and opened to him the gates of heaven in the abyss of his despair (cf. his *Selbstzeugnis* of 1545). This God is not God as he is

---

<sup>66</sup> John W. O'Malley, "Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity as Key to their Conflict," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 5 (1974) 47-65; p.61.

<sup>67</sup> Gordon Jenson writes: "When Luther states that he was a "terminist," or a follower of the *via moderna* even in his later life, it should be emphasized that this was correct methodologically, not theologically. He accepted Ockham's argument that God cannot be trapped by universals, in reaction to the *via antiqua*." Gordon Jenson, *The Signification of Luther's Theology of the Cross for Contemporary Political and Contextual Theologies*, (Toronto: Ph.D. dissertation, University of St. Michael's College, 1992).

in himself; *he is God for us*. Talk about him... has its own linguistic laws; for we ultimately experience this God *sub contrario*, under the contradiction of the cross.<sup>68</sup>

For Luther, God is one who acts redemptively. God acts through the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ remains present to Luther and this gives Luther's hermeneutic an unique eschatological shape.

#### Other Interpreters of Luther

There is no shortage of studies on Martin Luther. The explosion of scholarly work generated by the so-called "Luther Renaissance" is truly phenomenal.<sup>69</sup> This present study, of course, arises out of previous discussions about Luther. It is indebted to the insights of Gerhard Ebeling who stressed with clarity that the Word is a performative Word in Luther's hermeneutic. God is speaking in Christ and when God speaks in Scripture there is no distinction possible between the speaking and the doing. Ebeling notes that it was the leading spirit of the Enlightenment, Johann

---

<sup>68</sup> Stephan Pfürtnner, "The Paradigms of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther: Did Luther's Message of Justification mean a Paradigm Change?" in Hans Küng and David Tracy, *Paradigm Change in Theology*, (New York, Crossroad, 1991), p.140.

<sup>69</sup> See: Ulrich Asendorf, "How Luther Opened the Scripture," *Lutheran Quarterly* 9 (1995) 191-199. However, as Ulrich Asendorf notes, there has been significantly less work produced from the late 1970's to the present day.

Salomo Semler, who vigorously emphasized the distinction between the ability to understand and utter something and the ability to understand oneself in light of what has been uttered.<sup>70</sup> This distinction, so important for modernity according to Ebeling, is in a discordant relationship with Luther's hermeneutic: "For Luther, theology as the object of intellectual inquiry and theology as the sphere of a personal encounter, formed an indivisible unity."<sup>71</sup> The Word performs what it says and this Word is directed "for us."<sup>72</sup>

Ebeling continues these observations concerning Luther's hermeneutic by comparing them with the hermeneutics of Luther's contemporaries. Using Luther's first Lectures on the Psalms (*Dictata*), Ebeling notes that, although certain elements of Luther's hermeneutic can be found in others, there was something fundamentally different about Luther's. Thus, even though Hugo Cardinalis also reads Scripture christologically, he does so in an allegorical sense. Luther, however, "deems it more important to relate the Psalms to Christ according to the literal sense."<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought*, tr. R.A. Wilson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p.93.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.95-96.

<sup>72</sup> For an explanation of the importance that the Word is directed "for us", see p.28 below.

<sup>73</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "The Beginnings of Luther's Hermeneutics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) 129-158; 315-338; 451-468; p.454. The distinction between the literal and the spiritual senses of Scripture occupied the energies and interest of the Church in Luther's time. Evidence of this is afforded by the fact that Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Enchiridion militis Christiani* went through 23 printings in the six years immediately following its first publication in 1515. This work made much

Ebeling continues by pointing out that Luther was closer to Faber Stapulensis who did not distinguish between the prophetic and literal senses found in the Psalms but claimed that the literal sense was the prophetic sense.<sup>74</sup> This literal-prophetic sense became the spiritual sense for Faber and effectively put an end to his use or need of the *Quadriga*.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Ebeling notes that Luther's

---

of the distinction between the surface, literal meaning of Scripture and its deeper, hidden meaning. See: Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p.46 and p.178.

<sup>74</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "The Beginnings of Luther's Hermeneutics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) 129-158; 315-338; 451-468; pp.454-455. Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples [Faber Stapulensis] recollected talking to fellow monks about reading the Psalms: "I often asked the few monks who tried to find nourishment in Scripture what sweetness they experienced....Most...answered that as often as they fell into...the literal sense, especially when they tried to understand the...Psalms, they became utterly sad and downcast...I began to consider that perhaps this had not been the true literal sense but rather...a pseudo sense..." As cited in: Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p.70. The new covenant in Christ changes the definition of what should be considered literal and historical. Therefore, under this new definition a true literal and historical reading of the Old Testament must point to the future and to Christ. Lefèvre thus opposes what he calls the pseudo literal sense with the true literal sense, given by the Holy Spirit, which either speaks about Christ directly or in prophecy. Another attempt to find "spiritual" meaning from a literal reading of the text was made by Nicholas of Lyra. According to Ozment, Lyra's "aversion to extreme allegorical interpretation was reflected in his preference for speaking, not of literal and spiritual senses of Scripture, but of a 'double literal sense'." (Op.cit., p69) For instance, Old Testament passages that came to be understood as prophecies of the coming Christ in the New Testament were considered by Lyra to have a literal meaning within the historical context of the original narrative and were also *literally* prophecies about Jesus.

<sup>75</sup> The *Quadriga* was the four-fold interpretation of Scripture texts popular in medieval exegesis. In the theological compendium "*Rotulus pugillaris*", the Dominican Augustinus (Aage) of Denmark († 1285) penned the following verse which succinctly describes method: "*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quid speres anagogia*. As reported in: Helmut Feld, *Martin Luthers und Wendelin Steinbachs Vorlesungen über den Hebräerbrief*, (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1971), p.127. Evidence of the *quadriga*'s popularity is shown by the fact that there was more than one version of this rhyme: The earliest version of this verse comes from John Cassian (ca. 360-435) which has *Quo tendas anagogia* instead of Aage of

hermeneutic is different than Faber's in that Luther's literal-prophetic sense was the foundation of the other senses found in Scripture.<sup>76</sup> The reason for this is that Christ is speaking in Scripture. "Indeed, one could say that it is no longer the Psalms but rather Christ that is the text."<sup>77</sup>

Ebeling's interpretation of Luther highlights Luther's christological emphasis in that Christ is speaking for us (*Christus pro nobis*). The phrase *Christus pro nobis* has somewhat of a technical function in Luther-research. This short phrase simultaneously calls to mind a significant number of Luther's concerns. It has become a quick way of bringing to mind Luther's existential focus. Luther is always focused on real experience among living people in temporally objective time. Luther's existentialism is not a category of knowledge but a way of

---

Denmark's *quid speres anagogia*. cf. Robert M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (New York, 1963), p. 119. p. 127. Helmut Feld notes that in Nikolaus von Lyra's (1270-1340?) writing there is a "Erörterung des vierfachen Schriftsinnes in seinem ersten Prolog und im Kommentar zu der Stelle Gal. 4, 24." Nikolaus von Lyra uses the *quadriga* but gives a different ending to the verse: "Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia." (128) Helmut Feld, *Martin Luthers und Wendelin Steinbachs Vorlesungen über den Hebräerbrief* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1971), p. 128. Bonaventure describes the anagogical sense as "*quo docemur, qualiter est Deo adhaerendum*." Bonaventura, *De reductione artium ad theologiam*, in *Tri Opuscula* (Quaracchi, 1938), p. 372.

<sup>76</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "The Beginnings of Luther's Hermeneutics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) 129-158; 315-338; 451-468; p. 456.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

existing.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, the centrality of the concept of *Christus pro nobis* presents Luther's concern that God's grace should never be viewed as a commodity which has been made available for acquisition by human efforts. Thus, at the same time, it expresses Luther's emphasis on the activity of God in human salvation and the existential implications of that action.

Ebeling's understanding of Luther revolves around his central emphasis that God's Word is *Christus pro nobis*. Ebeling believes that Luther has a relational ontology which serves as a critique of all metaphysics. In this way, Ebeling follows the pattern of Heidegger's existential analysis of *Dasein* as hermeneutic.<sup>79</sup> His

---

<sup>78</sup> Otto H. Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology: The Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," (61-81) *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. by Jared Wicks, (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), pp.66-67. For Luther, it is existing before God. Søren Kierkegaard succinctly describes what it mean to exist before God: Søren Kierkegaard provides a description of being "before God" that resonates well with Luther's use of this concept. Kierkegaard writes: "The opposition sin/faith is the Christian one, which in a Christian way transforms the definition of all ethical concepts, giving them one distillation the more. At the bottom of this determinant which in turn stands in relation to the decisive Christian concept, "before God," a determinant which in turn stands in relation to the decisive criterion of Christianity: the absurd, the paradox, the possibility of offense. And that this should be indicated in every definition of Christianity is of the utmost importance, for the offense is Christianity's defense against all speculation. In this instance where is the possibility of the offense? It lies in the fact a man, as a particular individual, should have such a reality as is implied by existing directly in the sight of God; and then again, as a consequence of this, that a man's sin should concern God." Søren Kierkegaard (*Anti-Climacus*), *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening, in Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, tr. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p.214. See, below, page 302 note 756.

<sup>79</sup> See: Rüdiger Lorenz, *Die unvollendete Befreiung von Nominalismus: Martin Luther und die Grenzen hermeneutischer Theologie bei Gerhard Ebeling*, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1973), p.289. Thus, when Luther's distinction between "letter and Spirit" is examined it primarily becomes a statement about the being of humanity as existence.

hermeneutic is a critique against ontology in such a way that existence takes priority over essence.

Carl E. Braaten believes that Ebeling's interpretation of Luther is the culmination or end of a long line of German Protestant interpretations which had worked under neo-Kantian presuppositions.<sup>80</sup> Under these presuppositions, "all ontology to be found in Luther is verboten; faith...as volitional obedience rather than as ontological participation is all that a neo-Kantianized Luther would allow."<sup>81</sup> Braaten mentions this in order to praise the new Finnish School of Luther-research which has interpreted Luther against the background of medieval theology and has emphasized that "in faith itself Christ is really present."<sup>82</sup> The Finnish School of Luther-research has found much evidence, especially in the early Luther, that this union with Christ is of an ontological nature rather than a result of existential decision-making. However, Braaten's praise should be tempered with Dennis Bielfeldt's suspicions concerning their presentation of the "how?" of Christ's presence. Bielfeldt is suspicious that the Finnish use of *deificatio* as a paradigmatic category might inappropriately systematize Luther with their own agenda as much as the neo-Kantian

---

<sup>80</sup> Carl E. Braaten, "The Finnish Breakthrough in Luther Research," *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996) 141-143; p.143.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.,p.142.

Luther scholars did with their's.<sup>83</sup> After noting the Finnish penchant for raising Luther's concept of "participation" to the centre of their project, Bielfeldt registers the fact that Luther uses other conceptual images to describe the believer's union with Christ.<sup>84</sup> While "participation" particularly fits the theme of *theosis*, the use of these other images at least suggests that this theme might not be as central in Luther's thought as presented.

With these objections in mind, the Finnish School of Luther-research, led by Tuomo Mannermaa, has been able to give conceptual clarity to the ontological and metaphysical language of Luther's corpus of writings. Christ is not only "for us" but is also "within us."<sup>85</sup> Thus, Luther can say that it is actually Christ living the

---

<sup>83</sup> Dennis Bielfeldt, "Response to Sammeli Juntunen, 'Luther and Metaphysics'," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p.163.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p.165. Bielfeldt mentions Luther's use of the ancient traditional image of *perichoresis*. One might also add to this by mentioning Luther's use of the "happy exchange." See: Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp.370ff. Bielfeldt's acknowledges that these objections correspond to two of Klaus Schwarzwaller's: 1. "Since the texts do not explicitly recognize divinization as their 'organizing center,' is it not possible that the interpreter's own projection is responsible for finding it there?" 2. "Do the Finns sometimes interpret Luther's idiomatic expressions too literally? For instance, 'Greta gives herself in love to Hans' would not normally be interpreted as 'Greta gives to Hans her being,' or 'Greta participates in the being of Hans.'" Bielfeldt, op.cit., p.166n8. Reference to: Klaus Schwarzwaller, "Verantwortung des Glaubens," in *Freiheit als Liebe bei Martin Luther*, ed. Dennis Bielfeldt and Klaus Schwarzwaller (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), pp.146ff.

<sup>85</sup> The Finnish School of Luther-research is concerned to resolve a Lutheran problem concerning the doctrine of justification by faith. Lutheranism has been constantly tempted to develop a totally *forensic* understanding of justification by faith. The presence of Christ in the believer prevents this by concurrently stressing the sanctification of the justified. See: Antti Raunio, *Summe des Christlichen Lebens: Die "Goldene Regel" als Gesetz der Liebe in der*

believer's life.<sup>86</sup> In the creation of faith, *Christus pro nobis* is also *Christus in nobis*:

For actually it is not a true life but only a mask of life, under which there lives another One, namely, Christ, who is truly my Life. This life you do not see; you only hear it as 'you hear the sound of the wind, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes' (John 3:8)...I do indeed live in the flesh, but I do not live on the basis of my own self. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God...There the flesh is extinguished; and there Christ rules with his Holy Spirit, who now sees, hears, speaks, works, suffers, and does simply everything in him, even though the flesh is still reluctant.<sup>87</sup>

It was with appreciation that I read Oswald Bayer's non-dualistic interpretation of Luther. This construal of Luther is

---

*Theologie Martin Luthers von 1510 bis 1527*, (Helsinki: University of Helsinki XIII, 1993); Tuomo Mannermaa, *Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus: Rechtfertigung und Vergottung Zum ökumenischen Dialog*, (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus GmbH, 1989), pp.96ff.; and Eero Huovinen, "Diaconia - A Basic Task of the Church" *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994) 206-214.

<sup>86</sup> There is no disjunction between Luther's mysticism and his doctrine of justification by faith. Wolfhart Pannenberg writes: "But Melancthon did not grasp Luther's profound insight that faith by way of ecstasis participates in the reality of Christ himself and *therefore* transforms the faithful into Christ's image. Consequently, in Melancthon's theology justification remained a somewhat wooden, juridical matter, while in Luther's language it had a mystical flavor." Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Freedom and the Lutheran Reformation," *Theology Today* 38 (1981):292. (Referenced in: Egil Grislis, "Martin Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* Revisited," *Consensus* 24 (1998) 93-118;p.104.)

<sup>87</sup> WA 40 I 288,24-27; 289,35-36; 290,27-30; LW 26,170-172: "Non enim est vere vita sed tantum larva vitae, sub qua vivit alius, nempe Christus qui est vere vita mea, quam non vides, sed tantum audis, ut 'ventum audis sonare, sed nescis unde veniat, aut quo vadat', Ioan. 3... Quia vivo quidem in carne, et tamen non iam ego vivo ex me, sed 'quod vivo in carne, hoc in fide filii Dei vivo'...ubi exstincta carne regnat Christus cum suo spiritu sancto, qui iam videt, audit, loquitur, operatur, patitur et simpliciter omnia agit in ipso, etiamsi caro reluctetur." It has long been observed that the expression of faith and the presence of Christ exhibited above is not found in the "early Luther." The early Luther expressed faith in Christ as "conformity to Christ." See Harald Østergaard-Nielsen, *Scriptura sacra et viva vox*, (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1957), pp.154f.

centred on the embodied presence of Christ in Luther's writings. On the basis of this insight, Bayer contests the secularizing and abstracting methods of those contemporary interpretations of Luther who follow the inspiration of Ludwig Feuerbach and G.W.F.Hegel.<sup>88</sup> Under the authority of christological Dogma and Luther's appropriation of the doctrine concerning the *communicatio idiomatum*, Bayer believes that one must agree with Feuerbach in his emphasis that God must have a "for me" Being.<sup>89</sup> Yet, under nineteenth century appropriation of Luther's "theology of the cross," the "death of God" became a slogan which had the effect of also saying that human beings are completely alone.<sup>90</sup> In this secular appropriation of Luther's central theological concern, God's humanity becomes detached from the concrete history of Jesus Christ.<sup>91</sup> The human loneliness that results is not helped by Hegel's speculations and formulations concerning the naturally occurring

---

<sup>88</sup> See Oswald Bayer, "Tod Gottes und Herrenmahl," *Leibliches Wort: Reformation und Neuzeit im Konflikt*, (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992), pp.289-305.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.304. Bayer writes: "Man muß Feuerbach zustimmen, wenn er, unter Berufung auf das christologische Dogma, ein An-sich-Sein Gottes bestreitet und sich an Gottes Menschlichkeit, an sein Für-mich-Sein hält."

<sup>90</sup> See Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), pp.21-23. In his 20th century expression of the "death of God" theology, Altizer points to William Blake, G.F.W.Hegel, and Friedrich Nietzsche for inspiration.

<sup>91</sup> Oswald Bayer, "Tod Gottes und Herrenmahl," *Leibliches Wort: Reformation und Neuzeit im Konflikt*, (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992), p.304.

expressions of a *theologia crucis*.<sup>92</sup> Such abstractions are too far removed from the concrete life of the risen crucified One, who the Church has confessed as the One who makes God known for us.<sup>93</sup> Bayer asserts that the "death of God" must be interpreted by the Lord's Supper and vice versa.<sup>94</sup> Only then, does the concrete historical Christ-event become embodied into a communicative-event "for us." Here, the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is spoken to and for us. As Ulrich Asendorf writes:

Nicht zufällig ist für ihn die lutherische Realpräsenz das Paradigma einer nachkritischen Deutung der Vermittlung des Unendlichen und Endlichen, des Gegenständlichen und des subjectiv Geistigen.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, Christ cannot be reduced to a principle or dynamism of language. Not only does such secularization of Luther's hermeneutic

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 304-305.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 304. Against Hegel's pre-eminence given to the *Idea*, Bayer, using Luther's insistence on the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper and in Baptism, writes: "In ihm tritt in besonderer Klarheit heraus, daß »Christus« zu *Wort* kommen will, also nicht zur *Idee* werden kann. In ihm wird konkret erfahrbar, daß - und vor allem: *wie* - das in sich schon kommunikative Christusgeschehen sich *uns* vermittelt. Hier wird erfahren, daß und wie Gott zu uns und wir zu Gott kommen."

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>95</sup> Ulrich Asendorf, "Das Wort Gottes bei Luther im sakramentalen Zusammenhang patristischer Theologie: Systematische und ökumenische Überlegungen zu Luthers Schrift „Daß diese Worte Christi“ (1527)" *Kerygma und Dogma* 39 (1993) 31-47; p. 37. [ "For him, it is not accidental that the Lutheran real presence is *the* paradigm of a post-critical construction of a mediation of the unending and ending, the objective and the subjective spirit." ] See, also: Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), p. 11. Sasse writes: "No one can understand Luther unless he has understood his fight for the real presence."

apply to his doctrine concerning the cross, it also applies to his principle that salvation is created *sola gratia*. According to Luther's hermeneutic, such graciousness and love, removed from their christological moorings, only become expressions of a new "Law" or standard for human behaviour. Rather, it is Christ's presence in the proclamation of the "Gospel" which give these various principles and dynamisms of language their content and power. It is because Christ is *embodied* in the proclamation *for us* that Luther can claim that Christian salvation is given *by grace alone*.

#### Thesis and Organization

The focus of this dissertation is the relationship between Luther's hermeneutic and his theology. It will examine a selected number of Luther's major theological themes with an eye on the hermeneutic used in the development of his theology.<sup>96</sup> It is the thesis of this work that it is Luther's hermeneutic which caused him to claim that:

---

<sup>96</sup> In this century, there have been many attempts to separate Luther's various theological doctrines so that statements concerning the freedom of the person living in the grace of God, the love of God, and the gracious and loving justification of the sinner are separated from so-called "nominalistic hangovers" such as the wrath of God, the *deus absconditus*, the freedom of God, and the bondage of the will. These have also been attempts to separate the grace and love of God from Luther's distinction between "Law" and "Gospel".

Doctrine is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition."<sup>97</sup>

This statement should not be interpreted to mean that Luther is expounding some indivisible scheme for life. Luther immediately continues by saying that "life is like a physical point which can always be divided and can always yield something."<sup>98</sup>

This relationship between doctrine which is indivisible and life which is to be lived with all its divisible parts is a function of the relationship between Luther's hermeneutic and his theology. Theology, which formulates doctrine, is a second-order discourse. Theology is not that which accomplishes Christian freedom and love but is talk about what has already occurred in the proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection. This proclamation actually accomplishes Christian freedom and love. The proclamation is not abstract and theoretical but is spoken to actual people in various concrete life situations.<sup>99</sup> It is the thesis of this work

---

<sup>97</sup> WA 40 II,25,27; LW 27,37: "Est enim doctrina instar Mathematici puncti, non potest igitur dividi, hoc est, neque ademptionem neque additionem ferre potest."

<sup>98</sup> WA 40 II,46,27-28; LW 27,37: "Contra vita, quae est instar Physici puncti, semper dividi, semper aliquid concedere potest."

<sup>99</sup> See for instance: Carl E. Braaten, "Prolegomena to Christian Dogmatics" in *Christian Dogmatics* vol. 1, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp.35-36. Braaten writes: "Martin Luther, the foremost leader of the Protestant Reformation, was not a dogmatician or systematic theologian. The starting point of Luther's reforming work was not dogma but gospel....Luther expressed his thoughts in exegetical works, such as his lectures on Romans and his commentary on Galatians, in sermons, and in an abundance of occasional and polemical writings."

that Luther's theology functions to drive the Church back to this embodied proclamation.<sup>100</sup> It is Christ's speaking which creates the Church and, at the same time, as Luther puts it: "Christ is the subject matter of theology."<sup>101</sup> This "subject matter" of theology must be so formulated that the sinful Church will be forced to proclaim Christ crucified.<sup>102</sup>

This interplay between doctrine and life is the focus of this present study. This work will begin, in the first chapter, by examining that which Luther called the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel". The "Law" moves from the past or present towards the future. This or that action has certain consequences. "Law" is conditional and, for that reason, must never be confused with

---

<sup>100</sup> See: Steven D. Paulson, *Analogy and Proclamation: The Struggle over God's Hiddenness in the Theology of Martin Luther and Eberhard Jüngel*, (Chicago: Th.D. Dissertation for the Lutheran School of Theology, 1992), pp. 445-446. Paulson writes concerning dogmatics: "It is not a religion or a life program. It is rather what must be said if proclamation is what gives certainty, what gives unity to Scripture, what kills and makes alive. In short, if proclamation alone is the continuation of God's mighty acts of redemption, it is what needs saying if we are the kind of people in our thinking about faith who constantly need to be driven to proclamation, as proclamation never comes 'naturally' to sinful people. Luther is entirely 'systematic' in keeping God's act in Christ (not the doctrine of Christ) as central and the continuation of that act in present proclamation. He is 'unsystematic' only when viewed from a point in dogmatics which is not forcing one toward proclamation."

<sup>101</sup> WA, TR 2, 1868. See: Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), p. 27. Hagen writes: "The technical vocabulary that Luther consistently used throughout his works on Galatians was *Verbum* = *Veritas* (Word is Truth) and *verba* = *doctrina* (words in Scripture-Paul are the doctrines of the Gospel)... The difference between the singular Word and plural words is that Truth is singular, and the many words of Paul (Scripture) drive home (*treiben*) or preach the reality of the Word."

<sup>102</sup> Theology, for Luther, cannot be separated from the Church, the "body of Christ."

"Gospel." "Gospel" is the unconditional promise of God inherent in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Luther's distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" describes the actual "speaking" which establishes the Christ's "alien" righteousness in the believer. The connections between Luther's distinction of "Law" and "Gospel" and his doctrine of justification by faith are so many and so intimate that Luther would often equate the two. The One who is Righteous, Christ, is also the Word who intersects human life as "Law" and "Gospel." "Gospel" is God's promise "to us" in Christ.

Since the question of righteousness is so directly associated with the question of hope before God, the next chapter will deal with the question of justification or righteousness before God. Luther himself considered this to be the article by which the Church stands or falls. For Luther, the Christian Word is one that creates an "alien" righteousness in the life of the believer. Luther calls this righteousness the "alien" righteousness of Christ (*iustitia Christi aliena*). Luther, with this expression, communicates that humanity's hope is not found in establishing their own "righteousness" before God, but that the hope of salvation is based on someone else's righteousness, namely that of Jesus Christ. For Luther, human salvation depends on God's righteousness or goodness, not ours. Yet, this "alien" righteousness, nevertheless, becomes ours in faith as the Word is spoken "for us" (*pro nobis*).

Reflection on God's unconditional discourse or Word will cause questions concerning the human will to arise with increased intensity. These will have already been generated through consideration of the "alien" righteousness of Christ. The relationship of the human will with God's will is analyzed in detail in chapter three. For Luther, "free will" (*liberum arbitrium*) is a name for something only God possesses. In no uncertain terms, Luther continually asserts that the claim to have "free will" is the sinner's claim to be God. Such a declaration threatens Luther's expression of the "alien" righteousness of Christ and would cause the unconditional nature of the "Gospel" to unravel. The affirmation of human "free will" before God in the present is in conflict with the "Gospel" as promise, a Word from the future.

Chapter four is central in two ways. It is central in the physical sense of being the middle chapter of a work that has seven chapters. More importantly, it is central in that the hermeneutical connections made between doctrine and life are made explicit. Luther's hermeneutic comes powerfully to expression in his insistence that the bread *is* the body of Christ and the wine *is* the blood of Christ:

Now when I say that you should fix the Word of God in your heart I do not mean merely that you should know it and meditate on it. That is nothing.... you should hold it to be a living, eternal, all-powerful Word that can make you alive, free from sin and death, and keep you so eternally; that brings with

it everything of which it speaks, namely, Christ with his flesh and blood and everything that he is and has.<sup>103</sup>

After insisting that the Scripture which tells of Jesus saying; "This is my body" cannot mean "this *signifies* my body;" Luther goes on to say:

For if we permit such violence to be done in one passage, that without basis in Scripture a person can say the word "is" means the same as the word "signifies," then it would be impossible to stop it in any other passage.... In that case one could say: that Mary is a virgin and the mother of God is equivalent to saying that Mary signifies a virgin and the mother of God. Likewise: Christ is God and man; that is, Christ signifies God and man.<sup>104</sup>

If the bread and wine only signify Christ, then a door is opened for a hermeneutic of signification for the incarnation of God. Thus, Luther's doctrine concerning the Sacraments is central in the explication of the relationship between Luther's theology and his hermeneutic.

Chapter three, which analyzes Luther's insistence that God is the only One who has free will, brings up questions about Providence and the possibility of a hidden will of God. These questions are made more acute when considering Luther's grounding

---

<sup>103</sup> WA 11,433,23-28; LW 36,278: "Nicht aber meine ich solch fassen zu herzen, das du es wissest und dran gedenkest. Denn das ist nichts, ... das du es für ein lebendig ewig almechtig wort halltest, das dich kan lebendig, von allen sunden und todt frei machen und ewig behalten und bringe mit sich alles, was es deutet, nemlich Christum mit seim fleisch und blutt und alles was er ist und hatt."

<sup>104</sup> LW 36,280. This was also an issue in ancient debates on Christology. Referring to Hilary's *On the Trinity*, Luther writes: "The heretics garbled Holy Scripture terribly. They claimed that Christ is called a Son of God by a metaphor, as we, too, are called sons of God." LW 22,363.

of God's revelation bodily in the Sacraments. No metaphysical escape is possible. These questions about Providence will be investigated in chapter five by examining Luther's references to the experience of *Anfechtungen*. This experience is a function of the Word which is spoken contrary to experience itself.<sup>105</sup> Luther's own expression used to describe this part of his hermeneutic is to say that the Word is spoken under its opposite (*sub contrario*).<sup>106</sup> For Luther, "hope does not grow out of merits, but out of suffering which destroys merits."<sup>107</sup> Hope which arises from the attributes and accomplishments of the past and present is a function of human sin, which does not want God to be God but rather wants to take God's place.<sup>108</sup> God acts against such hope which arises from experience by giving experiences of *Anfechtungen*.

The sixth chapter again takes up the theme introduced in Chapter one. Christian hope comes from the proclamation of the "Gospel," God's promise concerning the future. Chapter six,

---

<sup>105</sup> See: Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 22-23. McGrath writes: "Doctrine does not necessarily express or articulate experience, but may contradict it. Perhaps the most celebrated instance of such an attitude may be found in Martin Luther's 'theology of the cross', in which emphasis is laid simultaneously upon the importance of religious experience in the authentic Christian life, and its unreliability as a theological resource."

<sup>106</sup> Luther's understanding that the revelation of God occurs *sub contrario* is an expression of his theology of the cross and his interpretation of the "masks" of God. God actively hides in the cross of Christ.

<sup>107</sup> WA 1,225,15: "Spes non venit ex meritis, sed ex passionibus merita destruentibus."

<sup>108</sup> WA 1,225,1-2: "Immo vellet se esse deum et deum non esse deum."

however, will investigate Luther's hermeneutic from the perspective of the Church, the community of God's promise in Jesus Christ. The theme of community and love, introduced in Luther's hermeneutic concerning the Church, will continue in the seventh chapter which will analyze Luther's hermeneutic as it relates to the believer's relationship to the other. The ethical relationship to the other is dependent on the relationship to God, the holy Other. Here, the theme of the "alien" righteousness of Christ will be examined afresh under the heading of the believer's ethical relationships to others.

In this examination of Luther's hermeneutic in relation to his theology it will become clear that his various doctrines are not schemes which provide meaning. They function by forcing the theologian back to the proclamation of the "Gospel."<sup>109</sup> Luther was very diligent in defending his various theological doctrines. This, however, was not a defence of a system of meanings. Rather, Luther was unrelenting in his pursuit of formulating correct doctrine precisely when he believed it was in danger of being changed so that it no longer forced the Church to proclaim salvation through Christ's death and resurrection. This "Gospel," which is Christ "for us" and Christ "within us," interprets the interpreter.<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> "Theologian" is here taken in the broad sense: everyone who asks about love, life, death and God is a theologian.

<sup>110</sup> See above: pp.21-22.

The believer, who has a new being-in-Christ, is created by a particular outside agent. Luther identifies this outside agent as the Son of God and as a member of the Trinity. According to Luther, only this Christ can grant freedom, salvation and love for others. Thus, for Luther, the stakes are high in the expression of theological doctrine. Even though it is a second-order discourse, theology, for Luther, has a narrow range of formulations which drive the Church toward proclamation. Luther is very careful in his theological framing of doctrine so that each dogma cannot be reduced to some human attempt for self-transcendence. In such an event, all freedom, salvation and the possibility of community and love would be lost. Human beings would remain *curved into themselves*.

The following analysis of Luther's hermeneutic has been conducted with the question of Luther's present relevance in the background. For this reason, Luther's hermeneutic is not only examined for the creative differences it has with medieval interpretation, but is also contrasted with subsequent hermeneutical theories. In this contrast, there are central elements in Luther's creative pre-modern hermeneutic which resonate with post-modernity's critique of the hermeneutics arising from the Enlightenment.

It should also be stated that, with the question of Luther's relevance in the background, this thesis represents a search for

positive wisdom arising from his hermeneutic. Nevertheless, Luther's writings are full of evidence that he did not always live in the wisdom which his hermeneutic points toward. Especially troublesome is his hatred of all those who disagree with him. Some have suggested that this part of Luther's writings is consistent with a pre-Enlightenment disdain for "cool" objectivity.<sup>111</sup> Others have tried to lessen the irritation of such language by attempting to understand it in terms of the language and rhetoric of the times. Nevertheless, the violence in which Luther expresses his disagreement with those who disagree with him goes against the central tenets of his hermeneutic described below.<sup>112</sup> This issue is a complex one and, if time permitted, one could write another thesis examining such instances in Luther's corpus of writings. Perhaps it would be of an even greater length than the present work. Such a project would also have to include Luther's endemic patriarchalism and authoritarianism, not to mention his superstitious belief in witches and black magic. The following work has limited its research to the areas where Luther points to the concerns that are important for a late modern era that cannot accept the objective "meta-narrative" of its recent "modern" past.

---

<sup>111</sup> See: John W. O'Malley, "Erasmus and Luther, Continuity and Discontinuity As Key to Their Conflict" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25,1 (1994) 47-65. See chapter three below, pages 192 and following.

<sup>112</sup> Examples of those who experienced the wrath of Luther include the Jews, Anabaptists, Turks, papists, Zwingli for his sacramental views, and the humanist Erasmus. There were others, but this list represents Luther's central concerns.

The presence of Christ cannot be reduced to Jesus' effects on the will. Luther's hermeneutic describes God's redemptive activity in Christ so that the sinner is solely rescued from the self by this gracious activity.<sup>113</sup> The new being cannot, then, arise from courageously making existential decisions in the face of the truth (*coram Deo*). Such a focus on the interpreter of Jesus would have the effect of exiting the christological hermeneutical circle described above.<sup>114</sup> Christ would no longer be the witness to his own work. The shift is subtle but important. Focusing on what takes place in the one encountered by Jesus Christ is to move away from the centrality of the "alien" presence described above. When the importance of the soteriological differences of being-in-Christ over against being-without-Christ are downplayed, Luther's hermeneutic becomes caught in the alternatives presented by different scientific theories concerning revelation, inspiration and anthropology.<sup>115</sup> The interpreter does not interpret the Word

---

<sup>113</sup> Luther often used the Latin term "*sola*" in order to emphasize that it was God's work in the believer that was redemptive rather than the believer's preparation or response. Thus, Luther would say that salvation occurred *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Christus* and *sola scriptura*.

<sup>114</sup> See pages 18 and following.

<sup>115</sup> See Tuomo Mannermaa, *Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus: Rechtfertigung und Vergottung; zum ökumenischen Dialog*, (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1989), pp. 18-19. Mannermaa comments: "Obgleich Holl, Hirsch und Vogelsang nicht eigentlich am altkirchlich-christologischen Grund der Anschauungen des Reformators interessiert waren, hat deren wissenschaftliche Arbeit mit Luthers Glaubensbegriff im Laufe der Zeit unausweichlich die wesentliche Zusammengehörigkeit von Glaubenstheologie und Christologie im Denken Luthers zutage gebracht." George W. Forell further indicates the importance of the contrast of being-in-Christ and being-without-Christ by noting that it is this contrast which demarcates Christian

through some method or technique. Rather, the interpreter is, in fact, interpreted by the Word.<sup>116</sup> Christ's witness and work cannot be separated. Christ's presence to the believer (*Christus in nobis*) is an "alien" presence which causes an ontological change.<sup>117</sup> The believer is something new in Christ Jesus.<sup>118</sup>

Nevertheless, any description of Luther's hermeneutic must also take into account that he explicitly criticized the metaphysical systems dependent on the work of Aristotle. This criticism has two major points. First, no creature has being-in-itself but is dependent on the continuous creative activity of God.<sup>119</sup> The second point is related to the first. There is no place

---

freedom and bondage to the powers. Thus, Luther must be separated from the philosophical and religious division made between "spirit" and "matter." Referred to in: Egil Grislis, "Martin Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian Revisited*," *Consensus* 24 (1998) 93-118; pp.99-100. (George W. Forell, "Luther and Christian Liberty," 4:102-103, in Eric W. Gritsch, ed., *Encounters with Luther* (Gettysburg, PA: Institute for Luther Studies, Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, 1990).

<sup>116</sup> See pages 21-22 above.

<sup>117</sup> The *aliena iustitia Christus* is an important concept in Luther's doctrine of justification before God. See Chapter one, below.

<sup>118</sup> Faith and new birth in Christ are identical. See: Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988),p.369.

<sup>119</sup> See *The Small Catechism's* explanation to the first article of the Creed: "I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil." Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989),pp.479-480.

from which the creature can seek God as some highest Good. All such metaphysical attempts are doomed to find some aspect of the metaphysicist as the highest Good.<sup>120</sup> Rather, God mercifully creates and redeems *ex nihilo*. Thus, Luther's criticism of the substantial ontology of Aristotle is based on an understanding that all creaturely being is a gift of God's mercy and *agape* love.<sup>121</sup>

Emmanuel Lévinas insists that God must reveal.<sup>122</sup> Behind this statement is a polemic against the metaphysics of the West. Robert W. Jenson has stated that it has been the preaching of the "Gospel" which has killed the gods of the West, breaking the West's metaphysical words even as the "Gospel" employed them.<sup>123</sup> Jenson goes on to claim that western civilization has heard the "Gospel" but has not believed and so now faces nothingness.<sup>124</sup>

In this nihilistic vacuum, there has arisen a fascination with language as a possible replacement of the gods of the West. However, since the holocaust there has been a loss in confidence

---

<sup>120</sup> See WA 59,409,1-410,12. (Referenced in Sammeli Juntunen, "Luther and Metaphysics: What is the Structure of Being according to Luther?" *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998),p.132.)

<sup>121</sup> Juntunen, *op. cit.*,p.132.

<sup>122</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993),p.51.

<sup>123</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "Proclamation without Metaphysics," *Dialog* 1 (1962) 22-29;p.26.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

that the great narratives of the last two centuries might be able to provide a moral basis for society.<sup>125</sup> Language is used to hide things instead of for revealing things.<sup>126</sup> Elie Wiesel writes eloquently concerning this loss of confidence:

Today it's different.... Like the *Shekinah*, Divine Presence, language has followed Israel into exile. What does exiled language mean? It refers to the distance between words and what they mask.... In every modern country one witnesses this verbal inflation, and a resulting devaluation of words. Political parties 'war' with each other, industrial enterprises launch 'offensives,'... On another plane, Stalin built the Gulag to 're-educate' his citizens and Lavrenty Beria (Soviet Intelligence chief during Stalin's regime) annihilated hundreds of thousands of people for the 'salvation' of humanity; as for Hitler, he invented the terms 'concentration camp' and 'final solution,' and all for the 'well-being' of the human race.<sup>127</sup>

According to Lyotard, this postmodern rebellion against language has occurred at other times in western civilization.<sup>128</sup>

It is the conclusion of this thesis that Luther's hermeneutic is one of those "other times." Although Luther certainly uses metaphysical language, there is a difference between faith and metaphysics even when faith is described with ontological language.

---

<sup>125</sup> See: Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: Correspondance 1982-1985* (Éditions Galilée, 1988), pp.33ff.

<sup>126</sup> See, for example: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, tr. by Georges Van Den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp.14ff.

<sup>127</sup> Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), pp.31-32.

<sup>128</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: Correspondance 1982-1985* (Éditions Galilée, 1988), pp.23ff.

Luther's trinitarian ontology is polemically set against the West's metaphysical tradition in that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit create *ex nihilo* within time. At the same time, Luther is fascinated with language.<sup>129</sup> Yet, this fascination does not lead to a hermeneutic that conducts an archeology of language. For Luther, the proclamation is clear and remains on the "surface" because both the signifier and the signified are Christ.<sup>130</sup> God hides so that God cannot be found through human searching of language and being. This is done so that God can be active in the proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection.

---

<sup>129</sup> See Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin - God's Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p.98. It is not too surprising that, given Luther's fascination with language and his use of ontological language, Luther-research has been caught between the alternatives of language-based interpretations and interpretations attracted to Luther's use of metaphysics. See *Introduction*, pages 28 and following.

<sup>130</sup> See chapter 1.

## Chapter One

## LAW AND GOSPEL

The distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" is a necessary and inherent element of Luther's hermeneutic. For Luther, the proclamation of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection is also the proclamation of "Law" and "Gospel." This distinction is also an integral part of Luther's doctrine concerning the justification of sinners by faith.<sup>131</sup> Luther uses St. Paul's distinction between the "letter" and the "Spirit" to connect divine revelation to human life in a way that, nevertheless, keeps the Word *extra nos*. Luther referred to St. Augustine as an authority to develop his own hermeneutical understanding of the distinction between the "letter" and the "Spirit".<sup>132</sup> Following St. Augustine, Luther named the Christian distinction between "letter" and "Spirit" as the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel". The "external" Word interprets the interpreter by coming from the outside as "Law" and "Gospel". This "external" Word is eternal even as it encounters human life and consciousness. It is a particular kind of eternity

---

<sup>131</sup> See pages 68ff. and pages 92-94.

<sup>132</sup> See page 94 above. "Law" is what God demands and "Gospel" is what God gives. "Gospel" is a Greek word (*Euangelium*) and is inherently tied to Luther's hermeneutic in that it refers to good news or glad tidings.

that encounters human life in the Word. It is the eternity of the life, love and activity of the Trinity.

With this stress on the externality of the Word, there is an existential focus in Luther's hermeneutic. The Word is not conceived as a great cosmological drama which has no connection with the present life of the believer. Luther used the doctrine of justification by faith and the proper distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" interchangeably. The distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" is a succinct description of Luther's hermeneutic as Christ becomes present to sinful humanity. It will be shown here that Luther's is not a hermeneutic of signification. Rather, the presence of Christ, proclaimed in "Law" and "Gospel", actually accomplishes an ontological change in the one addressed. Faith in Christ arises, which is to say, that the believer is *in Christ* so that Christ's righteousness becomes the believer's.<sup>133</sup>

#### The Distinction between Law and Gospel as Hermeneutic

Luther alternatively identifies the doctrine of justification by faith and the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" as being key to making proper interpretations about Scripture, doctrine and

---

<sup>133</sup> See Introduction, pages 31 and following.

life. Luther had often asserted that Scripture cannot be understood without the correct doctrine of justification by faith:

No one understands this passage unless he has the correct doctrine of justification. Jerome really sweats over it, but he leaves it unexplained.<sup>134</sup>

Luther makes similar claims regarding the proper distinction between "Law" and "Gospel":

Such a proper distinction between the function of the Law and that of the Gospel keeps all genuine theology in its correct use. It also establishes us believers in a position as judges over all styles of life and over all the laws and dogmas of men. Finally it provides us with a faculty for testing all the spirits.<sup>135</sup>

Proper interpretations are only possible under a hermeneutic which creates faith in Christ who promises love, mercy, and new life under the cross.

When "Law" and "Gospel" are properly distinguished, the righteousness, miracles and political action of the patriarchs, prophets and kings of Scripture will be understood according to a "new and theological grammar."<sup>136</sup> This new grammar is the

---

<sup>134</sup> The Scripture referred to is Galatians 3: 10: "For it is written: cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, and do them" (LW 26, 251) WA 40 I,397,18f.; LW 26,252: "Hunc locum nemo intelligit, nisi probe teneat articulum iustificationis. Hieronymus satis quidem sudat, sed inexplicatum relinquit."

<sup>135</sup> WA 40 I,511,31-34; LW 26,331: "Hoc proprium discrimen officiorum legis et Evangelii conservat in vero usu universam sinceram Theologiam; Item constituit nos credentes super omnia vitae genera, super omnes omnium hominum leges et dogmata iudices, denique facultatem suppeditat probandi omnes spiritus."

<sup>136</sup> WA 40 I 418,21-24: "Itaque cum legis in Scriptura de Patribus, Prophetis, Regibus, quod operati sint iustitiam, suscitaverint mortuos, vicerint regna etc., memineris talia et similia dicta

hermeneutic which arises from Luther's distinction between "Law" and "Gospel." Those who do not properly distinguish between "Law" and "Gospel" will be inspired by Scripture to attempt to establish their own righteousness. Luther complains that these people, when they hear the "Gospel" concerning God's love for humanity in Christ, scream against him that Scripture often speaks about "doing" and "working."<sup>137</sup> In response, Luther applies his new and theological grammar which is the proper distinction between "Law" and "Gospel":

But in theology they [i.e. moral matters] become completely new words and acquire a new meaning. Therefore all the hypocrites, who want to be justified on the basis of the Law and have false ideas about God, belong to moral 'doing'; against them Paul is disputing here. For they have the sort of 'doing' that proceeds from a moral or human right reason and good will. Therefore their work is merely moral or rational, not a faithful or theological work, one that includes faith.<sup>138</sup>

A tropological emphasis arising from reading Scripture, which focuses on what people must do, is replaced by the grammar of an eschatological faith. This eschatological faith disrupts all continuities with this present life, including humanity's moral

---

secundum novam et Theologicam Grammaticam exponenda esse,"

<sup>137</sup> WA 40 I 418,28-29: "Clamare quidem possunt Scripturam saepe loqui de faciendo et operando;..."

<sup>138</sup> WA 40 I 418, 16-21; LW 26, 267: "In Theologia vero fiunt plane nova vocabula acquiruntque novam significationem. Quare ad morale 'facere' pertinent omnes Hypocritae qui volunt ex Lege iustificari et falsas opiniones de Deo habent, Contra quos Paulus hic disputat. Habent enim 'facere', quod fluit ex recta ratione et bona voluntate morali seu humana. Ideo opus eorum est plane morale seu rationale, non fidele aut Theologicum quod includit fidem."

projects. A blessed relationship with God occurs because of God's goodness or righteousness in Christ and not because of the righteousness of the creature.

The goal of this theological hermeneutic is to describe faithfully what happens in the encounter with God's Word. On one occasion, Luther records this principle as follows:

Moreover, the chief point of all Scripture is that we should not doubt but hope, trust, and believe for a certainty that God is merciful, kind, and patient, that He does not lie and deceive but is faithful and true. He keeps His promises and has now accomplished what He had promised, handing over His only Son into death for our sins, so that everyone who believes in the Son should not perish but have eternal life.<sup>139</sup>

The doctrine of justification by faith and the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" are both formulated in light of this encounter between God and humanity. The doctrine of justification is concerned with righteousness before God while the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" is specifically concerned with what is communicated by God to humanity.

---

<sup>139</sup> WA 40 I,588,12-17; LW 26,386: "Deinde tota scriptura hoc praecipue agit, ne dubitemus, sed certo speremus, confidamus et credamus Deum esse misericordem, benignum, patientem, non mentientem et fallentem, sed fidelem et veracem, qui servet promissa, Imo qui nunc praestiterit, quod promisit, tradendo unigenitum filium suum in mortem propter peccata nostra, ut omnis, qui credit in filium, non pereat, sed habeat vitam aeternam."

The Gospel-Word, Jesus Christ, is a Word of Promise from God

For Luther, the "Law" is a universal demand made on all human beings.<sup>140</sup> It should be noted that Luther is aware of more than one purpose and function of God's "Law".<sup>141</sup> The universal demand was, however, Luther's major way of interpreting the "Law." Also, it is the way that it is most directly related to our theme, which is to set the context in which the "Gospel" is proclaimed. Luther calls this use of the "Law" the *theological use*. It is the universal, relentless, and eternal demand placed on all human beings by God. Its purpose is to reveal human sinfulness so that one will despair of one's own attempts at following God's will and be so driven to the promises of the "Gospel."<sup>142</sup> This use of the "Law" should be distinguished from the *civic use* of the "Law" which is used by the magistrate to constrain the "rough and the wicked".<sup>143</sup> A single

---

<sup>140</sup> The Law is universal and as such is separate from any particular religious expression. In this regard, the Law underlies the structure of all human communication with one another.

<sup>141</sup> By the time of Luther's *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1535 and 1538), he had a two-fold use of the "Law" which were termed the *usus civilis (political)* and *usus theologicus*. See Gerhard Ebeling, "On the Doctrine of the *triplex usus legis* in the Theology of the Reformation," *Word and Faith*, tr. James W. Leitch, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p.70.

<sup>142</sup> The "Law" is the content of God's will. See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert C. Schultz, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p.252.

<sup>143</sup> See WA 40 I 429,29-430,14: "Primum ad coercendos rudes et malos. Hoc modo est civilis sententia: 'Qui fecerit ea homo, vivet iu eis'; Id est si homo obedierit magistratui foris et in regno Politico, poenas et mortem evadet. Politicus magistratus non habet ius in eum, ut subiciat poenis aut occidat, sed permittit eum impune vivere. Is est Politicus legis usus, valens ad coercendos rudes."

passage of Moses can be interpreted in these two ways.<sup>144</sup> While these two uses of the "Law" arise from Scripture it is important that the two should not be confused.<sup>145</sup> Confusing these would have the same effect as confusing the distinction between living *coram Deo* and living *coram hominibus*.<sup>146</sup> Luther tells his congregation: "For no man's reason and no lawyer will say that I am a sinner and an object of God's wrath and condemnation if I do not steal, rob,

---

<sup>144</sup> WA 40 I 429, 28-29: "Itaque dixi hunc locum Mosi intelligi dupliciter, Civiliter et Theologice."

<sup>145</sup> Philip Melanchthon, in the 1535 edition of his *Loci*, introduces a third use of the "Law". (CR 21, pp.405f.) This "third use" positively refers to the instructive role of the "Law" for the believer. The *triplex usus legis* had a major role in the theology of John Calvin. Whether Luther had such a conception of a third use of the "Law" is one that has occupied the discussions of many Luther interpreters. It is a complex issue. On the one hand, it is a way to prevent Luther's freedom from the "Law" from becoming a license to gratify the self. This was the mistake of the Antinomians whom Luther tried to correct in his later years. The "Gospel" is not "Gospel without the "Law". (See: Albrecht Beutel, *In dem Anfang war das Wort: Studien zu Luthers Sprachverständnis* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1991),p.67) On the other hand, a focus on this third use of the "Law" appears to some interpreters of Luther as a way lessening the radical freedom Luther has developed in his distinction between "Law" and "Gospel." Gerhard O. Forde writes: "To brand those who resisted the 'third use of the law' as 'antinomian' is a mistake. Rejecting the third use of the law for the sake of the full eschatological reality of the new life out of death is not antinomian. Such rejection is made precisely to *establish* the law in its full, undiminished right in this age *before* death." Forde is making reference to the *theological* use of the "Law" here. See: Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith - A Matter of Death and Life*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982),p.101n.12. However one formulates Luther's understanding of the different uses of the "Law," one has to take into account the many references where the "Law" is used in a positive sense for believers. See also: Wilfried Joest, "Denkanstöße für eine theologische Sozialethik," *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 24 (1980) 251-258. Joest believes that without some positive use of the "Law" for believers, Luther's doctrine of the two-kingdoms will be interpreted in terms of a quietist stance for believers in the public realm. In such a quietist ethic, the public realm will be left for the Devil. See also: Chapter seven below, especially pages 435 and following.

<sup>146</sup> See WA 39 I 441, 1ff. See, also, pages 54 and following above.

commit adultery, and the like, but am a pious, respectable man."<sup>147</sup> The righteousness that satisfies the standards of one's neighbours would then be projected onto God, hence ending the *theological use* of the Law, which condemns all.<sup>148</sup>

In terms of Luther's distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" the *theological use* of the "Law" takes priority. There is an opposing "Word" to the universal and unrelenting demand of the "Law". This "Word" is a "Word of promise" which Luther calls "Gospel."<sup>149</sup> The promise character of this Gospel-Word was decisive in how Luther read the Old Testament. Luther found the "Gospel" proclaimed when he read the Old Testament accounts of the lives of various saints. These saints had to rely on God's promise of future salvation. This promise, the content of which consists of Christ's death and resurrection, was past for Luther but was future for these Old Testament saints. In terms of God's promises, Luther and his contemporaries were in a privileged position by being in the

---

<sup>147</sup> St.L. XI.712; *Sermons* 2:339. Reference found in: Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993),p.47.

<sup>148</sup> Gerhard Ebeling gathers evidence that the *usus theologicus* is the "absolute centre" of Luther's understanding concerning the Law. In his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1535), the *usus theologicus* is referred as; "*verus usus* (WA 40 I 511,11;530,22;532,7); *usus necessarius* (WA 40 I, 535,8); *verum officium legis et proprius usus* (WA 40 I,481,4); *legis usus proprius et absolutus* (WA 40 I,482,3); *optimus et perfectissimus usus* (WA 40 I, 490,5); *legitimus usus* (WA 40 I, 509,1)." Gerhard Ebeling, "On the Doctrine of the *triplex usus legis* in the Theology of the Reformation," *Word and Faith*, tr. James W. Leitch, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963),p.71n.2.

<sup>149</sup> Luther uses "Word" in a particular manner. It has an incarnational sense and refers to Jesus Christ.

far future to the saints in the Old Testament. It gives Luther and his contemporaries a vantage point from which to observe God at work for redemption. They could read about both the giving and the fulfilment of God's promises. Existentially, this had the effect of providing encouragement to Luther and his congregation as they attempted to live by God's promises in the face of their own uncertain future. Like Luther and his contemporaries, the saints of the Old Testament also had to rely on God's promises in their life-struggles. Luther concludes that both the saints of the Old Testament and the saints of 16th century Europe had to live by faith in God's promises. According to Luther, the saints of the 16th century had the privileged vantage point of seeing God's faithfulness in the past. They could therefore be comforted in their own struggles to face their present challenges and their own uncertain futures. The leap of faith and the experience of *Anfechtungen*<sup>150</sup> which accompanies that leap could be made with the knowledge that the saints of the Old Testament had also relied on God's faithful promises. Thus, Scripture not only contains God's

---

<sup>150</sup> The experience of *Anfechtungen* was an important one in Luther's theology. It refers to extreme temptation and trial and results from the fact that God's revelation is hidden in the Word under the cross. God's love is hidden under wrath. Here, Luther interprets the Old Testament so that there is a community of those experiencing *Anfechtungen* between the saints of Scripture and the saints of 16th century Europe. Heinrich Heimler writes: "Die Erfahrung des Zornes Gottes ist die Anfechtung. Luther setzt der negativen Theologie des Areopagiten, der über das Sein und Nichtsein Gottes reflektiert, die Theologie des Kreuzes und der Anfechtung gegenüber. Im Kreuz wird der verborgene Gott, im Zorn aber die Liebe Gottes offenbar. So wird das Kreuz ein letztgültiges Kriterium, weil darin Gottes Handeln mit dem Menschen im Widerspiel erkannt wird." Heinrich Heimler, "Aspekte der Zeit und Ewigkeit bei Luther," *Lutherjahrbuch* 40 (1973) 9-45; p.35.

active Word of "Law" and "Gospel," but also provides examples of other human beings who were addressed by that Word.

The "Gospel" is God's Word of promise spoken to people in the midst of their present struggles. In Luther's use of the Spirit-letter distinction this "Gospel" is identified as "Spirit." All that is not God's promise is "letter" or "Law". All speaking apart from God's promise is conditional. God's promise, however, is "Spirit" or "Gospel". It is not bounded by conditions.

It is not "promise" in general or as a principle that should be identified as "Spirit". The "Gospel-Word" cannot be separated from Christ and turned into a dynamism of human language.<sup>151</sup> Luther makes this clear in his comments on St. Paul's use of the Hagar-Sarah allegory. Luther interprets it so that the birth of a child through the union of Abraham and Hagar is "letter" or "Law."<sup>152</sup> His reason for making this interpretation is that this union was not connected to God's promise but came about only through the "promise" or "permission" of Sarah.<sup>153</sup> The "word" of Sarah which allowed Abraham and Hagar to conceive the child had all the elements of promise. It creates a particular future and life for others. Sarah's "word", however, like all human promises, is

---

<sup>151</sup> See page 19 note 56 above.

<sup>152</sup> For an example where Luther explicitly equates the Law and the letter see: WA 40 I,260,28f: "Maneat ergo Moses in terra, sit Doctor literae, exactor legis et crucifigat peccatores."

<sup>153</sup> See WA 40 I,654-659.

limited by various uncertainties and ultimately limited by death. It is a conditional promise. The conditional nature of human promises necessitates the use of reason and the senses to interpret the signs to determine the likelihood of their fulfilment.<sup>154</sup>

Only God's promises, however, can be identified as "Spirit" in that death is already past for Jesus and can no longer be considered an obstacle in his ability to be faithful to his promises. This is why "promise" cannot be separated from Christ in Luther's hermeneutic. God's promise, the "Gospel", is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This unconditional Word of God is opposed to the conditional redemption presented by the "Law."

The shape of God's promises is further specified when considering Sarah's child. He was the child of promise and as such represents "believers scattered throughout the world, who have the same Gospel, the same faith in Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments."<sup>155</sup> The promises of God cannot be considered as

---

<sup>154</sup> Interpreting the signs of allegory creates the same problematic. Thus, Luther would not use allegory to comfort consciences, that is, to prove doctrine. See Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung* (Munich, 1942), pp.44-89.

<sup>155</sup> WA 40 I,662,22-24; LW 26,439: "...credentes sparsi per totum orbem, qui idem Evangelium, eandem fidem in Christum, eundem Spiritum sanctum et eadem sacramenta habent." Luther makes this connection between Isaac, Sarah's child, and the "church militant on earth" (WA 40 I,662,26) through St. Paul's allegory which connects Hagar to not only Sinai but also to the present Jerusalem. Luther finds this to be remarkable and contrary to all expectations and uses it to show that Sarah corresponds to a "heavenly or spiritual Jerusalem" "where the promise rules and the spiritual people are free." (WA 40 I,661,20-23; LW 26,438-439: "At Paulus facit quidem Hierusalem Saram, non autem istam corporalem quam simpliciter adiungit ipsi Agar, sed spiritualem et coelestem, in qua non lex regnat nec populus carnalis, ut in Hierusalem quae servit cum filiis suis, sed in qua promissio regnat et populus spiritualis et liber est.")

signs which should be judged for their likelihood of being fulfilled.<sup>156</sup> Isaac, Sarah's child, was born of a ninety year-old woman of dubious vitality who had already given up hope.<sup>157</sup> The child of God's promise is the work of the Spirit and not the result of human vitality or hopefulness.<sup>158</sup> God's promises are not dependent on the affirmations of sense or reason which look toward signs. Sarah did not exhibit the signs of human vitality. She did not even exhibit hope in the future God announced to her. Luther's hermeneutic looks to the cross<sup>159</sup>:

But under the cross which we experience, eternal life lies hidden... We, too, experience the cross, and death appears to us, if not in fact, yet in our conscience through Satan. Death and sin appear, but I announce life and faith, but in hope. Therefore, if you want to be saved, you must battle against your feelings. Hope means to expect life in the midst of

---

<sup>156</sup> Oswald Bayer notes that when Luther does write about signs, the concept of *promise* takes priority over any hermeneutic of signification. Signs function positively in Luther's hermeneutic by grounding God's promises in the material of this temporal life. See Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), p.309ff.

<sup>157</sup> WA 40 I,654-655.

<sup>158</sup> The surprising nature of God's promise and action is reflected in the Genesis text through laughter and the giving of the child's name which brings to mind such laughing. Genesis 17:17 has Abraham laughing at the news that he and Sarah will have a son in their old age (ויצחק); Genesis 18: 9-15 records that Sarah also laughs at the news (ותצחק שרה); The child is born and is named Isaac (יצחק) in Genesis 21:3; Sarah's response is to praise God for such laughter (יצחק לי) -Genesis 21:6.

<sup>159</sup> The "cross" has a particular significance in Luther's hermeneutic and theology. The "cross" is not only the instrument of Roman torture which killed Jesus but shows that God reveals in way contrary to experience, sense, reason and expectation. Experientially, this element of God's hidden revelation causes intense experiences of *Anfechtungen*.

death, and righteousness in the midst of sins.<sup>160</sup>

God's promises are hoped for and not "seen". They are not signs of some conditional future which require eyes to "see" or interpret whether they are likely to deliver. God's promises are unconditionally grounded in Christ, where the trinitarian love and life of God is incarnated.<sup>161</sup>

#### The Goal of Both Law and Gospel

The central affirmation of Scripture is that we should hope, believe and trust that God keeps promises and that we should believe that God is merciful, kind and patient.<sup>162</sup> The assertion that God is merciful, kind, patient and trustworthy in keeping promises has implications for how Luther understood the human

---

<sup>160</sup> WA 25,12,2-3, 12-16; LW 29:10-11: "...sed sub ista cruce, quam sentimus, latet vita aeterna... Nos: cruces, apparet mors, Ro.8., si non realiter tamen in conscientia per Satanam. Apparet mors, peccatum, sed ego annuncio vitam, fidem sed in spe. Ergo si vis salvus fieri, contra sensum pugna. Spes est expectare in morte vitam, iustitiam in peccatis, quia nemo potest apprehendere vitam, in qua non sit peccatum."

<sup>161</sup> See Scholion to Psalm 4:4: "quod idem sit Deus et homo, mortuus et vivus, mortalis et Immortalis, et fere omnis contradictio hic conciliatur in Christo." Quoted in: Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971),p.318.

<sup>162</sup> WA 40 I,588,12-17.

condition in the sight of God<sup>163</sup>. For Luther, one of the implications of these positive assertions about God was the corresponding negative one that human beings and all their efforts were sinful. "In its very promises, therefore, Scripture consigns all men to sin and the curse."<sup>164</sup>

According to Luther, to claim righteousness for oneself is to deny the righteousness, mercifulness and kindness of God. To attempt to find one's own righteousness for salvation is to confuse "Law" with "Gospel": "But anyone who uses the Law to obtain righteousness in the sight of God does not know what he is saying or what he is saying it about; and he makes the good Law dangerous and damnable for him."<sup>165</sup> A personal righteousness which becomes the basis for salvation will be a righteousness measured by some standard or law. Luther believes that the attempt to find such a path of salvation by personal righteousness self-destructs under

---

<sup>163</sup> Luther's concept of living *coram Deo* is central in his distinction between "Law" and "Gospel". That the discussion is understood *coram Deo* ensures that the "Law" is the *theologicus usus* and that this eternal demand which condemns all humanity as sinners can only be answered by the "Gospel" which is the promise of Jesus Christ.

<sup>164</sup> WA 40 I,513,28f, LW 26,332: "Sic ergo in ipsis promissionibus Scriptura concludit omnes homines sub peccato et maledicto," Nestingen thinks that this attitude to the law is a result of Luther's apocalyptic framework. He writes: "For example, the argument for the bound will begins with a conclusion drawn from the gospel: if Christ has overcome the power of sin, we must be sinners; if Christ's death and resurrection were the necessary condition of such a release, humanity must be incapable of freeing itself any other way...The same must be said for Luther's understanding of law...if Christ saves, the law must not be capable of redeeming..." James Arne Nestingen, "The End of the End: The role of Apocalyptic in the Lutheran Reform," *Word and World* 15 (1995) 195-205; p.204.

<sup>165</sup> WA 40 I,620,33-621,12; LW 26,409: "Qui autem lege utitur ad consequendam iustitiam coram Deo, nescit, quid loquatur aut de quo affirmet, facitque legem bonam sibi noxiam et damnabilem."

the weight of its own logic: "When those who are self-righteous keep the Law, they deny the righteousness of faith and sin against the First, Second and Third Commandments... because God commands that He be worshipped by believing and fearing Him."<sup>166</sup> In their very attempts at keeping the Law they act in a manner contrary to it.<sup>167</sup> Believing in themselves and their own righteousness precludes relying on God for salvation.

According to Luther, God functions in a Christian's life by being the One in whom the believer places his or her hope for salvation. God, in Christ, is the righteous One and *in Christ* is the hope of salvation for humanity. These matters are intimately connected to Luther's existential definition of God's presence. Self-righteous people, however, come to rely on their own performance of the "Law" in the hope for salvation and so they

---

<sup>166</sup> WA 40 I,399,18-21; LW 26,253: "Et hoc ipso, quod Iusticiarii legem faciunt, negant iustitiam fidei et peccant in primum, secundum et tertium praeceptum et in totam legem, Quia Deus praecipit se coli fide et timore sui." For another example where Luther equates the attempt to find righteousness within one's own life as a sin against the first three commandments of the Ten Commandments, see: WA 40 I,88,14ff: "Cum nihil habeam praeter peccata et ea vera et gravissima... ut est summa infidelitas, dubitatio, desperatio, quotidianus contemptus Dei, odium, ignorantia, Blasphemia dei, Ingratitudo, Abusus nominis Dei, Negligentia, fastidium, contemptus verbi Dei etc., Quae summa peccata sunt contra primam tabulam." Christoph Burger point out that, over against those who wanted to understand the New Testament's "Doppelgebot der Liebe" as superceding the Ten Commandments (e.g. spätmittelalterlichen Universitätskollegen), Luther insists that the Decalogue cannot be bypassed. For Luther, the First Commandment functions to create faith in God's Son. Christoph Burger, "Gottesliebe, Erstes Gebot und menschliche Autonomie", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 89 (1992) 280-301. Luther scholarship of the first half of this century has uncovered the immense importance the first commandment had for Luther. cf. for example; Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), pp.248ff.

<sup>167</sup> WA 40 I,399,22-23; LW 26,254: "Ergo eo ipso, quod faciunt legem, maxime faciunt contra legem et gravissime et atrocissime peccant."

reverse Luther's definition. They existentially replace God with their interpretation of the Law. This reliance on the self denies the creative activity of God's redemptive work. Such a person becomes what Luther calls an abomination who attempts to be both creature and creator at the same time. The end "product" is a result of the labours of the self, which is sinful, on the sinful "material" of the self.<sup>168</sup> Although sin might express itself in many forms and contexts, according to Luther, the source of the many sins is a sin against the First Commandment.<sup>169</sup> Human beings regularly sin against the First Commandment by not worshipping God. Human idol-making is chiefly evidenced in the human penchant for establishing our own righteousness before God instead of relying on the righteousness of Christ.<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>168</sup> See WA 40 I,407,19ff.: "Sic quilibet Hypocrita simul est materia et operator (Quaquam hoc sit contra Philosophiam, quia idem non potest agere in seipsum): Materia, quia peccator, Operator, quia induit Cucullum vel eligit quoddam aliud opus, per quod sperat mereri gratiam et salvare seipsum et alios, - Ergo simul est creatura et Creator. Quare nemo potest verbis consequi, quam horribilis et execranda res sit quaerere iustitiam extra benedictionem in lege et operibus. Est enim Abominatio stans in loco sancto quae negat Deum et constituit creaturam in locum Creatoris."

<sup>169</sup> See Luther's *Small Catechism*. Christoph Burger points out that for Luther the First Commandment was more important and could not be replaced by the "Doppelgebot der Liebe" which says that one should love God with all one's heart and soul and strength and that one should love one's neighbour as oneself. Christoph Burger, "Gottesliebe, Erstes Gebot und menschliche Autonomie bei spätmittelalterlichen Theologen und bei Martin Luther" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 89 (1992) 280-301. "Deswegen, weil das Erste Gebot den Glauben fordert und schafft, bildet a zusammen mit dem Bekenntnis des Glaubens an Gottes Sohn das Zentrum des Katechismus." Ibid.,p.301.

<sup>170</sup> An example where the creation of the idol of human righteousness is linked to having the Law take over the function of the Gospel is seen in WA 40 I,406,17-25: "Quare omnes Hypocritae et idololatrae ea opera facere conantur quae proprie ad divinitatem et uni solique Christo competunt. Ore quidem non dicunt: Ego sum Deus, Ego sum Christus, revera tamen divinitatem et officium

In the sight of God, human sinfulness also includes all human institutions and communities. Even the gathering of God's holy people in God's Holy Church was seen by Luther as disclosing the human condition *coram Deo*:

This I say in opposition to the monstrous flattery and praise with which the foolish scholastics and monks have adorned the saints. They said that the church is holy in the sense that it is completely without sin. The church is indeed holy, but it is a sinner at the same time. Therefore it believes in the forgiveness of sins..."<sup>171</sup>

Holiness in individuals and in communities must be understood in such a way that those who are holy find it necessary and crucial to rely on God for forgiveness. To be holy means relying on God's holiness. Anything else would constitute replacing the proper worship of God with the worship of something else. Viewed under the paradigm of holiness, the structure of the relationship of God with the one addressed by the "Gospel" does not change from what Luther had said concerning righteousness:

Christian holiness is not active but passive...  
You and I are holy; the church, the city, and the people are holy - not on the basis of their own holiness but on the basis of a holiness not their

---

Christi sibi arrogant. Itaque revera dicunt: Ego sum Christus, Ego sum salvator, non solum meus sed et aliorum. Sicque docuerunt Monachi et persuaserunt hoc toti mundo, quod non solum seipsos iustificare possint sua illa Hypocritica sanctitate sed etiam alios, quibus eam communicarent, Cum tamen iustificare peccatorem sit solius Christi proprium officium."

<sup>171</sup> WA 40 I,197,21-24; LW 26,109: "Hoc dico contra monstrosa praeconia et laudes quibus stulti Sophistae et Monachi ornauerunt Sanctos, et dixerunt Ecclesiam sic sanctam esse, quod omnino sine peccato sit. Est quidem Ecclesia sancta, tamen simul peccatrix est. Ideo etiam credit remissionem peccatorum..."

own...<sup>172</sup>

Christian holiness is an *aliena sanctitas* and therefore the Christian is "righteous and a sinner at the same time, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God."<sup>173</sup> This relationship between sinfulness and righteousness/holiness exhibits a now/not yet structure that results from the promise character of the "Gospel-Word". Until Christ comes at the end of the age, sin is always present.<sup>174</sup> This now/not yet structure of the "alien" righteousness of Christ in the lives of believers carries implications concerning the relationship of God to time. Luther affirms the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus in time and the continual work of sanctification of the Holy Spirit. This correlates with the now of the "alien" righteousness of Christ. The not yet of the promise is in keeping with Luther's profession that

---

<sup>172</sup> WA 40 I,70,14-20; LW 26,25: "Christiana sanctitas non est activa sed passiva sanctitas... Sed ego, tu sancti sumus, Ecclesia, Civitas, populus sanctus est non sua sed aliena, non activa sed passiva sanctitate..."

<sup>173</sup> WA 40 I,368,26f.; LW 26,232: "Sic homo Christianus simul iustus et peccator, Sanctus, prophanus, inimicus et filius Dei est." The concept of an *aliena sanctitas* is parallel to the *aliena iustus Christus*. The fact that Christian holiness and righteousness is found outside the self in Christ necessitates Luther's concept that the Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*. In Christ, they are totally holy and righteous. In themselves, they are totally sinful.

<sup>174</sup> Luther also uses the terms "acceptance or imputation" instead of promise. This language exhibits the same now/not yet characteristics of his promise language. This is illustrated in the following: "Itaque Deus acceptat seu reputat te iustum, solum propter Christum in quem credis etc. Et valde necessaria est Acceptatio seu reputatio, Primum, quia nondum sumus pure iusti, sed in hac vita haeret adhuc peccatum in carne." WA 40 I,233,22-26.

God is the Creator and Redeemer of time.<sup>175</sup> This confession regarding the promises of God in Christ is not an attempt to escape time. Rather, the eternity of God is of a trinitarian nature and from that eternal love and life flows the claim of God as God to Israel, the resurrection of Christ and the promise that God is the God of the living.<sup>176</sup>

"Law" and "Gospel" work together to destroy the worship of the god of self-righteousness.<sup>177</sup> This sin was the source of all other sins and was chief among them:

Therefore the presumption of righteousness is the dregs of all the evils and the sin of all the sins of the world. For all other sins and vices can be corrected, or at least prohibited by the punishment of the magistrate.<sup>178</sup>

---

<sup>175</sup> Luther, however, warns that: "It is folly to argue much about God outside and before time, because this is an effort to understand the Godhead without a covering, or the uncovered divine essence. Because this is impossible, God envelops Himself in His works in certain forms, as today He wraps Himself in Baptism, in absolution, etc. If you should depart from these, you will get into an area where there is no measure, no space, no time, and into the merest nothing, concerning which, according to the philosopher, there can be no knowledge." LW 1,11. Luther's stress on the promise of God is not an escape from history.

<sup>176</sup> See: Heinrich Heimler, "Aspekte der Zeit und Ewigkeit bei Luther," *Lutherjahrbuch* 40 (1973) 9-45; p.42. Heimler writes: "Die Ewigkeit ist kein abstraktes Sein für Luther, sondern als ein integrieren der Bestandteil des Gottesgedankens zu verstehen. Letzlich ist es das erste Gebot, darin das Verständnis der Ewigkeit erschlossen wird. Gott ist unsichtbar und welttranszendent, obwohl, ja weil er die Welt in ihrem innersten Wesen und Immanenz bedingt und umfängt. »Immortalitas vitae et aeternitas ex primo praecepto fluit.« (WA 40 III, 578,8f.) Ja, weil Gott Herr eines anderen, unsichtbaren Lebens ist, ist er ein Gott der Lebendigen und nicht der Toten. Sogar die Auferstehung der Toten folgt aus dem erten Gebot, weil Gott ewiges Leben ist."

<sup>177</sup> See WA 40 I,605,12f: "Quotquot igitur fidunt propriis viribus et iustitia, serviunt deo, qui tantum opinabiliter, non natura Deus est."

<sup>178</sup> WA 40 I,477,20-23; LW 26,307: "Ideo opinio iustitiae sentina est omnium malorum et peccatum peccatorum mundi. Nan omnia alia peccata et vitia emendari possunt, aut certe prohiberi

This sin functions hermeneutically by making it impossible for a person to judge any issues of life, salvation and God correctly.<sup>179</sup> Both "Law" and "Gospel" work in harmony for the purposes of destroying this sin:

For God is He who dispenses His gifts freely to all, and this is the praise of His deity. But He cannot defend this deity of His against the self-righteous people who are unwilling to accept grace and eternal life from Him freely but want to earn it by their own works. They simply want to rob Him of the glory of His deity. In order to retain it, He is compelled to send forth His Law, to terrify and crush those very hard rocks as though it were thunder and lightning.<sup>180</sup>

Both the "Word of the Law" and the "Word of the Gospel" work together to create a relationship between the One who gives the gifts of creation and redemption and those who receive these gifts in trust and gratitude.<sup>181</sup> The proclamation of "Law" and "Gospel" functions hermeneutically by placing a person before Another who gives identity and reality.<sup>182</sup>

---

vindicta Magistratus."

<sup>179</sup> See WA 40 I,477,24f: " quia impossibile est carnali homini iudicare de illa re."

<sup>180</sup> WA 40 I,224,28-35; LW 26,127: "Nam Deus est qui sua dona gratis largitur omnibus, Eaque est laus divinitatis ipsius. Verum hanc suam divinitatem non potest defendere contra iustitiosos qui gratiam et vitam aeternam non volunt gratis accipere ab eo, sed illa mereri suis operibus. Illi simpliciter volunt ei adimere gloriam divinitatis. Ut ergo hanc retinere possit, legem praemittere cogitur quae terreat et conterat quasi fulmen et tonitru quoddam illas durissimas petras."

<sup>181</sup> See: Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.49-53.

<sup>182</sup> Oswald Bayer claims that this hermeneutical function of the *aliena iustitia* of Christ places Luther's theology in sharp contrast with modern thought. The relationship of the "same" to the

God's Word of the "Law" has a holy purpose. According to Luther, apart from the issue of justification one should think reverently of it.<sup>183</sup> The "Law" tells human beings what they ought to do. As such, it is the voice of God's "wrath" in that it places the onus of some response on the conscience and, at the same time, raises awareness of sin and failure. Luther tells his students: "Apart from our conscience we should make a god of it; but in our conscience it is truly a devil, for in the slightest trial it cannot encourage or comfort the conscience but does the very opposite, frightening and saddening it and depriving it of confidence in righteousness, of life, and of everything good."<sup>184</sup>

---

"other" is decisive, as Emmanuel Levinas has argued in his recent critiques of modern assumptions. Bayer writes: "Damit ist der entscheidende Streitpunkt im Konflikt reformatorischer Theologie mit neuzeitlichem Denken bezeichnet. Indem ihn die Theologie ins Auge faßt, muß sie auf ihre Weise das Verhältnis von  $\lambda\omicron\omicron\nu\nu$  und  $\acute{\epsilon}\tau\epsilon\rho\nu$  bestimmen, das in der philosophischen Tradition seit Platon im Sinne der monarchischen Vernunft gefaßt wurde und nun von Emmanuel Levinas, der gegen diese Tradition die „Anderheit“ (altérité) scharf betont, neu bearbeitet wird." Oswald Bayer, "Luthers Verständnis des Seins Jesu Christi im Glaubens" *Luther und Ontologie: Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers*, herausgegeben von Anja Ghiselli, Kari Kopperi und Rainer Vinke, (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1993), p.111. Luther's hermeneutic is not monarchistic where some form of the transcendental "I" takes priority. Rather: "Die Theologie Luthers zeichnet sich durch einen klaren Verzicht auf jeden theoretischen Monismus aus, ohne manichäisch zu werden. Die Betonung des Kampfes zwischen Gott und Teufel sowie zwischen Evangelium und Gesetz, der Spannung zwischen dem im Wort offenbaren Gott und seiner schrecklichen Verborgenheit sowie zwischen Glauben und Schauen führt ebensowenig in einen theoretischen Dualismus wie die Betonung des Bruches zwischen dem alten Menschen und dem neuen Menschen, der sich gleichwohl, bis zum Tod, zum alten zu verhalten hat." Ibid., p.112.

<sup>183</sup> WA 40 I,558,24f: "Caeterum extra locum iustificationis debemus cum Paulo reverenter sentire de lege..."

<sup>184</sup> WA 40 I, 558,26-29; LW365-366: "Debemus extra conscientiam, facere ex ea Deum, in conscientia vero est vere diabolus, quia in minima tentatione non potest erigere aut consolari conscientiam, imo plane diversum facit, terret et contristat eam et a fiducia iustitiae, vitae et omnis

The transcendent "I", which Luther here calls the conscience, is hopelessly self-serving and attempts to find its own way in response to God's presence in the "Law". The boundary marking the proper limits of the "Law" is described by Luther in the following way: "But no Law, no matter how divine or holy, has the right to tell me that I obtain justification and life through it."<sup>185</sup> Justification and life come through the proclamation of the "Gospel". Therefore, it is deadly to confuse the "Law" with what the "Gospel" gives. God, through the "Gospel", delivers human beings from *peccatis, diabolo, morte, inferis*.<sup>186</sup>

This setting of the boundary between "Law" and "Gospel" is, concurrently, a critique of a hermeneutic of signification concerning the proclamation of the "Gospel". One notable characteristic of the "Law" is that it points beyond itself in its requirements and conditions.<sup>187</sup> In this way, the "Law" acts like a *sign*. Those who do what is required and those who do not will be granted a meaning and future through the *sign* of the "Law". In this regard also, the "Law" should not be confused with the "Gospel". As will be explained more fully in the next chapter, in Luther's

---

boni rapit."

<sup>185</sup> WA 40 I,168,16f.; LW 26,91: "Sed nulla lex quantumvis divina et sancta debet me docere, quod per eam iustificer et vivam."

<sup>186</sup> WA 40 I,168,19.

<sup>187</sup> See James Arne Nestingen, "The End of the End: The role of Apocalyptic in the Lutheran Reform," *Word and World* 15 (1995) 195-205, p.200.

hermeneutic both the *res significans* and the *res significata* refer to Christ.<sup>188</sup> The "Gospel" does not signify anything apart from what it gives, which is Christ.

### The *Sitz im Leben*<sup>189</sup> of the One Addressed

One inherited theory concerning the *Sitz im Leben* of the person addressed by the Word that was operative during Luther's time was the hypothesis that humanity was of a tripartite nature. Luther attributed this idea to Origen, who asserted that human beings consisted of flesh, soul, and spirit. In the human struggle between good and evil in this life, the soul was conceptualized as neutral in this struggle. From this neutral vantage point the human subject could, at any given moment, move toward the flesh or toward the spirit, that is, either toward evil or good.

If this description of the human situation and inherent abilities was true, it would have the effect of undoing Luther's

---

<sup>188</sup> See pages 89 and following.

<sup>189</sup> The "life situation" is a common term used in Scriptural exegesis. How the Word interacts with the people addressed determines one's understanding of it. There is a touch of irony in my use of this technical term here. It can be used as a way for the "transcendent" interpreter of Scripture to put distance and perspective onto the call of the Gospel, thereby denying the proclamation of God's love and mercy *pro nobis*. Here, Luther shows that the hermeneutic of proclamation denies the possibility for abstract escape. Our "life situation" is to be rescued by God in Christ Jesus.

entire hermeneutic. The "Word", understood as "Law" and "Gospel", would no longer interact with humanity from the outside. The centre of the hermeneutic would then shift away from God and become located in the human situation or in the complex of human attributes. Luther sharply writes against this theory. In his arguments against Erasmus, Luther uses the Pauline distinction between "flesh" and "Spirit" against Origen's theory of the tripartate nature of humanity:

I, too, am familiar with Origen's fable about the threefold disposition of flesh, soul, and spirit standing in the middle and being capable of turning either way, toward the flesh or toward the spirit... Paul here calls everything flesh that is without the Spirit...<sup>190</sup>

In Luther's hermeneutic, when the Word of God is addressed to the hearer of that Word it encounters one who does not stand on neutral ground. The hermeneutical situation is such that, in the struggle between good and evil, it is God who is good and it is fallen humanity who are evil. It is this good God who is rescuing evil humanity through the "Word". This "Word" is the Christ who comes to humanity existentially through the "Letter" and "Spirit", the "Law" and the "Gospel".

If humanity is on the side of evil in God's struggle for the redemption of creation, the "Law" which commands "you shall love

---

<sup>190</sup> WA 18,774,39ff.; LW 33,275: "Nota est et mihi fabula Origenis de triplici affectu, quorum unus caro, alius spiritus illi dicitur, Anima vero medius ille, in utram partem vel carnis vel spiritus vertibilis... Paulus his carnem vocat, quicquid sine spiritu est..."

the Lord" accuses and damns all.<sup>191</sup> The "Law" functions to define the human situation as it truly is "coram Deo".<sup>192</sup> According to Regin Prenter, Luther was aware of a pattern exhibited in monastic piety, which used this function of the "Law" to exhort people to have the necessary humility to prepare for the infusion of God's grace.<sup>193</sup> For Luther, this pattern of false piety would attempt to replace God with the believer's humility.<sup>194</sup> Something human, that is humility, would become the determining factor in the hermeneutic describing the relationship between God and humanity. The function of the Word would then hermeneutically shift in the same way as the theory of a tripartate nature of human beings shifted the hermeneutic structure of the Word. The result of the interaction between the Word and the listener cannot be viewed as being finally

---

<sup>191</sup> WA 40 I,606,24f.; LW 26,398: "Ideo ista lex: 'Diliges Dominum' etc. non iustificat, sed accusat et damnat omnes homines..." It is noteworthy that this is very different from Augustine's conception of the *amor Dei* as the *amor summi boni*.

<sup>192</sup> This is the *theological use* of the "Law". In the presence or face of God, for Luther, the *theological use* of the "Law" is the only and necessary use. See page 56, note 145 and page 57, note 148.

<sup>193</sup> Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, tr. John M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), pp.6-7. Prenter states that the *odium sui* or *condemnatio sui* is not a human act but the passive suffering under the active judgement of God.

<sup>194</sup> Humility is created by God's activity and becomes the *mark* of hope in Luther's theology. As such, the confession of sin is analogous to the confession of an alcoholic regarding alcohol's power over him. These confessions are not marks of despair but of hope. (See: Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p.64.) It is important for Luther's hermeneutic that humility cannot be described as that which gives hope. The Church should not be filled with people trying to outdo each other.

determined by the listener.

### The "Law" "Kills"<sup>195</sup>

For Luther, something more is needed than the recognition by the conscience of the judgement of God. Randall Zachman writes:

However, Luther makes it clear not only that the law must be revealed to the conscience by the Word of God, but also that God must move the conscience inwardly so that it acknowledges the truth of the Word. If the conscience were a sufficient point of contact for the law, it would follow that the majority of humanity would be able to accept and acknowledge the preaching of the law, since all persons are endowed with a conscience... Hence something more than the conscience must be needed for

---

<sup>195</sup> Luther's concept of the killing function of the "Law" communicates a number of meanings at once. For Luther, it became a short-hand way of talking about the radical nature of the change that takes place in the one addressed by the "Law". He is, of course, thinking about the *theological use* of the "Law". (See above, pages 55 and following) This description of the violence of the "Law" ensures that the "Law" will not be conceptualized as a pedagogue, gently correcting the faults of an otherwise good creature. It communicates that there is nothing redeemable to be found within those addressed by the "Law". Redemption is created *ex nihilo* through Christ. Luther's statements that the "Law" "kills" also introduce eschatological themes. Luther teaches: "Hence, we must note that there is a double death, namely, the natural or, better, temporal one and the eternal one. Temporal death is the separation of body and soul... Also eternal death is twofold. One is a very great good. It is the death of sin and the death of death, by which the soul is freed and separated from sin and the body from corruption, and the soul is united by grace and glory with the living God. This is death in the strict and proper sense of the word (for in every other death there is some mixture of life remains, but not in this one, in which there is nothing but life itself: eternal life)." Martin Luther, *Luther: Lecture on Romans*, tr. and ed. by Wilhelm Pauck, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961),p.179.

the subjective appropriation of the law.<sup>196</sup>

The primary purpose of the accusatory and damning function of the "Law" cannot be to cause shame or guilt. Shame and guilt are still fruits of the conscience. Thus, when the "Law" invades the conscience, the resulting remorse is just the final attempt of the self to establish itself and, for Luther, is the remorse of the Devil which angers rather than placates God.<sup>197</sup> In Luther's distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" the existence of shame cannot be made the determining factor. In Luther's language, what matters is that the "Law" "kills" and the "Gospel" "makes alive".<sup>198</sup> Once again, Luther's hermeneutic, the proclamation of Jesus Christ through "Law" and "Gospel" prevents any powers of the transcendent "I" or conscience from becoming the determining factor. It is God's "Word" which is active and creates faith *ex nihilo*.

Luther conceptualizes this activity of God under the pattern of the *theologia crucis*:

Luther further specifies the inner working of God that allows the conscience to acknowledge the truth of the law as being the effect of the cross of Christ within us... the *theologia crucis* manifests itself in Luther's understanding of the Word as law: when God makes alive, God does so by slaying; when God justifies, God first

---

<sup>196</sup> Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.46-47.

<sup>197</sup> Gerhard Forde, "Luther and the *Usus Pauli*" *Dialog* 32 (1993) 275-282; p.278.

<sup>198</sup> See page 75, footnote # 195.

makes guilty.<sup>199</sup>

In this pattern, the "Law" is a power that actively "kills". Luther writes that "in its highest use and force, then, the Law cannot do anything but accuse, frighten, condemn, and kill."<sup>200</sup> Existentially, the "killing" activity of the "Law" increases the intensity of one's consciousness of sin and one's awareness of being under God's "wrath."<sup>201</sup> It shakes the ground on which the reliance on one's own righteousness normally stands. The "Law", spoken by God, accuses and damns all. The universality of God's "Law" is independent of cultural and religious differences between peoples:

Therefore there is one law which runs through all ages, is known to all men, is written in the hearts of all people, and leaves no one from beginning to end with an excuse, although for the Jews ceremonies were added and the other nations had their own laws, which were not binding upon the whole world, but only this one, which the Holy Spirit dictates unceasingly in the hearts of all.<sup>202</sup>

---

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-48.

<sup>200</sup> WA 40 I, 554, 27f.; LW 26, 363: "Deinde lex etiam in summo suo usu et vi nihil potest quam accusare, terrere, condemnare et occidere."

<sup>201</sup> The killing of the "old Adam", while understood by Luther to be a real death is not identical with physical death. It is not a one time event but is part of a "complex and continuing process of the eradication of sin." See: Egil Grislis, "The Foundation of Creative Freedom in Martin Luther's '*Von den Guten Werken*' (1520)" *Freiheit als Liebe bei Martin Luther/Freedom as Love in Martin Luther*, ed. Dennis D. Bielfeldt and Klaus Schwarzwaller, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 95.

<sup>202</sup> WA 2, 580, 18-23; LW 27, 355: "Igitur una est lex, quae transit per omnia secula, omnibus nota hominibus, scripta in omnium cordibus, nec excusabilem relinquit ullum ab initio usque in finem, licet Iudaeis accesserint ceremoniae, tum aliis gentibus suae propriae leges, quae non universum mundum obligabant, sed haec sola, quam spiritus dictat in cordibus omnium sine intermissione."

The "killing" function of the "Law" cannot be understood metaphorically. Understood metaphorically, the mortification of the "Law" becomes part of a larger tropological project where death and resurrection are understood to be referring to the transcendence of a new moral self over against an old sinful self. The "Law" would then become a technical resource for the glory of the transcendent "I". In such an event, the "Law" would remain separate from the "Gospel" since its function of signification would remain primary.<sup>203</sup> If this "death" is seen as a metaphor for some improvement of life, the "Law" would become an instrument of the conscience. "Law" would then be confused with "Gospel" and become an instrument of redemption. The self would then be seen as the active agent in salvation.

Instead, Luther's insistence that the "Law" "kills" must be understood in light of the "Gospel" which "makes alive" through the presence of Christ. Redemption is totally the result of the presence of the Other, who alone is righteous.<sup>204</sup> Luther's

---

<sup>203</sup> See above, pages 59 and following.

<sup>204</sup> Luther's description of the encounter with God under the categories of "Law" and "Gospel" shows a remarkable similarity to what Emmanuel Lévinas has written concerning the presence of the Other. Lévinas contends: "Judgement is pronounced upon me in the measure that it summons me to respond. Truth takes form in this response to a summons. The summons exalts the singularity precisely because it is addressed to an infinite responsibility. *The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed*; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am.... Perhaps the possibility of a point of the universe where such an overflow of responsibility is produced ultimately defines the I." Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. by Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne

hermeneutic describing the violence of the "Law" against sinful humanity is one that ensures that salvation be described as being *sola gratia*.

Luther is sure that it is a too comfortable life which causes a hermeneutic to arise which describes the "killing" function of the "Law" in terms of some moral project of self-improvement. In this regard, Luther complains about St. Jerome's interpretation of Galatians 4:13.<sup>205</sup> St. Jerome and other ancient fathers explained these words so that they were read as referring to a disease of the body or a temptation of sexual desire. Luther explains that this incorrect interpretation was caused by the existence of something other than Christ by which these fathers secured their lives:

These good fathers were living when the church was enjoying success, free of any cross or persecution. At that time the bishops began to increase and prosper in wealth, public esteem, and glory in the world;<sup>206</sup>

Here, the *signs* of success for the Church became that which gave the conscience security and caused an incorrect reading of Scripture.<sup>207</sup> A hermeneutic was created that turned the "Law" into

---

University Press, 1969), pp. 244-245.

<sup>205</sup> "You know that it was because of weakness of the flesh that I preached the Gospel to you at first."

<sup>206</sup> WA 40 I, 634, 14-17; LW 26, 418: "Boni isti Patres vixerunt in successu temporali Ecclesiae, expertes crucis et persecutionis. Episcopi enim iam tum coeperant crescere et augeri opibus, existimatione et gloria in mundo..."

<sup>207</sup> The proclamation of "Law" and "Gospel", properly distinguished, is Luther's hermeneutic. It ensures a description of Scripture where the active, creative voice of God turns sinners into saints.

an instrument for the moral projects of purging the body of disease or sexual temptations. It interprets the "killing" function of God's speaking in terms of some tropological paradigm which is used in the service of a larger *causa sui* project.<sup>208</sup> This hermeneutic resulting from a comfortable life is evidence that the "Law" has not yet "killed" these interpreters so that they can trust in Christ over against their own moral projects.

Luther believed that, eventually, the "Law" did its proper work over against these Church Fathers. In the same commentary, Luther notes that St. Jerome, St. Gregory the Great, and many other fathers and hermits were saved when, at the moment of death or during some illness, despairing of their lives they took hold of the promise of God.<sup>209</sup> The "Law" functions by violently removing all securities so that one can be secure in Christ. In its divine purpose, the "Law" puts a stop to all *causa sui* projects.

---

<sup>208</sup> In this regard, the presence of Christ and his alien righteousness is different than Gadamer's understanding of Kierkegaard's concept of contemporaneity. According to Gadamer: "Contemporaneity, for Kierkegaard, does not mean existing at the same time, but is a formulation of the believer's task of so totally combining one's own presence and the redeeming act of Christ, that the latter is experienced as something present (not as something in the past) and is taken seriously as such. Against this the simultaneity of the aesthetic consciousness depends on the concealment of the task that contemporaneity sets." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. Garrett Barden and John Cumming, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 113. Luther's hermeneutic of the presence of Christ is based on the activity of the risen and alive Jesus rather than the "believer's task" of aligning the aesthetic consciousness with Jesus. The Word of God, as Law and Gospel, does not attract but kills and makes alive.

<sup>209</sup> WA 40 I, 687, 19-30; LW 26,460: "Hoc fecit Bernardus... Is non opposuit irae et iudicio Dei Monachatum et vitam angelicam suam, sed apprehenit illud unum, quod necessarium est, atque ita salvatus est. Simili modo opinor Hieronymum, Gregorium pluresque alios patres et Erimitas salvatos esse."

The "Law" which causes this "eternal death"<sup>210</sup> is heard most intensely when facing physical death. Luther identified the death-struggle as a time when the conscience is especially terrified by the recollection of past sins: "The devil will attack you vigorously and will try to swamp you with piles, floods, and whole oceans of sins, in order to frighten you, draw you away from Christ, and plunge you into despair."<sup>211</sup> Luther's advice to the one facing such temptation is to add to the list of sins. Tell the devil that he forgot a few of the more grievous ones and that if, as the devil tries to suggest, the tempted person should attempt to be without sin, then that person would not need Christ.<sup>212</sup> In Luther's hermeneutic, the Word of the "Law" functions by turning the believer's attention away from his or her own life for justification towards the life of Jesus Christ. If the "Word" of the "Law" does not accomplish this, it becomes a tool for the devil. In the same section, Luther continues: "Satan, you cantankerous saint, why do you try to make me feel holy and look for righteousness in myself, when in fact there is nothing in me but sins, real and serious sins at that?"<sup>213</sup>

---

<sup>210</sup> See above, page 75, footnote # 195.

<sup>211</sup> WA 40 I,87,34- 88,10; LW 26,35: "...et diabolus magno impetu te invadit et mole, fluctibus ac diluvio peccatorum obruere vult, ut perterrefaciat, a Christo fuget et ad desperationem te adigat,"

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> WA 40 I,88,13-15; LW 26,35: "Cur ergo, O perversum in modum, Sancte Satan, vis me facere Sanctum et a me exigere iustitias, Cum nihil habeam praeter peccata et ea vera et gravissima, non ficta

The "Law" places the conscience of the person into the presence of God. There is a long tradition reflected in the Scriptures according to which nothing unholy can survive the presence of God.<sup>214</sup> God's "Law", which places the conscience into God's presence, can thus be said to actively "kill" the sinner, namely, the person who attempts to remain in God's presence on the basis of their own righteousness. The "killing" function of the "Law" is the "shadow side" of living in the presence of Christ. To live in the presence of Christ and thus to live on the basis of the *aliena iustitia Christi*<sup>215</sup> has ontological implications. Luther writes:

This 'I' Paul rejects; for 'I,' as a person distinct from Christ, belongs to death and hell... Christ is my 'form,' which adorns my faith as color or light adorns a wall. 'Christ,' he says, 'is fixed and cemented to me and abides in me'... Indeed, Christ Himself is the life that I now live... Living in me as He does, Christ abolishes the Law, damns sin, and kills death;<sup>216</sup>

---

aut inania," Luther goes on to list these real and grievous sins and organizes this list to include sins from both the first and second Tables of the Ten Commandments. WA 40 I,88,15-26.

<sup>214</sup> See, for example, Exodus 19:21. "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to gaze and many of them perish.'"

<sup>215</sup> For an analysis concerning the significance of the *aliena iustus Christus*, see Chapter 1, especially pages 64 and following.

<sup>216</sup> WA 40 I,283,24-34; LW 26,167: "Illum Ego Paulus reiicit, Quia Ego ut distincta persona a Christo pertinet ad mortem et Infernum... Is (Christus) est mea forma ornans fidem meam, ut color vel lux parietem ornat... Non enim possumus spiritualiter comprehendere tam proxime et intime Christum haerere et manere in nobis, quam lux vel albedo in pariete haeret. Christus ergo, inquit, sic inhaerens et conglutinatus mihi et manens in me... imo vita qua sic vivo, est Christus ipse... Vivens autem in me Christus abolet legem, peccatum damnat, mortem mortificat."

Luther uses the concept of *perichoresis* to illustrate how Christ can be intimately and concretely present in the believer's life. This is a patristic concept that was especially utilized to give language to the relationships existing between the persons of the Trinity.<sup>217</sup> Risto Saarinen calls this Luther's "real-ontic" interpretation of Christ's presence.<sup>218</sup> For Luther, there is an ontological difference between *being in Christ* and *being in the Law*.<sup>219</sup>

---

<sup>217</sup> See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.163-179. Gunton, while acknowledging that the concept of *perichoresis* was mostly used to give language to speculations regarding the immanent Trinity, believes that it is especially suited to describe personal dynamics of the Father, Son and Spirit in action on the world: "...that it opens up all kinds of possibilities for thought. The reasons are first that it is a concept heavy with spatial and temporal conceptuality, involving movement, recurrence and interpenetration; and second that it is an *implication* of the unity-in-variety of the divine economic involvement in the world." Luther's use of *perichoresis* to describe what Scripture means by *being in Christ* necessitates a corresponding doctrine of *theosis*. Gunton goes further than Luther in that he explores the use of *perichoresis* with regard to the relationships and interpenetration of all Creation, including inanimate objects. He notes that the automobile can be used as a symbol of our *perichoresis* with each other and the world. Our love for the automobile "shapes our urban society -through town planning, noise, changed patterns of mobility, the decay of public transport - and our relation with the universe as a whole." This love of the automobile, while promising more freedom also contributes to an increased isolation and alienation of people from one another. Gunton's definition and utilization of the concept of *perichoresis* is helpful in our discussion of Luther. It highlights Luther's insight that there is only bondage apart from a *perichoresis* with God, in Christ Jesus.

<sup>218</sup> Risto Saarinen, "The Presence of God in Luther's Theology" *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 no.1 (1994) 3-13; p.8.

<sup>219</sup> This ontology is based on Luther's trinitarian conception of God and God's creative activity. This is a relational ontology which posits the interpenetration of beings. The being who is addressed by the Word is not an impenetrable autonomous being unto itself. Presently, in theological research on the Trinity, there has been work done on the relation of the creation to a trinitarian and relational conception of God. See, for example: Colin E. Gunton, "Relation and Relativity: The Trinity and the Created World" in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph

### Law and Gospel Work Together

The "Law" was given for salvific purposes as it leads human beings to Christ. In its redemptive function it leads the one addressed by the "Law" to rely on the promises of the "Gospel". If the "Law" does not lead a person to trust in the promises of the "Gospel", the "Law" becomes an instrument of the devil.<sup>220</sup> In such an event, the person addressed by the Word of the "Law" attempts to use that word as a way either to establish his or her own righteousness or stand accused without hope of redemption. If the "Law" does not lead a person to Christ, it results in either self-righteousness or self-despair.

The "Law", without the "Gospel", only names the problem or establishes human need.<sup>221</sup> "Law", which only names and confirms

---

Schwöbel, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 92-112; p.95. Gunton, after noting that Faraday's conception of matter as fields of force replaced a mechanistic universe populated by impenetrable parts, writes: "What we have in Farady is a kind of doctrine of the *perichoresis*, the interpenetration, of matter. As the three persons of the Trinity interpenetrate the being of others, so it is with the matter of which the world is made."

<sup>220</sup> See: WA 40 I,229,32: "Christum enim vel fides non est Lex nec opus legis."

<sup>221</sup> Luther's insistence that the "Law" must be proclaimed before the "Gospel" raises a problem in this regard. "Law" without "Gospel" only convinces human beings of their need and as the analysis below suggests, such awareness only results in despair and various attempts to mask that need. Randall C. Zachman deals with this problem and concludes that Luther's doctrine that both "Law"

human need leads to despair. It is like telling a person who lacks hope that what they really need is hope. The same could be said about a person who lacks love or lacks will-power or needs God. The naming of the particular predicament does not satisfy what is lacking. Telling a person to "cheer up" does not actually change that person's frame of mind. For Luther, a "Law" which only confirms human need is a "Law" that has been separated from the proclamation of the "Gospel". Luther's insistence that "Law" and "Gospel" be spoken together is an insistence that God's "Word" actually gives what is spoken. According to Luther, the "Gospel" produces a faith which justifies "because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ."<sup>222</sup>

In Luther's hermeneutic, the "Word" does not only establish human need or define the human predicament, it also gives what is lacking.<sup>223</sup> The Word of God is active and does not "wait" for some

---

and "Gospel" work together takes priority over the ordering. See: Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.50-53.

<sup>222</sup> WA 40 I,229,22-23; LW 26,130: "Iustificat ergo fides, quia apprehendit et possidet istum thesaurum, scilicet Christum praesentem." Luther goes on to assert that knowledge of how Christ is present in human life is not possible in precise terms: "Sed quo modo praesens sit, non est cogitabile, quia sunt tenebrae, ut dixi." WA 40 I,229,23-24.

<sup>223</sup> Paul Tillich develops his particular formulation of the ancient concept of *acceptatio* by introducing the concept of "absolute faith". While Tillich's theological advice to "accept one's acceptance" seems to be in keeping with Luther's doctrine of justification by faith, the formulation of "absolute faith" is at loggerheads with Luther's insistence that it is God's communication which creates faith. Tillich, through his efforts to create a theology not dependent on a Word and which circumvents the subject-object problematic, introduces his concept of "absolute faith". After noting that the acknowledgement and acceptance of despair (particularly the modern problem of despair

correspondence to be established with human life so that human beings might find the "Gospel" reasonable or desirable. God's Word acts independently of human initiative and desire. There is no *analogia entis* by which finite human beings can grasp hold of a passively waiting "Word" of God.<sup>224</sup> The human problem is a bondage to sin which prevents properly loving relationships to others and God. This bondage of self-centredness is one which, by definition, cannot be broken by the efforts of the self. Human bondage can only be broken by an active Word which says "yes" to the sinner in the Word of Jesus Christ preached as "Law" and "Gospel".<sup>225</sup>

---

concerning meaninglessness) is actually a courageous move of "being", Tillich claims that such an *acceptatio* is actually a faith that does need not a speaker who creates something or Someone to believe. Such a description of faith (absolute faith) and its power to create the "courage to be" originates from the power of the "same". God is not the Other who gives an alien Word but becomes that which harmonizes and resonates with that power of being which acknowledges the futility and despair of being. In this respect, if "accepting one's acceptance" means the power of being to accept one's despair such advice becomes another Word of Law. See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1952), pp.167-173.

<sup>224</sup> Steven Paulson points out that Luther's hermeneutic, centred on proclamation, is very different from a hermeneutic centred on analogy. Luther's doctrines concerning the *communicato idiomatum*, the *deus absconditus* and his doctrine concerning the Word preached as Law and Gospel have been variously called into question by theologians using *analogia*. (namely Karl Barth with his *analogia fidei* and Eberhard Jüngel with his *analogia adventus*) Luther's *communicato idiomatum* contradicts any theology based on the mathematical distinction between the finite and the infinite (*analogia* has mathematical roots). Luther's *communicato idiomatum* establishes the problem between God and humanity as being sin. According to Paulson, the preaching of Law and Gospel *pro nobis* has Satan, who has bound humanity, as its target while a theology based on "analogy" will preach the Word as Gospel and Law to a humanity whose problem with God consists in its finitude and limits. See Steven D. Paulson, *Analogy and Proclamation: The Struggle over God's Hiddenness in the Theology of Martin Luther and Eberhard Jüngel*, (Chicago: Th.D. Dissertation for Lutheran School of Theology, 1992), pp.439ff. See also, below, pages 251 and following. Luther affirms that God is indeed everywhere, but that God is not everywhere "for us."

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

According to Luther, the "Law" without the "Gospel" produces two types of despair. The first is to make the "Law" less demanding and more manageable than it really is:

Whoever surrenders this knowledge (i.e. Gospel) must necessarily develop this notion: "I shall undertake this form of worship; I shall join this religious order; I shall select this or that work. And so I shall serve God. There is no doubt that God will regard and accept these works and grant me eternal life for them."<sup>226</sup>

The second human possibility in the face of the "Law" received without the "Gospel" is to hate it. Luther characterizes this hatred as an "infinite hatred of the human heart against the Law"; and since the "Law" has a divine source this hatred is also a hatred "against God Himself".<sup>227</sup> The death of Jesus is the result of this infinite human hatred against God. These two expressions of despair result from a message which defines the human predicament without also providing a way out of that defined predicament. The "Law" without the "Gospel" is equivalent to accurately revealing to others that they need love, hope, and repentance without, however, actually giving them what they need.

Luther does not return to a hermeneutic of the self by

---

<sup>226</sup> WA 40 I,603,14-17; LW 26,396: "Qui hac notitia excidit, illum necesse est hanc imaginationem concipere: Ego instituum hunc cultum, suscipiam illum ordinem, hoc vel illud opus eligam, atque ita serviam Deo; non dubium autem est, quin Deus ista respiciet et acceptabit ac pro eis reddet mihi vitam aeternam."

<sup>227</sup> WA 40 I,496,30f.; LW 26,320: "Quare ista fuga indicat infinitum odium cordis humani contra legem et per consequens contra ipsum Deum." See also WA 40 I,534,17: "Deus enim percutit, ut sanet, occidit, ut vivificet etc."

grounding God's promise on this human need. Humbly looking toward human need becomes a way to return to some aspect of the self as the hermeneutical key. This strategy of egoistical sapience is especially insidious since the outward humility of such a scheme masks a return to the self while declaring a renunciation of that self. For the sake of argument, Luther entertains the idea that human beings could fulfill the "Law" and that they could be as holy as angels. Luther asserts that even in the face of such a situation where human beings would not need God's promises, salvation would still depend on the promise: "the promise is altogether sure and firm; for otherwise God would be found to be a deceiver or a liar who either would promise to no purpose or would not be willing to perform what He has promised."<sup>228</sup> God does not make the promises of Christ depend on human needfulness.<sup>229</sup> Instead, the Son of God, "gave Himself out of sheer love to redeem me."<sup>230</sup> The relationship between God and humanity that is established in the promise is one

---

<sup>228</sup> WA 40 I,466,23-25; LW 26,300: "tamen maxime sentiendum est (i.e. promissione) eam esse certissimam et firmissimam; alioqui enim inveniretur Deus vanus aut mendax qui vel frustra promisisset aut promissa praestare non vellet."

<sup>229</sup> The Franciscans and Dominicans had argued against each other whether it would have been necessary to send Christ if their had been no sin. See J.M.Bissen, "La tradition sur la prédestination absolue de Jésus-Christ du VIIe au XIIe siècle," *France Franciscaine* 22 (1939) 9-34. The Franciscans insisted that the sending of Christ did not depend on human contingencies of sin.

<sup>230</sup> WA 40 I,297,32f.; LW 26,177: "Christus enim est filius Dei qui ex mera charitate tradidit seipsum pro me redimendo." See also WA 40 I,434,16-19: "Christus autem non solum inventus est inter peccatores, *sed etiam ipse sua sponte et Patris voluntate voluit esse socius peccatorum, assumpta carne et sanguine eorum qui peccatores, Latrones et immersi sunt omnibus peccatis.*"

characterized by God's love in Christ Jesus.<sup>231</sup> In a sermon preached on *The Epiphany of Our Lord* (January 6, 1534), Luther makes the same point regarding Jesus' baptism.<sup>232</sup> It was good even for Jesus to hear the "Word" of promise inherent in Baptism. Since Jesus was without sin according to Luther, the Bible, and tradition it follows that God's "Word" is not dependent on compensating the need of human sinfulness.

From the perspective of faith alone, the "Law" has a positive and active purpose: "Therefore the function of the Law is indeed to denounce and to increase sin, but for the purpose of righteousness; and to kill, but for the purpose of life."<sup>233</sup> A little earlier in his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1535), Luther spells this out in terms of the relationship to Christ. The "Law's" function is "not only to disclose the sin and wrath of God but also to drive us to Christ."<sup>234</sup>

To be "driven" to Christ is to rely on His righteousness. This is in opposition to the sinful human inclination to rely on one's own goodness. The "alien" righteousness of Christ becomes the

---

<sup>231</sup> In fact, Luther wrote that it was for the sake of this redemption in Christ that God created humanity. Martin Luther, *Grosser Katechismus*, Von dem Glauben, 64. "Denn er hat uns eben dazu geschaffen, dass er uns erlösete..."

<sup>232</sup> See WA 37,249ff.

<sup>233</sup> WA 40 I,552,13f.; LW 26,361: "Es leit auff: 'servire legi.' I. Usu civili arceri a furto, homicidio, peccata, sed ad iustitiam, occidere, sed ad vitam."

<sup>234</sup> WA 40 I,489,31ff.; LW 26,315: "Ideo postquam te lex humiliavit, perterrefecit et prorsus contrivit, ut iam sis desperationi proximus, vide, ut lege me compellere in Christum."

righteousness of the believer and this new righteousness is mutually exclusive with any righteousness created from *causa sui* projects of the person apart from Christ.<sup>235</sup> Jesus is proclaimed as the ultimate crisis and death of humanity's attempt to become gods. Luther's insistence on putting death alongside life is coherent with his hermeneutic of the "alien" righteousness of Christ. This relationship between death and life is grounded in Luther's Christology.

According to Luther, the "crude, unlearned" Nestorius had wanted to divide Christ because he intellectually shrank from the necessary conclusion which follows the doctrine of a united Christ:<sup>236</sup> "It seemed terrible to him to hear that God should die."<sup>237</sup> Luther, however, insists that it is equally strange for God to become human in Jesus Christ, and to deny the death of God is also to deny the incarnation of God.<sup>238</sup> Therefore, in Luther's hermeneutic, both "Law" and "Gospel" must be affirmed and kept together even though one causes death and the other gives life.

---

<sup>235</sup> See Egil Grislis, "The Foundation of Creative Freedom in Martin Luther's *Von den Guten Werken* (1520)" in *Freiheit als Liebe bei Martin Luther*, edited by Dennis D. Bielfeldt and Klaus Schwarzwaller, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), p.91. "Thus the deterioration of faith brings about self-centeredness. The final result is thoroughly frightening: 'er sich selb und nit got rumet'" (WA 6,219,8; LW 44,41).

<sup>236</sup> WA 50,588,29ff.

<sup>237</sup> WA 50,589,7-8; LW 41,103: "Denn es dünckt in schrecklich zu hören sein, das Gott solt sterben,"

<sup>238</sup> WA 50,589,28ff.

### The "Happy Exchange"

It has been established that, for Luther, the "Law" either "drives" the addressed person to rely on the "Gospel" or it becomes a tool for the devil.<sup>239</sup> The difference or dividing line between the two is marked by relational considerations. The distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" gives a kind of knowing, a kind of trusting and loving that actually penetrates the self.<sup>240</sup> Luther often described this soteriological relationship between Christ and believer as the "fortunate exchange".<sup>241</sup> Luther writes: "By this fortunate exchange with us He [Jesus] took upon Himself our sinful person and granted

---

<sup>239</sup> This is the paradox of *Anfechtungen*. See Chapter five.

<sup>240</sup> This knowing, trusting and loving is the result of Jesus' presence. Luther's utilization of the patristic concept of *perichoresis* helps to give language to how such *penetration* is possible. See pages 82-83 and footnote #217 above. This penetration is not the result of the diggings of the transcendent "I." The Incarnation is not an analytical abstraction. Jesus appeared in the real world and acted upon the tangible appearances of things.

<sup>241</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan notes that the idea of the "fortunate exchange" stems from St. Augustine (reference: Confessions 10,43,68-70). Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*; vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.163.

us His innocent and victorious Person"<sup>242</sup>

It is noteworthy that this "fortunate exchange" is operative even in the "killing" and "damning" function of God's Word. According to Scripture, Christ is "cursed" and "killed" through the "Law". God is dead. Luther's *theology of the cross*<sup>243</sup> is an integral part of the "fortunate exchange" that takes place in the proclamation of "Law" and "Gospel".<sup>244</sup> Human participation in the life of God via the "happy exchange" with Christ is a process of

---

<sup>242</sup> WA 40 I,443,23f.; LW 26,284: "Sic feliciter commutans nobiscum suscepit nostram peccatricem et donavit nobis suam innocentem et victricem personam." It should be noted here that before Luther made this statement he had established the divinity of Christ in the previous paragraphs; See for example, WA 40 I,441,14f. "Et hic vides, quam necessarium sit credere et confiteri articulum de Divinitate Christi."

<sup>243</sup> Luther's *theology of the cross* is paradigmatic in its scope and thus relates to all aspects of Luther's theology and his hermeneutic. Its relationship with Luther's doctrine of the "happy exchange" is one that adds a certain richness of expression and conceptuality to his distinction between "Law" and "Gospel". Gerhard O. Forde aptly describes Luther's *theology of the cross* in the following manner: "The cross is in the first instance God's attack on human sin. Of course in the second instance, and finally, it is also salvation from sin. But we miss the bite of it if we do not see that first off it is an attack on sin. Strange attack - to suffer and die at our hands! God's 'alien work,' Luther called it. As an attack it reveals that the real seat of sin is not the flesh but in our *spiritual* aspirations, in our 'theology of glory.'" Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p.1. Luther's *theology of the cross* is an attack on all forms of human idolatry, which is the attempt to find *glory* for the self.

<sup>244</sup> In this respect, there is no fundamental or inherent difference between Luther's theology of the cross and his theology of the Word. See David Löfgren, *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), p.255. Löfgren writes: "Wenigstens scheint es uns ungerechtfertigt, wenn man, wie das die von der Existenzialphilosophie geprägte Lutherdeutung mit Vorliebe zu tun pflegt, einen grundsätzlichen Unterschied zwischen der theologie crucis des jüngeren und der Theologie des Wortes beim späteren Luther sehen will."

mortification.<sup>245</sup> Simo Peura concludes that Luther's statements concerning human participation in the life of God is not at odds with his emphasis on the killing function of God's Word.<sup>246</sup> While admitting that it is not immediately clear how Luther's theology of the cross can be related to a theology of "participation", Peura continues by showing how God's work in creation and redemption begins "out of nothing".<sup>247</sup>

This application of Luther's *theology of the cross* has its basis in Christological considerations. When Luther goes on to demonstrate what the *feliciter commutans* entails, he mentions that Christ became a curse for us in order to destroy sin and that

---

<sup>245</sup> Risto Saarinen, "The Presence of God in Luther's Theology" *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 no.1 (Spring 1994) 3-13; p.7. See also Gerhard Ebeling, "Des Todes Tod" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 85 (1988) 162-194; esp.p.170. This is also a theme in the sermons of John Tauler. One example can be found in a sermon preached on the Second Sunday of Lent in 1340: "Now this becoming one with the eternal Goodness cannot come to pass but by an absolute renunciation of our Self, and all that is ours, natural or spiritual; for in the same measure that a man comes out from himself, in that measure does God enter in with His divine grace, and he who loseth his life shall find it." Susanna Winkworth, *The History and Life of the Reverend Doctor John Tauler of Strasbourg; with Twenty-five of his Sermons*, tr. Susanna Winkworth, (London: Smith, Elder, and Company, 1857), p.274.

<sup>246</sup> Simo Peura, "Die Vergöttlichung des Menschen als Sein in Gott" *Lutherjahrbuch* (1993) 39-71; p.56. Peura uses Luther's statement that "homo enim homo est, donec fiat deus, qui solus est verax, cuius participatione et ipse verax efficitur, dum illi vera fide et spe adhaeret redactus hoc excessu in nihilum." He goes on to conclude: "Der kreuzestheologische Aspekt der Partizipation ergibt sich nun aus dem Hinweis am Ende des Zitats: »redactus hoc excessu in nihilum«... Diese Abtötung geschieht gerade in der Weise, daß der Mensch zu Nichts gemacht wird."

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.,p.57. Peura writes: "Luther meint damit die Erschaffung des Menschen, da der Mensch gerade in der Schöpfung aus Gott (ex deo) und aus »seinem eigenen Nichts« (ex suo nihilo) hervorgegangen ist. Die Partizipation an Gott realisiert sich also in einer dem Schöpfungsakt ähnlichen Weise. Die Teilhabe an Gott ist das Sein in Gott."

Christ died in order to destroy death by His resurrection.<sup>248</sup> The "killing" that makes alive results from the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. In this way, the "fortunate exchange" is a complete exchange on all levels of the believer's existence before God. "The Christian... is utterly dead through the Law but living in Christ, or rather with Christ living in him, he lives an alien life."<sup>249</sup> Luther's concept of the "fortunate exchange" thereby functions to christologically explain and describe how the presence of God in the *proclamation* actively "kills" and creates salvation, that is, a person who has faith in Christ. It describes the meaning of what it is to *live in Christ*. Christ's interpenetration of the believer is so complete that it can only be described in terms of *perichoresis*.<sup>250</sup>

---

<sup>248</sup> WA 40 I,443,29-34; LW 26,284: "Atque cum ita gestaret in nostra larva peccatum totius mundi, comprehensus, passus, crucifixus, mortuus et pro nobis Maledictum factus est. Quia vero divina et aeterna persona erat, impossibile fuit Morti tenere eam. Ideo resurrexit die tertia a morte at nunc in aeternum vivit nec amplius invenitur in ea Peccatum, Mors et larva nostra, sed mera Iustitia, Vita et Benedictio aeterna."

<sup>249</sup> WA 40 I,287,31-33; LW 26,170. The full quote refers to Paul which is not evident in the text given above. However, Luther understands Paul in this instance to be a representative of every Christian. The full quote is as follows: "Quis tum vivet? Christianus. Paulus ergo ut in se vivens plane per legem mortuus est, Sed ut in Christo vel potius ut Christus in eo vivens vivit aliena vita..."

<sup>250</sup> See pages 147 and following above. Ulrich Asendorf observes that Luther's understanding of the "fortunate exchange" is an actualization of the Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ and the trinitarian considerations that arise from that doctrine: "Wenn nämlich Christus wie ein Mensch stirbt und wie ein Gott lebt, so wird der Tod vom Leben verschlungen, indem die Unsterblichkeit Gottes die Sterblichkeit des Menschen verschlingt, (WA 45,436,11-20) so liegt das, wie auch die Auslegung von Joh 6-8 zeigt auf der Linie der Vergottung. Aus der Einheit der Person Christi, die wiederum mit dem schon erwähnten Bild vom Zucker im Wasser beschrieben wird, folgt unsere Einheit mit Christus, so daß sein Fleisch in uns und unser Fleisch in ihm ist. Die christologische

Thus, *living in Christ* refers to a particular ontological reality which "kills" death:

Living in me as He does, Christ abolishes the Law, damns sin, and kills death; for at His presence all these cannot help disappearing. Christ is eternal Peace, Comfort, Righteousness, and Life, to which the terror of the Law, sadness of mind, sin, hell and death have to yield.<sup>251</sup>

The presence of Christ in the believer "kills" the "Law" which can be described as:

...a general term describing man's existence in "this age."... It is the "voice" under which he lives and from which he cannot escape as long as he is a sinner.<sup>252</sup>

The voice of the "Law" is the "wrath" of God which brings all human projects for salvation to nothing so that, with the "Gospel," God creates believers *ex nihilo*.<sup>253</sup> The "Word" of the Gospel is an active power which puts to an end this "voice" of the "Law" through Christ who died under the "Law" and who has triumphantly risen

---

Einheit geht so der christologisch-anthropologischen Einheit voraus. (WA 33,232,3-233,27) Die *communicatio idiomatum* ist also auf den 'fröhlichen Wechsel' hin angelegt, dessen inhaltliche Aussage mit der Vergottung identisch ist." Ulrich Asendorf, "Die Einbettung der Theosis in die Theologie Martin Luthers" in *Luther und Theosis*, (Helsinki: Martin-Luther-Verlag Erlangen, 1990), pp.81-102; p.99.

<sup>251</sup> WA 40 I,283,34-35...284,12-14; LW 26,167: "Vivens autem in me Christus abolet legem, peccatum damnat, mortem mortificat, quia ad praesentiam ipsius illa non possunt non evanescere... Scilicet sic: 'per legem legi' etc., nisi enim Christus aeterna pax, consolatio, iustitia et vita; His autem cedere oportet terrorem legis, moerorem animi, peccatum, Infernum, mortem."

<sup>252</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, "The Newness of the Gospel" *Dialog* 6 (1967) 87-94; p.91.

<sup>253</sup> See: Sammeli Juntunen, *Der Begriff des Nichts bei Luther in den Jahren von 1510 bis 1523* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1996).

above it. However, since the Christian community still lives in this age and therefore still lives in sin under the "Law", the "voice" of the "Law" will be continued to be heard daily:

Tommorrow it will sound again in countless subtle ways-perhaps even the demand that you somehow recapture the faith you had yesterday! For even yesterday's gospel is today's law! Today the gospel must be heard anew. For the gospel, by its very nature, is "ever new."<sup>254</sup>

For this reason, a vibrant relationship exists between the doctrine concerning "Law" and "Gospel" and the hermeneutic which connects that doctrine with people of every new day. The relationship forces the Church, as the body of Christ, to a description of a hermeneutic where the "Gospel" accomplishes what it proclaims. At the same time, this hermeneutic limits what can be formulated in the doctrine concerning this distinction between "Law" and "Gospel."

The "Gospel," in its announcement of *good news*, is a promise. The relationship resulting from the "Gospel" gives the Christian life a particular shape which can be characterized as one having a *perichoresis* with Christ. This *being in Christ* has an already/not yet structure. The "already" part of this structure is a life lived which is dependent on God's promise. The Christian community participates in the new creation in hope, not in fact. The promise points toward the future, but at the same time the promise and the

---

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p.91.

anticipated future creates a context by which life can be lived in the present:

For our blessing has not yet been revealed. But meanwhile we await it in patience and yet already possess it certainly through faith.<sup>255</sup>

Luther often offered the opinion that while it is easy to talk about the "alien" righteousness of Christ and while it might also be easy to describe the life of the promised blessings, it is quite another thing to live "in Christ." Human beings presently live before the final fulfilment of the promises of God and so are continually under the "voice" of the Law. In this situation, life must be conceived as a constant struggle between faith and unbelief.<sup>256</sup> Luther could, therefore, speak of a progression in life as one came to trust more completely in Christ over against the constant whispers of the "Law":

Therefore there is in godly people a perpetual struggle between the hearing of faith and the works of the Law, because the conscience is always murmuring and thinking that when righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal salvation are promised solely on the basis of hearing with faith, this is too easy a way... Just let your conscience murmur, and let this "one must" keep on recurring. But endure it for a while and hold your ground until you conquer this "one must." Thus, as faith gradually increases, that opinion about the righteousness of the Law will decrease. But

---

<sup>255</sup> WA 40 I,679,17-19; LW 26,453: "nondum enim revelatum est bonum nostrum, quod per patientiam interim expectamus, et tamen certo iam tenemus illud per fidem."

<sup>256</sup> See chapter 5 below which analyzes more closely Luther's description of the experience of *Anfechtungen*. This experience results from the "promise-character" of the *proclamation* of Jesus Christ. Here, we are also showing that *Anfechtungen* is a necessary and inherent implication of the ontological state of *being in Christ*.

this cannot be done without a great conflict.<sup>257</sup>

This struggle between the "hearing of faith" and the "works of the Law" is a struggle between two very different ontological realities. The "voice of the Law" also creates a relationship with human life that can also be described as a *perichoresis*. It penetrates human life at many levels, thereby giving a context for existence, creating a future and granting identity and meaning. Like the *proclamation* of the "Gospel" of Jesus' death and resurrection, the "voice of the Law" does all this by focusing on relational considerations.

An example is afforded by how the "voice of the Law" creates meaning and a future through the medium of human labour. Gainful employment takes place under the mutual, conditional promises that occur between employer and employee. There is a conditional promise made when money is given for labour. This money is also connected to a societal promise that it will be worth something in exchange for goods and services. A framework for life and a future is created by the conditional promises inherent in the "Law". The structure suggested by this example is also operational in the many other relationships human beings have with each other and to

---

<sup>257</sup> WA 40 I,346,11-22; LW 26,215-216: "Rethoricatur ibi et deterret a periculo et damno: 'Sic amentes' vel insensati 'estis: spiritu.' piis lucta cum auditu fidei et operibus legis, quia conscientia semper remurmurat et cogitat: Nimis facilem hanc viam esse, quod ex solo auditu verbi promittitur iustitia, spiritus sanctus et salus aeterna... Sed remurmeret sane conscientia et recurrat subinde (hoc 'Oportet'), tamen tu tantisper perdura et consiste, donec illud 'Oportet' vincas. Sic crescente fide paulatim decrescet illa opinio iustitiae legis. Sed hoc sine magno certamine fieri non potest."

creation. There is a certain graciousness associated with the ontological reality created by the "Law". A future and a context for directing human energies is granted by a "power" which is larger than any one individual or any group of individuals. In this respect, the "Law" can be easily confused with the "Gospel".

Nevertheless, there is a decisive difference. The "Law" has an if-then structure which creates a cause and effect future. A different hermeneutic will be necessary in the ontological reality created by the "voice of the Law". It will be a hermeneutic of signification where the burden of responsibility for this posited future will be on the individuals or the groups addressed by the "Law". Those who must satisfy the conditions of the "promises" of the "Law" become jointly responsible with those making the promises.<sup>258</sup> This remains the case even when the ultimate responsibility can be placed on the One who initiated such a

---

<sup>258</sup> Luther's *theology of the cross*, where God attacks human sin by being put to death at our hands, disallows any human points of contact with God apart from that which has created in the cross. See: Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative: Nature and Aim of the Church's Mission and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p.24. Braaten writes: "When Luther was a fledgling theologian, some years before 1517, the year of The 95 Theses, he taught the traditional scholastic doctrine of *synteresis* (conscience [lit., 'preservation']), which provides a human point of contact for God's grace. But he finally surrendered that doctrine because it simply could not be made to fit a radical theology of the cross, but instead invites semi-Pelagian rationalism and moralism. In his polemic against Erasmus he argued like a good Augustinian should that there is no *positive* point of contact in the human condition for the working of divine grace.... Theories about *synteresis* - or any other positive point of contact in human reason, will, or experience - cling to some of the old foundations and work out a system of synergism between divine grace and human potentiality."

covenantal future.<sup>259</sup> If covenant is understood to have an if-then structure, the future created through such a covenant would be out of step with Luther's understanding of the *iustitia Christi aliena* and the *externum verbum*.<sup>260</sup> Luther's hermeneutic, which is grounded in the activity of God, would then shift its centre toward the recipient of God's mission.

*Being in Christ* is a different ontological reality and creates a different hermeneutic. The future promised in the proclamation is not a conditional one based on the if-then structure of Law. Rather, it is the unconditional future created by the promises which are intrinsic to love. This future is given by God through Christ and is eternal. It cannot be stressed enough how important Luther's grounding of this future in Christ is to the presentation

---

<sup>259</sup> These arguments concerning human responsibility in the relationship with God had a long history before Luther. Medieval theologians were aware of falling into the Pelagian heresy. Heikko Oberman contends that Gabriel Biel's doctrine of justification was either Pelagian or was one that had a remarkable combination of *sola gratia* and *sola operibus*. See H.A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, Cambridge, 1963. In opposition to this, Alister McGrath maintains that Biel's doctrine concerning the relationship between God and humanity preserves the divine initiative and graciousness throughout. Biel does this through a covenantal theology. Nevertheless, McGrath also maintains that the criticism which can be directed towards any covenantal theology can also be applied to Biel. McGrath writes: "Any covenantal theology runs the risk of diminishing God's spontaneous graciousness and of making God appear under an obligation to man." See Alister E. McGrath, "The Anti-Pelagian Structure of "Nominalist" Doctrines of Justification" in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensis* 57 no. 1 (1981) 107-119.

<sup>260</sup> It should be noted that Luther used the word covenant but used it without this if-then structure. Kenneth Hagen gives examples where "covenant" and "testament" are equivalent in Luther's writings and goes on to explain that "testament" was used to refer to the *promissio* of a last will and "testament". Kenneth Hagen, "From Testament to Covenant in the Early Sixteenth Century" *Sixteenth Century Journal* III, 1 (April 1972), 1-24.

of his theology. The Western metaphysical tradition also knows of an unbounded and eternal futurity which does not refer to Christ. This futurity is the transcendence of sheer possibility.<sup>261</sup> Luther insists that the future of the "Gospel" is not just sheer possibility but is defined in terms of Christ's righteousness and love.

#### Scripture Applied to Life: Proclamation

The present hermeneutical effect of the future that is created by the Gospel can be seen in how Luther applies Scripture. Repeatedly in his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* 1535, Luther directly

---

<sup>261</sup> See, for example, Friedrich Schiller's 21st Letter in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* where he locates an infinity in the moment before a decision is made when the limitless possibilities become a particular reality. This is the space for human freedom and free will and is not an empty freedom but is filled the content of an aesthetic freedom. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. and tr. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 144ff. Robert Jenson claims that this metaphysic of pure possibility is a result of the Western world hearing the promises of the Gospel while emptying those promises of Christ. Jenson writes: "If the gospel, which asserts this God, is *true*, then this futurity is really there, and we must expect that when the gospel calls our attention to it, it will be noticed also by those of us who do not come to obey the gospel. To such notice, unbounded futurity must present itself as the child's nightmare of eternity, in which at every moment there is always yet another moment, so that no journey can have a goal, no pain a termination, no joy a resting place, into which the meaning of every temporal act and sequence evaporates. If infinity is not the infinity of God, it must be the infinity of the world, that is, nothingness.... Insofar as the call of infinity has been an actual historical phenomenon in the West... radical faith and nihilism have repeatedly and with increasing urgency posited themselves as our only choices." Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pp. 168-169.

applies his exegetical conclusions to his present life-situation. The distance in time between his own situation and the time of the writing of Paul's letter to the Galatians is not a factor when Luther applies the text. This is due to the fact that, for Luther, the promises innate to the "Gospel" of Jesus Christ are made by God to the one who is now addressed by this Gospel-Word.

For instance, the distance of time is not a factor when he applies the text found in Galatians 2:3<sup>262</sup> to his own situation. From this text Luther formulates the principle that "Paul did not require that anyone who wanted to be circumcised should remain uncircumcised, but he did want him to know that circumcision was not necessary for justification."<sup>263</sup> In St. Paul's day, according to Luther, one consequence of this principle was that while Paul might have let Titus be circumcised if there were no extenuating circumstances, the situation dictated another course of action. When he saw that some would have forced Titus to be circumcised, Paul prevented it out of fear that others might then conclude that circumcision was necessary for salvation.<sup>264</sup> Luther applies this principle directly to his own situation where circumcision is no

---

<sup>262</sup> "But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek."

<sup>263</sup> WA 40 I,159,26-27; LW 26,85: "Paulus ergo neminem qui voluit circumcidi, coegit, ut incircumcismus maneret, modo hoc sciret, Circumcisionem non esse necessariam ad iustificationem."

<sup>264</sup> WA 40 I,159,33-35: "Et quidem potuisset permittere Paulus, ut Circumcideratur Titus, tamen, quia videbat se cogi ad hoc, nolebat. Nam si obtinuissent hoc qui urgebant Circumcisionem, statim conclusissent eam esse necessariam ad iusticiam."

longer the issue:

In the same way we grant freedom to everyone to put on a cowl or take it off, to enter a monastery or to leave it, to eat meat or vegetables....And let him know that none of these things avails anything to atone for sins or to win grace....so in our day our opponents stubbornly insist that human traditions cannot be dropped without putting salvation in jeopardy.<sup>265</sup>

This application of Scripture to his present situation shows that Luther was not primarily interested in the world behind the text.<sup>266</sup> Rather, his first interest is in what James Arne Nestingen calls the "world in front of the text".<sup>267</sup> Focusing on Luther's exposition of Genesis, Nestingen observes that the patriarchs and the community in Wittenberg share a number of common characteristics:

Both live in the realm of the law, battered by the powers of sin, death, and the devil. Both have heard a word of promise that has given them hope and the confidence of faith in the face of difficulties. Both communities experience tension as they struggle under the law, awaiting the realization of the gospel.<sup>268</sup>

---

<sup>265</sup> WA 40 I,160,11-18; LW 26,85-86: "Sic non relinquimus cuique liberum, induere vel exuere cucullum, ingredi vel deserere monasterium, carnibus aut holeribus vesci,...non fidei faciat Sciatque haec omnia nihil valere ad satisfaciendum pro peccatis et ad promerendam gratiam etc.... Ita hodie adversarii fortissime contendunt humanas traditiones non posse omitti sine periculo salutis,"

<sup>266</sup> See the note on page 72 concerning "*Sitz im Leben*".

<sup>267</sup> James Arne Nestingen, "Luther in Front of the Text: The Genesis Commentary" *Word and World* XIV no.2 (1994) 186-194. See WA 7,58,31-34: "Redeundo ad id, quod coepimus, puto per haec clarum fieri, Non esse satis nec Christianum, si Christi opera, vitam et verba praedicemus historico more, ceu res quasdam gestas, quas nosse satis sit ad vitae formandae exemplum... (*Tractatus de libertate christiana. 1520.*)

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*,p.191.

This capacity to apply Scripture to Luther's own life situation is a characteristic of the Gospel-Word. The distance between text and reader is not bridged by the interpretive efforts of someone who tries to get behind the text.<sup>269</sup> Rather, Luther and his congregation are connected to the people of Scripture across time and space by the fact that they share the same future. This future is the one promised in the Gospel. It is a future with Jesus Christ. As James S. Preus points out in his analysis of Luther's *Dictata super Psalterium*, this also means that the saints of the Old Testament share this same future and therefore the dividing line between "letter" and "Spirit" cannot be located as the division between the Old and the New Testament.<sup>270</sup> The Gospel creates a common future for all God's saints through the promises of God. The circumstances of time and space are not the determining components.

This does not mean, however, that the same thing that God's speaking did in the time of St. Paul will happen in Luther's time.

---

<sup>269</sup> Luther criticizes such attempts a large number of times. In his later commentary on Galatians a sample of examples can be seen at: LW 26,15; 50; 90; 92; 97; 111; 156; 194; 221; 246; 250; 283; 301; 388; 395; 425; 450. See also Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993),p.15. Along similar lines already noted with Nestingen's analysis of Luther's use of Scripture in Genesis, Hagen writes with Luther's work on Galatians in mind: "The point is that Luther and the Bible are inseparable. The modern discipline of method and hermeneutics is based on the presupposition of the distance between the ancient text of Scripture and the modern 'interpreter.' Such notions of distance from antiquity and the need to bridge the gap through interpretation were foreign to Luther in his work on Scripture, although such notions were starting among others in Luther's day.... Luther warned against interpretation. The Bible is its own interpreter for him,..."

<sup>270</sup> James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969),pp.212-225.

God's speaking in Jesus Christ caused St. Paul to resolve the complicated religious issues of including a Gentile named Titus into the community of Israel, the people of the promise. This same speaking caused Luther to conclude and to polemically state that all human attempts for getting on God's good side, is to deny the "Gospel" which *proclaims* that God already loves the addressed in Christ Jesus. As Nicholas Wolterstorff has shown, a single locutionary act can produce several different illocutionary acts for different addressees. He gives the example of a mother stating that there are only two more days until Christmas and thereby suggesting to her children that their excited anticipation is justified. With the same words, she also communicates to her husband that he should stop procrastinating and get the shopping done.<sup>271</sup> From this analysis, Nicholas Wolterstorff goes on to deal with Scripture in a way that is in keeping with Luther's hermeneutic. St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, was acting as a *prophet* and thus:

God would have been saying various things to those Christians in Rome. Possibly all the things God said to any of them; then again, perhaps with some in the text God said one thing to some of them and something different to others of them. Furthermore, it may be that by Paul's doing those things, God was addressing those Christians in Rome but other human beings as well. Even you and me, perhaps.<sup>272</sup>

---

<sup>271</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.55.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, p.56.

In Luther's hermeneutic, it is the same God who is speaking to different people in different circumstances. Luther was aware that there were different senses of a single passage of Scripture. This is the result of God speaking several illocutionary acts of commanding, asking and promising with a single locutionary act.

As already pointed out throughout this chapter, God's speaking is one that brings Christ to the addressed and, in so doing, lovingly gives a future. The hermeneutical function of Luther's distinction between a Word of "Law" and a Word of "Gospel" is one that has a decidedly eschatological flavour. The Word of promise is addressed to one, who by faith, is *simul iustus et peccator*. The promise points toward a time when the one addressed by such a Word will be completely purified. As Luther says in his *Disputatio de iustificatione* (1536):

At this point we say that original sin, although forgiveness has been imputed and thus sin is removed so that it is not imputed, nevertheless, is not substantially or essentially destroyed except in the conflagration of fire by which the whole world and our bodies will be completely purified on the last day.<sup>273</sup>

---

<sup>273</sup> WA 39 I,95,16-19; LW 34,164: "Nos autem hic dicimus, quod peccatum originale, quamquam est remissum imputative, et ita submovetur, ut non imputetur, tamen non tollitur substantialiter aut realiter, nisi in conflagratione ignis, quo omnino purgantur totus mundus et corpora nostra in novissimo die." In Luther's view of history, life is gradually winding down as one approaches the end of history. For example, when Luther attempts to explain why the king of Egypt would be attracted to a 60 year old Sarah he teaches: "...our age has deteriorated to such an extent that at that time a sixty-year-old woman was comparable in both beauty and vigor to one who is thirty years old today. At the time nature was livelier and hardier than it is now, in the old age of the world. For just as there was a gradual increase in wickedness, so there was a decline in the gifts with which God endows the godly." LW 2,303-304.

This eschatological Word of promise has the hermeneutical function of joining together all who are addressed by this Word into one eschatological community. A basis for community is established between all who are so addressed despite the distancing power of time and space. George W. Forell stresses that there is no disjunction between the blessings of the promised future and the Word of that promise. He does this by underscoring that for Luther the axiological and teleological aspects of eschatology were not mutually exclusive but complementary:

This future which is coming towards us is not merely a personal and subjective hope, but a hope for the entire people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the living and not of the dead. Through the people of God this eschatological hope becomes a hope for all people, indeed for all creation.<sup>274</sup>

The distancing powers of time and space are breached via the awaited and "alien" righteousness of Jesus Christ.

### Conclusion

Luther's version of the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" is intimately connected to his doctrine of *justification by faith*.

---

<sup>274</sup> George W. Forell, "Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought" in *Martin Luther: Theologian of the Church* Word & World Supplement Series 2, ed. William R. Russell (St. Paul: Word and World, 1994), p.46.

Both act as hermenutical principles in and of themselves.<sup>275</sup> They are both characterized by a stress on the relational aspects of the communication that occurs between God and humanity. Such a focus on this relationship has ontological implications since, for Luther, trust in God concerns the future and changes one's identity. As hermeneutic, both the doctrine of *justification by faith* and the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" pulls the gaze of the one addressed by God away from the self.

According to Luther, human beings are cursed by being that we are hopelessly self-centred. One of the symptoms of this problem of sin is that we make our future and identity dependent on our efforts. We make our lives our own project. Luther calls this "trying to be justified through the Law".<sup>276</sup> The "Law" is spoken by God in Christ Jesus in order to "kill" such self-creating and self-redeeming projects.<sup>277</sup> Luther puts it ironically by saying such self-centred attempts at identity and salvation can be compared to a epileptic seeking help from the plague, or a leper from another leper, or a beggar dreaming of being rich through the assistance of another beggar.<sup>278</sup> Trying to be justified by the "Law" is like

---

<sup>275</sup> The doctrine of *justification by faith* will be analysed in the next chapter.

<sup>276</sup> WA 40 I 613,28-29: "Ideo per legem velle iustificari idem est,"

<sup>277</sup> See pages 75 and following.

<sup>278</sup> WA 40 I 614,13-15: "Ut si laborans morbo comitiali adiungat sibi pestem, Aut si leprosus ad leprosum, mendicus ad mendicum veniret, alter opem laturus alteri et locupletaturus illum."

seeking help from the very thing which is killing us.

The "Word" of "Law" and "Gospel" is given particularly to and for us to free us from our own self-involved attempts at finding redemption. This "Word" is Jesus Christ and is not immanently found in some aspect of human life. This aspect of Luther's hermeneutic is at odds with rationalism's assumptions. Luther's suspicion that such attempts at finding God immanently are inherently self-serving mirror some post-Enlightenment critiques of the narratives of immanence. Perhaps, the most clear expression of this sentiment comes from Emmanuel Lévinas. Jeffrey Bloechl identifies Emmanuel Lévinas as one post-modern thinker who has consistently judged Western thought's "long adventure with immanence" as "violent".<sup>279</sup> Adriaan Peperzak summarizes Lévinas' revolt against Western use of immanence for its construction of the Good in the following way:

In any case, the project of Western philosophy has excluded the possibility of ego's transcending itself toward a God who would be absolutely other and irreducible to any element or to the whole of the universe. Under the name of God, the philosophers, as did the theologians, built many idols, as for example Logos, *Esse ipsum*, Substance, Nature, or Spirit, but a God neither known or preknown, nor concealed in the unconscious or preconscious memory of conscience, a God who must reveal in order to be accepted - such a God is impossible within the traditional framework.<sup>280</sup>

While it is certainly true that Luther used the traditional

---

<sup>279</sup> Jeffrey Bloechl, "Lévinas, Daniel Webster, and Us: Radical Responsibility and the Problem of Evil" *International Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (1998) 259-273; p.261.

<sup>280</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993),p.51.

language and conceptuality expressed in such terms as *Logos*, *Being*, *Substance*, *Nature*, and *Spirit* he did so in such a way that God remains transcendent to sinful human life. God becomes present only in revelation. For Luther, this revelation is the result of the trinitarian life of God where the "Gospel" spoken for us in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, and the "Spirit intercedes for us in groanings too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)<sup>281</sup>

---

<sup>281</sup> See page 19 above.

## Chapter Two

## JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

## The Beginnings of Luther's New Hermeneutic

In a study comparing the hermeneutics of Martin Luther and Johannes von Staupitz, David C. Steinmetz comments that since the 1928 publication of Karl Bauer's *Die Wittenberger Universitätstheologie und die Anfänge der Deutschen Reformation*, the thesis has been widely accepted that it was the discovery of a new hermeneutic that caused Luther to move from being a monk to being a reformer.<sup>282</sup> Gerhard Ebeling has also written that Luther research has clarified Bauer's thesis but has not contradicted it.<sup>283</sup> There is an inherent connection between Luther's new hermeneutic and the doctrine of justification by faith which became the touchstone for reform and counter-reform.

According to Reinhart Staats, while this connection between justification by faith and Luther's hermeneutic has been firmly

---

<sup>282</sup> David C. Steinmetz, "Hermeneutic and Old Testament Interpretation in Staupitz and the Young Martin Luther" *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 70 (1979) 24-58.

<sup>283</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutic" in *Lutherstudien*, Band 1, (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1971),p.6.

established in Luther scholarship, it has also been somewhat of an embarrassment that no definitive dating of Luther's hermeneutical discovery can be made.<sup>284</sup> A large body of literature, however, has been produced in the search of the elusive point where Luther's writings exhibit the change where his theology and hermeneutic became significantly different than the range of acceptable opinions in the Roman Catholic teaching of Luther's day.

One element in this discussion is Luther's own reminiscences about that change. In 1545 Luther wrote in the preface of the Wittenberg edition of his works that this change had occurred in 1519, and that this change involved a new understanding of the *iustitia Dei*.<sup>285</sup> According to Luther's memory in 1545, it was his reading of Romans 1:17<sup>286</sup> which became the focal point for his discovery concerning the righteousness of God. It has been argued with force, however, that Luther's writings exhibit this change in

---

<sup>284</sup> Reinhart Staats, "Augustinus 'De spiritu et littera' in Luthers reformatorischer Erkenntnis" *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 98 (1987) 28-47. Staats lists attempts at dating between the extremes of 1513 at the beginning of his first lectures on the Psalms and 1519, the year of the Leipziger Disputation.

<sup>285</sup> WA 54,185,12ff.

<sup>286</sup> WA 54,185,12-20: "Interim eo anno [1519] iam redieram ad Psalterium denuo interpretandum, fretus eo, quod exercitator essem, postquam S. Pauli Epistolas ad Romanos, ad Galatas, et eam, quae est ad Ebraeos, tractassem in scholis. Miro certe ardore captus fueram cognoscendi Pauli in epistola ad Rom., sed obstiterat hactenus non frigidus circum praecordia sanguis, sed unicum vocabulum, quod est Cap. 1: Iustitia Dei revelatur in illo. Oderam enim vocabulum istud 'Iustitia Dei', quod usu et consuetudine omnium doctorum doctus eram philosophice intelligere de iustitia (ut vocant) formali seu activa, qua Deus est iustus, et peccatores iniustosque punit."

hermeneutic and theology earlier than 1519.<sup>287</sup> In these discussions, much depends on how righteousness is defined. Some scholars have argued that Luther's later understanding of passive righteousness does not show up in his writings until 1525.<sup>288</sup> These discussions have been further complicated in the literature by the coining of the word "Turmerlebnis"<sup>289</sup> to identify an event that was probably more "fluid" and gradual than such a word suggests.<sup>290</sup> Also, it is also not very helpful to try and make Luther's "discovery" the

---

<sup>287</sup> See, for example: Bernhard Lohse, *Der Durchbruch der Reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), pp. X-XII.

<sup>288</sup> See, for example: Lowell C. Green, "Faith, Righteousness, and Justification: New Light on their Development under Luther and Melancton," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 4 (1972) 65-86.

<sup>289</sup> Albrecht Peters identifies Luther's *Turmerlebnis* with the following four markers: 1) He moves from a position which understood the *iustitia Dei* as the righteousness by which God judged sinners to a position which understood the *iustitia Dei* as the righteousness by which God clothed sinners; 2) he interprets Rom. 1:17 in light of Rom. 3:21 (the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law); 3) This new understanding of the "righteousness of God" is extended to include God's works, strength, word, wisdom, salvation and glory; 4) This new understanding is prefigured in St. Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter*. Albrecht Peters, "Luthers Turmerlebnis," in *Der Durchbruch der Reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther*, herausgegeben Bernhard Lohse, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), p.246.

<sup>290</sup> See Mark U. Edwards, Jr. *Printing, Propoganda, and Martin Luther*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p.170. Edwards contends that many of the sources by which the reconstructions of Luther's early development were written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and were affected by "romantic" notions of change. The scholars influenced by such notions exhibited an special admiration for sudden conversions. Another possible explanation for this construction of a sudden conversion stem's from Luther's 1545 memories of the "breakthrough." A. Hamel suggests that these recollections might have been patterned after the eighth book of St. Augustine's confessions. A. Hamel, *Der junge Luther und Augustin* (2 vols: Gütersloh, 1934-5), pp.157-162.

centre or even the jumping off point of the entire Reformation.<sup>291</sup>

The concern of this study, however, is not focused on the chronological development of Luther's hermeneutic or even its significance for the rest of the Reformation. As already noted, the interest of this study is the relationship between Luther's hermeneutic and his theology. The relationship between these will become clear as the doctrine of justification by faith is examined and it becomes evident that for this doctrine to be properly formulated it must lead to the event of "justification" before God. At this point in the study, however, we begin with the bare fact that Luther's hermeneutic represents a fundamental change in the theology concerning justification by faith. Luther was aware of the connection between his hermeneutic and the doctrine of justification by faith. Commenting on Galatians 3:10,<sup>292</sup> Luther writes: "No one understands this passage unless he has the correct doctrine of justification."<sup>293</sup>

---

<sup>291</sup> In this regard, Alister E. McGrath asserts that the term "theological breakthrough" is better than "reformatorsche Entdeckung" because of the all too easy tendency to equate Luther's personal preoccupations with the shape of the Reformation as a whole. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification from 1500 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.9.

<sup>292</sup> "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.'"

<sup>293</sup> WA 40 I,397,18-19; LW 26,252: "Hunc locum nemo intelligit, nisi probe teneat articulum iustificationis."

## "Righteousness"

The development of Luther's hermeneutic of proclamation centred around the meaning of the word "righteousness." Luther's attempts to interpret this concept were complicated by the fact that the Bible was written in the Hebrew and Greek languages while much of the tradition of interpretation was passed on in Latin. Luther, with the scholarship of his time, was aware that there might be significant differences and assumptions behind different words and phrases of various languages. The semantic field of a given word includes its synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and homophones so that translating particular words from one semantic field to another creates special problems.<sup>294</sup> It is impossible to "transplant" the rich web of associations, images and meanings attached to a particular word within one semantic field in its translation to another.

This difficulty becomes particularly apparent in an analysis of the history of the meanings associated with the expression "righteousness of God." A short history of the shifts in meaning associated with the transition from צדקה to δικαιοσύνη to *iustitia* is helpful to establish the context in which Luther attempted to use the concept "the righteousness of God." The "weight" of the

---

<sup>294</sup> Alister E. McGrath, "The Righteousness of God' from Augustine to Luther", *Studia Theologia* 36 (1982) 63-78.

semantic field associated with the Hebrew צדקה was one that stressed the relational and theological aspects of the word.<sup>295</sup> Luther's understanding of "righteousness" is one that is governed by this Hebrew semantic field. An example of this can be seen in his comments on Galatians 3:13 which claims: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us - for it is written: Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree."<sup>296</sup> Luther teaches that the central emphasis of this passage is on the phrase ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν. He then concludes that "we should not imagine Christ as an innocent and private person who is holy and righteous only for Himself, . . ."<sup>297</sup>

Luther's understanding of the phrase "the righteousness of God" can be placed over against the emphases that had arisen from the Latin and Greek semantic fields. The relational emphasis of the Hebrew צדקה was imperceptibly changed in the following ways. One

---

<sup>295</sup> See: Hermann Cremer, *Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhang ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzung*, (Gütersloh, 1899). Referenced in Alister E. McGrath, "The Righteousness of God' from Augustine to Luther", *Studia Theologia* 36 (1982) 63-78. צדקה fundamentally refers to an actual relationship between two persons. In the Hebrew Bible it refers to the covenantal relationship between God and the community of Israel. See also: Alister E. McGrath, "Justice and Justification," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1982) 403-418; esp. pp. 406ff. צדקה concerns the right order of things and the right order of things is closely connected to God's liberation of Israel. Thus צדקה includes redemption for the poor, needy and oppressed and is intimately related to mercy, victory and reconciliation. According to McGrath, צדקה must be distinguished from the Greek δικαιοσύνη which is close to the western concept of *iustitia distributiva*.

<sup>296</sup> As given in LW 26,276.

<sup>297</sup> See WA 40 I 448,2-4; LW 26,287: "Ideo **sthets allein auff dem** vocabulo: 'yper ymon.' Hoc est vitium omnium Sophistarum et patrum, ut faciant Christum privatam personam."

meaning arising from the Latin world was one that stressed the judicial nature of "righteousness." For instance, Cicero had concluded that the origin of justice is to found in the natural force of Law.<sup>298</sup> Cicero had also recognized that equivalent words in different languages had a different force. He had noted that for the Greeks, Law contains the idea of granting to each his own (Νόμος is derived from νέμω "to distribute") and for the Latins, Law contains the idea of choosing (*lex* from *lego* "to choose").<sup>299</sup> For Cicero, both ideas are proper to Law. Both are based on gifts of Nature given to humanity which enable them to unite with one another and which maximize greater fellowship.<sup>300</sup> Centuries later, in a Christian context, Julian of Eclanum had applied a Ciceronian definition of *lex civilis* to God. St. Augustine had criticized this application by noting that the justice found in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard could not be fit into this Ciceronian definition.<sup>301</sup>

---

<sup>298</sup> Cicero, *de Legibus* I,19. Cicero in twenty-eight volumes, XVI, DE RE PUBLICA, DE LEGIBUS, with an English translation by Clinton Walker Keyes, (London: William Heinemann, Ltd, 1928),p.317.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> Cicero, *de Legibus* I,17. Cicero in twenty-eight volumes, XVI, DE RE PUBLICA, DE LEGIBUS, with an English translation by Clinton Walker Keyes, (London: William Heinemann, Ltd, 1928),p.315. See also Cicero, *de re publica* I,39. Cicero in twenty-eight volumes, XVI, DE RE PUBLICA, DE LEGIBUS, with an English translation by Clinton Walker Keyes, (London: William Heinemann, Ltd, 1928),p.65.

<sup>301</sup> Augustine, *Contra Iulianum* lib I,35. Alister E. McGrath notes that the Ciceronian definition of *iustitia* eventually became attributed to Augustine: "...Abailard reproduces the

A purely judicial model for defining the *iustitia Dei* cannot find a proper place for the mercy of God. How is God's mercy related to the *iustitia Dei* when *iustitia* is defined in legal categories? St. Anselm was one of the more influential Christian thinkers who pointedly asked this question. Writing in Latin, St. Anselm of Canterbury assumed a judicial definition of *iustitia* which caused him to ask God:

But how do you spare the wicked if You are all-just and supremely just? ... Or what kind of justice is it to give everlasting life to him who merits eternal death?<sup>302</sup>

A little later, St. Anselm states that the very definition of *iustitia* demands that God "reward the good with good and the bad with bad."<sup>303</sup> Therefore, St. Anselm claims that God's goodness is of such a quality that it goes beyond human definitions, so that God's goodness is one that is beyond that which can be conceived.<sup>304</sup> God's

---

Ciceronian definition of justice without critical comment: *iustitia virtus est, communi utilitate servata, suam cuique tribuens dignitatem...* This was developed further by Stephen Langton, who distinguished three senses of the term *iustitia*, two of which are clearly dependent upon Cicero. Whilst Godfrey of Poitiers... appears to have introduced an important innovation of considerable significance: the opinion that *iustitia reddit unicuique quod suum est is attributed to Augustine!*" Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A history of the Christian doctrine of Justification, The Beginnings to the Reformation*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), pp.61-62.

<sup>302</sup> St. Anselm, *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, tr. M.J. Charlesworth, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p.125. "Verum malis quomodo parcis, si es totus iustus et summe iustus?... Aut quae iustitia est merenti mortem aeternam dare vitam sempiternam?"

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p.127. "Etenim licet bonis bona et malis mala ex bonitate retribuas, ratio tamen iustitiae hoc postulare videtur."

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, p.129. "An quia iustum est te sic esse bonum, ut nequeas intelligi melior,... Hoc utique non fieret, si esses bonus tantum retribuendo et non parcendo, et si faceres de non bonis tantum

mercy is the result of God's supreme righteousness.<sup>305</sup> As a starting point, St. Anselm assumes that God cannot do anything which violates his own nature and that God's attribute of righteousness is not an *accident* of God's nature but is *essential* to it.<sup>306</sup> Therefore, God's dealing with human beings with mercy must become an attribute of God's nature. In this way, St. Anselm theologially distinguishes human definitions of justice which match good with good and the bad with bad with God's justice which incorporates mercy.

In a *scholia* on Psalm 9 from his early lectures on the Psalms, Luther also assumes a Latin definition of *iustitia*:

"Justice," however, is said to be the restoration to each one of what belongs to him. Hence equity comes before justice and is, as it were, the prerequisite.<sup>307</sup>

Luther's early use of *redditio unicuique quod suum est* for a definition of *iustitia* might be a direct result of his extensive reading of Cicero, but more likely arises from the theological discussions of his day.<sup>308</sup>

---

bonos, et non etiam de malis. Hoc itaque modo iustum est ut parcas malis, et ut facias bonos de malis."

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 129. "...vere idcirco es misericors, quia summe iustus es."

<sup>306</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus homo*, I, 12.

<sup>307</sup> WA 3,91,10-11; LW 10,95: "Iustitia autem dicitur redditio unicuique quod suum est. Unde prior est equitas quam iustitia et quasi prerequisite."

<sup>308</sup> Luther certainly admired Cicero. See LW 54,475: "Cicero was an excellent philosopher because he worked very hard, even if he didn't reach his goal. He will sit much higher [in the

Within the constraints of such a definition, the relationship between the *iustitia Dei* and the *iustitia hominibus* was very complex. It occupied the labour of the best theologians for many generations after St. Anselm and before Luther. As Heiko A. Oberman points out:

Unlike those historians who wish to treat the 'late Middle Ages' as a homogenous epoch and who thereby sacrifice the multidimensional vision, we must not underestimate as factors in the *Wegestreit* the length and diversity of the path stretching from Occam to Steinbach.<sup>309</sup>

This long path of discussion regarding the "righteousness of God" and its complexity is reflected by the fact that theologians who belonged to the same methodological school, nevertheless, disagreed sharply on this one issue. For instance, Gregory of Rimini (+ 1358) criticizes Ockham's teaching that people could receive the grace necessary for salvation by doing their moral best. Gregory was in turn criticized by Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420-1495) who returned to the soteriology of Ockham.<sup>310</sup> David C.

---

world to come] than Duke George or the margrave, who died between two whores. Oh, if they sat where Cicero does they would be saved!"

<sup>309</sup> Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Masters of the Reformation: The Emergence of a New Intellectual Climate in Europe*, tr. by Dennis Martin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.27. Oberman mentions Gregory von Rimini, Petrus d'Ailly, Johannes Gerson and Gabriel Biel in that long way between Ockham and Steinbach.

<sup>310</sup> *Ozment*, op.cit., pp.41-42. Heiko A. Oberman puts forth the thesis that the *via Gregorii* was a designation for a movement that was distinct from the *via moderna*. See Heiko A. Oberman, "Headwaters of the Reformation" reprinted in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought*, (Edinburgh, 1986), pp.39-83. Alister McGrath points out that the statutes of the University of Paris identify both Gregory of Rimini and William of

Steinmetz and Denis R. Janz identify a "late medieval Augustinianism that cut across methodological lines and was characterized by an anti-Pelagian protest against the dominant and various expressions of *pelagiani moderni*."<sup>311</sup> It is significant to note that Luther had carefully studied Biel's voluminous *Sacri canonis missae expositio* for his formal education. This might help to explain Luther's early use of the Latin definition of righteousness.<sup>312</sup>

Whatever Luther's relationship might have been to this long line of discussion, by the time he had reached Psalm 70 in the *Dictata* his definition of *iustitia* had changed.<sup>313</sup> For the purposes

---

Ockham as leading representatives of the *via moderna*. Nevertheless, while Gregory of Rimini's writings might be philosophically similar to William of Ockham his theology is radically Augustinian. See Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation: An Introduction*, second edition, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 81. Leif Grane points out that the starting point for Gregory of Rimini's theology was the sinfulness of humanity so that the assertion that a human being could love God above all else was the sinful assertion that human beings could redeem themselves. Gabriel Biel started from considering human intellect and from that vantage point loving God above all else becomes one act belonging to the set of all possible acts. Leif Grane, *Contra Gabrielem: Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Gabriel Biel in der Disputatio Contra Scholasticam Theologiam 1517*, (Gyldendal: Aarhus Stiftsbogtrykkerie, 1962), p. 188.

<sup>311</sup> Denis R. Janz, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology*, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), p. 165.

<sup>312</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, tr. James L. Schaaf, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 71.

<sup>313</sup> See: Regim Prenter, "Die Auslegung von Ps 70,2 in den Dictata," in *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther*, herausgegeben von Bernhard Lohse, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), pp. 203-242. See also: Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd, 1985), pp. 119ff.

of fixing the date of Luther's theological breakthrough, the setting apart of Psalm 70 of the *Dictata* as a turning point raises a number of complex issues. These issues include a discussion on the proper ordering of the text of the Weimar edition<sup>314</sup> and the fact that later in the *Dictata* Luther seems to return to the Ciceronian definition of *iustitia* familiar in Gabriel Biel's theological project.<sup>315</sup> For the purposes of this study, however, it is sufficient to identify the change that took place in Luther's understanding of the *iustitia Dei*.

When Luther comes to the Psalmist's prayer "*Deliver me, O my God*" of Psalm 70, he concludes that the believer seeks refuge in God in three areas. With the Psalmist, one prays: to be delivered from the sin of Adam; to be delivered from the sin of those who are unwilling to be made righteous by faith in Christ; and to be delivered from the sin of those who prefer their own righteousness to God's.<sup>316</sup> This threefold prayer asks for a righteousness that is

---

<sup>314</sup> See: Heinrich Bornkamm, "Zur Frage der Iustitia Dei beim jungen Luther," in *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther*, herausgegeben Bernhard Lohse, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), pp.292-294.

<sup>315</sup> See WA 4,262,2-7. See also: Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, tr. James L. Schaaf, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985),p.87. Martin Brecht asserts that already in Psalm 71:2 Luther interprets the passage 'Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son' in a way that was in keeping with Biel's reference to the judging Christ in the Mass. If Brecht is correct, the setting of Luther's theological breakthrough with the timing of his interpretation of Psalm 70 would be thrown into doubt.

<sup>316</sup> WA 3,454,16-20: "Qui sunt peccatores sicut omnes, qui sunt ex Adam. Deinde addunt ipsi, quod contra legem agunt, scilicet nolentes ex peccatoribus iusti fieri per fidem Christi, que est lex vera et lux vera. Tercio sunt iniqui, quia suam statuunt iustitiam, preferentes eam iustitie dei."

very different from that which results from "doing that which is in you."<sup>317</sup> In this *iustitia*, granted by God, the one who prays is directed away from "righteousness" as a possession of the human being toward God's "righteousness."<sup>318</sup> According to Luther, this righteousness is faith in Christ, since Christ is nothing else but the power and righteousness of God.<sup>319</sup> Luther concludes from this definition of righteousness, that when one's attention is turned to the question of one's personal righteousness everything must then be understood tropologically:<sup>320</sup>

Truth, wisdom, strength, salvation, righteousness, namely, that by which He makes us strong, safe, righteous, wise, etc. So it is with the works of God. All of them are Christ literally, and all of them are faith in Him morally.<sup>321</sup>

Thus, for Luther, the righteousness of God, which includes ethical

---

<sup>317</sup> Gabriel Biel, an influential theologian of the *via moderna*, taught that God had ordained to grant mercy to all who had done what is in them (*facere quod in se est*).

<sup>318</sup> WA 3,457,38-39: "In hoc tandem versu recta distinctio iustitiae Dei et humane describitur."

<sup>319</sup> WA 3,458,5-7: "Et proprie Christum hic exprimit. Qui est potentia Dei et iustitia dei per maximam et profundissimam humilitatem: ideo iam est in altissimis per summam gloriam."

<sup>320</sup> The *tropological* or *moral* sense of Scripture was one of the senses described in the *Quadrigena* (see above: p.27.). Alister E. McGrath succinctly describes these four senses as follows: *literal* - the text is taken at face value; *allegorical* - "which interpreted certain passages of Scripture to produce statements of doctrine"; *tropological* - interpreted Scripture to produce ethical guidance; *anagogical* - pointed "toward the future fulfillment of the divine promises in the New Jerusalem." Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p.177.

<sup>321</sup> WA 3,458,9-11; LW 10,402: "Veritas, sapientia, virtus, salus, iustitia, scilicet qua nos facit fortes, salvos, iustos, sapientes &c. Sic opera dei, viae dei: quae omnia Christus est literaliter. Et fides eius moraliter haec omnia."

and moral behaviour, is shifted from an abstract understanding to a dynamic relationship formed between Christ and the believer in faith.

That righteousness was now to be defined in terms of a relationship with God, fueled Luther's attack on Aristotle's use of δικαιοσύνη.<sup>322</sup> Aristotle had attempted to construct an ethic which would be suitable for the polis which, in turn, caused an ontological breach between a person's identity or status and that person's behaviour. This breach is the result of the fact that the attempt to find an ethic which is good for the whole political community is a teleological venture. Aristotle had asserted that it was indeed possible "to do injustice without thereby being unjust."<sup>323</sup> If stealing and adultery are deemed bad for the community, these activities are judged to be wrong in such a way that the "ontological status" of the person committing these acts remains unaffected.<sup>324</sup>

In such a teleological system, it is crucial to find a way to

---

<sup>322</sup> See Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p.136. McGrath writes: "...we propose to demonstrate that Luther's revolt against reason in general, and Aristotle in particular, is a direct consequence of his discovery of the true meaning of the 'righteousness of God'."

<sup>323</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (582), tr. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985), p.135.

<sup>324</sup> See: *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.52 where Aristotle says that "it does not matter if a decent person has taken from a base person, or a base person from a decent person, or if a decent or a base person has committed adultery." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985), p.125.

judge between competing definitions of "the good" which exist within that political community. For Aristotle, there is a positive connection between right reason and "the good."<sup>325</sup> According to this theory about reason and righteousness, a good person will choose the alternative which practical reason has determined to be the best. Thus, it is possible for a person to have right reason and thereby be good and at the same time to be a person who sins through incontinence. According to Aristotle, in the case of incontinence, right reason is suspended by weakness or passion at the point of a moral violation.<sup>326</sup> Weakness and passion can take a person out of their "right mind." Aristotle's teleological understanding of justice is not only related to the aforementioned ontological breach but also implies that "justice is a mean... while injustice concerns the extremes."<sup>327</sup>

---

<sup>325</sup> When Luther encountered this opinion in his theological opponents of the *via moderna* he said that their sin went beyond that of the Pelagians. Excepting Gregory of Rimini, Luther condemns the scholastics because they taught that a good work can be performed through the natural dictates of right reason to which the will can naturally conform. WA 2,394,31-395,5: "Certum est enim, Modernos (quos vocant) cum Schotists et Thomistis in hac re (id est libero arbitrio et gratia) consentire, excepto uno Gregorio Ariminense, quem omnes damnant, qui et ipse eos Pelagianis deteriores esse et recte et efficaciter convincit.... Idem certe dicunt Scholastici, dum sine gratia opus bonum, sed non meritorium fieri docent. Deinde super Pelagianos addunt, hominem habere dictamen naturale rectae rationis, cui se possit naturaliter conformare voluntas...."

<sup>326</sup> See Risto Saarinen, "Moral Weakness and Human Action in John Buridan's Ethics," in Heikki Kirjavainen, ed. *Faith, Will, and Grammar: Some Themes of Intensional Logic and Semantics in Medieval and Reformation Thought*, (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1986), pp.109-112.

<sup>327</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985), p.134. (Nicomachean Ethics 5.81). McGrath points out that one result of Aristotle's

Luther's relational definition of righteousness, with righteousness ultimately being judged in the "face of God", did not introduce an Aristotelian ontological breach between a person's identity and that person's righteousness.<sup>328</sup> For Luther, it is not possible to define righteousness before God in terms of a mean. Luther made two claims regarding the righteousness of God. Luther insists that the Evangelical doctrine is centred, contrary to Aristotle, on the affirmation that a good person will perform good works and an evil person will perform evil works.<sup>329</sup> At the same time, Luther insists that a person is not made righteous by doing righteous acts.<sup>330</sup> These seemingly contradictory statements are held together by the proclamation of the "Gospel," which is the promise of God in Christ Jesus.

---

understanding is that when the sphere of *δικαιοσύνη* is defined as that of the *πόλις*, the concept of the 'righteousness of God' has no immediate practical significance. See: Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification: The Beginnings to the Reformation*, (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.10.

<sup>328</sup> Bernard Lohse identifies the distinction between *coram Deo* and *coram hominibus* as being central in the development of his doctrines concerning Justification, the distinction between Law and Gospel, and the distinction between the two Kingdoms of God. See Bernhard Lohse, "Gewissen und Autorität bei Luther" (1974) in *Evangelium in der Geschichte: Studien zu Luther und der Reformation*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), p.271. Lohse writes: "Es ist also die strikte Unterscheidung zwischen dem „coram Deo“ und dem „coram hominibus“, welche zu Luthers Neufassung des Gewissens führt. An dieser Stelle hängt Luthers Verständnis des Gewissens mit sämtlichen zentralen Themen seiner reformatorischen Theologie Zusammen, also mit der Rechtfertigungslehre, mit der Unterscheidung zwischen Gesetz und Evangelium, mit der Zwei-Reiche-Lehre oder der Unterscheidung zwischen den beiden Regimenten Gottes."

<sup>329</sup> See WA 42,190,35ff.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

## Alien Righteousness

Alister McGrath identifies three main lines of interpretation in the medieval church concerning the *iustitia Dei*: 1) it is the righteousness by which God is righteous, which is shown in God's faithfulness to the promises of salvation; 2) it is the righteousness with which the sinner is endowed by God; 3) it understood the *iustitia Dei* as the assurance that God, in his righteousness, will reward those who act justly.<sup>331</sup> However, there existed ways in which a Pelagian understanding of *iustitia Dei* could be avoided at a theoretical level while remaining essentially Pelagian at the existential level. One example is afforded by Gabriel Biel.

Biel taught that there was nothing in humanity that could put God into debt and in so doing tried to keep the integrity of the *potentia Dei absoluta* "intact" within the system of his theology.

---

<sup>331</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A history of the Christian doctrine of Justification, The Beginnings to the Reformation*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1986). These three lines of interpretation correspond exactly to what Sam K. Williams identifies as the three main views concerning the meaning of *δικαιοσύνη Θεου* found in the scholarly literature of the last twenty-five years. In biblical scholarship "righteousness of God" has been interpreted as: (1) that human righteousness which "counts" in God's eyes (*theou* being understood as an objective genitive), (2) God's own saving power or activity (*theou* taken as a subjective genitive), and (3) God's gift of righteousness (*theou* understood as a genitive of origin). Sam K. Williams, "The 'Righteousness of God' in Romans," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980) 241-290. This correspondence suggests to me that the medieval arguments about the nature of the "righteousness of God" are rooted in the ambiguity of the greek *δικαιοσύνη Θεου*.

By having such a structure for describing the relationship between humanity and a judging God, Biel avoided a Pelagian theology at the theoretical level.<sup>332</sup> Out of the many possibilities an absolutely free and powerful God could choose, according to Biel, was that God has graciously ordained to enter a "pact" with humanity through Jesus Christ. This covenant was an expression of what scholastic theology called the *potentia Dei ordinata*. In the *potentia Dei ordinata*, God has deemed to accept as righteous the actions of one *qui facit quod in se est*.

God's graciousness is not exhibited within this "order" but in God's choosing of this particular "order" of salvation.<sup>333</sup> Therefore, within the "order" graciously ordained by God, people will necessarily look to their own lives and ask whether they have done all that is within them (*quod in se est*).<sup>334</sup> When the question of one's salvation before God is raised, the hermeneutic behind this theology directs attention toward the self and away from God.

---

<sup>332</sup> Alister E. McGrath, "The Anti-Pelagian Structure of 'Nominalist' Doctrines of Justification," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensis* 57 no.1 (1981) 107-119.

<sup>333</sup> Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p.43. Oberman writes: "God's gratuitous, self-giving love, expressed in the very fact that he chose to commit himself at all, is not operative *actualiter* but *historice*; not existing *within* the order chosen, but *in the fact that* he chose this particular order in eternity."

<sup>334</sup> Gerhard Forde claims that the modern ethic which commands us to be ourselves or to be true to ourselves is a particularly modern expression of that theology which has confidence that there is salvation for those *qui facit quod in se est*. Of course, the modern expressions of this theology do not have any safeguards against Pelagianism, theoretical or otherwise. See: Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

This is so even when there is an acknowledgement and gratitude that God had so lovingly ordained such a scheme. It is also even the case when "doing all that was in you"<sup>335</sup> included receiving God's forgiveness and mercy. Even when those safeguards against overt Pelagianism were in place, attention is still directed inwardly so that you must attempt to judge that which is "within you" and so live up to your personal standard with God's help.

This solution eventually proved to be unsatisfactory for Luther. One is left with a choice between two ways of living "before God."<sup>336</sup> Either "doing all that is within you" becomes a project that is impossibly difficult or, if this standard is judged to be low enough, it becomes an excuse *coram Deo*. Luther intensely experienced the difficulty of living up to such a scheme. When could Luther know when he had done enough?<sup>337</sup> He confesses that he came to hate the idea of the righteousness of God.<sup>338</sup> Luther's

---

<sup>335</sup> The concept *facere quod in se est* was used in such a way that it safeguarded the person standing *coram Deo* from the "freedom" of God. It also acknowledged differing inherent abilities and contexts in which the person could do good acts.

<sup>336</sup> Living *coram Deo* was an important existential notion for Luther. It is a life that must be distinguished from living *coram hominibus*. It is an awareness that all of life is lived in the "face of God." See Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953). Rupp is correct in his thesis that it was knowing that he lived life *coram Deo* that moved Luther towards a different understanding of the *iustitia Dei*. Being in the presence of God caused the tension which pulled apart the theological system which had confidence in doing what was in you.

<sup>337</sup> See Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), pp.33-43.

<sup>338</sup> WA 54, 185, 17-20: "For I hated that phrase 'the righteousness of God' which, according to the use and custom of all the doctors, I had been taught to understand philosophically, in the

awareness of living *coram Deo* eventually led to the disavowal of all attempts to find salvation by *facere quod in se est*. Even though this scheme was a result of God's gracious choice according to the Biel, et alia, it was existentially merely another way of living *coram hominibus*. Within the system, a human being, oneself, judged what was one's potential and then attempted to live up to that standard.

Luther defines the *iustitia hominibus* as *reddens unicuique quod suum est*. This definition of the *iustitia hominibus* obviously parallels Biel's *iustitia Dei* within his scheme of the *potentia Dei ordinata*. In human society, where there are differing starting points in terms of human attributes, it is equitable and just to give people what is due to them. However, when someone attempts to establish a relationship with God in the same manner, the proper distinction between *iustitia hominibus* and *iustitia Dei* is not made. The result is a relationship between God and humanity based on what Luther called "works righteousness." In such a scheme, God is placed in debt to the work of righteousness that was performed by a human being.<sup>339</sup> Luther's existential focus caused the

---

sense of the formal or active righteousness (as they termed it), by which God is righteous, and punished unrighteous sinners." As translated in Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p.96.

<sup>339</sup> Otto H. Pesch contends that Luther's existential theology is of such a nature that every theological statement can, with a change in its grammatical form, be turned into a prayer. Otto H. Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology-- the Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. by Jared Wicks, (Chicago:

theological and theoretical safeguard concerning the *potentia Dei absoluta* to break down. God does not remain free in the distinction between the *potentia Dei absoluta* and the *potentia Dei ordinata* since at the existential level, God is placed in debt to human works of righteousness. This existential level is central in Luther's relational understanding of righteousness.

In keeping with this relational understanding of righteousness, Luther looked toward the One he was in relationship with in faith, for righteousness. Luther's hermeneutic directed humanity's attention away from its own righteousness. Luther defines the *iustitia Dei* as *fides Jesu Christi*. For Luther, the *iustitia Dei* is not to be found in the self as an attribute. It cannot be the result of some work performed. Nor can it be defined as the fulfilment of a person's attributes. The *iustitia Dei* is an "alien righteousness."<sup>340</sup>

---

Loyola University Press, 1970), pp.61-81. An example where Luther shows his objection to a theology which understands God as one who rewards according to merit, can be seen in his critique of the following monastic prayer of absolution: "May the merit of the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ, of Blessed and Ever Virgin Mary, and of all the saints; the merit of your order; the burden of your order; the humility of your confession, the contrition of your heart; the good works that you have done and will do for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ - may all this be granted to you for the forgiveness of your sins, for the growth of merit and grace, and for the reward of eternal life, Amen." (LW 26,154) A reliance on merits and works engenders prayers which make Christ idle and give no comfort to the distraught. The test that this prayer of absolution provided no comfort is given by the example of those condemned to die for crimes they had committed against others. Luther points out the horror of asking such a person to trust in the merit of accepting their punishment with calm consent. (LW 26,153-155)

<sup>340</sup> The notion of the "alien righteousness of Christ" (*aliena iustitia Christi*) is an important one for Luther's theology concerning human righteousness and his doctrine of Justification by faith. In

For Luther, the attempt to establish one's own righteousness is to replace Christ with works of the Law. Luther writes: "But the inner man, who owes nothing to the Law but is free of it, is a living, righteous, and holy person - not of himself or in his own substance but in Christ, because he believes in Him..."<sup>341</sup> Here, there is a critique of an ontology based on one's "own substance" by the presence of the righteous Christ given to the sinful believer:

...he [St. Paul] states what Christian righteousness is, namely, that righteousness by which Christ lives in us, not the righteousness that is in our own person. Therefore when it is necessary to discuss Christian righteousness, the person must be completely rejected.<sup>342</sup>

Saving righteousness is alien to human life and all attempts to find it in human life are doomed to failure.

One common attempt for finding a saving righteousness is to look toward particular qualities found within an individual. Referring to this opinion in his opponents, Luther asserts:

...for they suppose that righteousness is a certain quality that is first infused into the

---

the relationship between God and the human being it is not the human being who must prove to be righteous. Rather, the Gospel declares that it is God who is righteous and this righteousness means acts of love and mercy in Jesus toward the human being.

<sup>341</sup> WA 40 I, 279,34- 280,1; LW 26, 164: "Internus autem homo in sua substantia, in se, sed in Christo. Ideo quia credit in Christum..."

<sup>342</sup> WA 40 I, 282,17-19; LW 26,166: "...et dicit, quae sit iustitia Christiana, ea scilicet, qua Christus in nobis vivit, non quae est in persona nostra. Itaque cum disputandum est de iustitia Christiana, prorsus abiicienda est persona."

soul and then distributed through all the members. They cannot strip off the thoughts of reason, which declares that righteousness is a right judgement and a right will....righteousness is not in us in a formal sense, as Aristotle maintains, but is outside us, solely in the grace of God and in His imputation.<sup>343</sup>

Nor can righteousness be found in some congruousness with reason. The fact that this righteousness is an "alien" righteousness places it outside the confines of human reason. Luther judges that "the blindness of human reason is so incomprehensible and infinite that it cannot form sound judgements even about life and works, much less about the doctrine of faith."<sup>344</sup>

Nor can saving righteousness be found in the ethical and communal life that exists between human beings. While Luther stressed a relational interpretation of "righteousness," he also repeatedly takes issue with the definition of faith which was described as "formed by love."<sup>345</sup> The hermeneutical problem with

---

<sup>343</sup> WA 40 I, 370,22-24...28-29; LW 26,233-234: "...quia imaginantur iustitiam esse qualitatem primo infusam, deinde in membra diffusam. Non enim possunt exuere cogitationes rationis, quae dictat Iudicium rectum et voluntatem rectam esse iustitiam. ...iustitiam non esse formaliter in nobis, ut Aristoteles disputat, sed extra nos in sola gratia et reputatione divina,"

<sup>344</sup> WA 40 II,71,32-34; LW 27,57: "Adeo incomprehensibilis et infinita est caecitas humanae rationis, ut non solum de doctrina fidei sed etiam de vita et operibus rite iudicare non possit."

<sup>345</sup> The Roman Catholic theology encapsulated by the phrase *fides caritate formata* is the reverse of Luther's theology concerning the relationship between faith and love. George W. Forell writes: Faith in God through Christ is the necessary presupposition for love to our fellow man, and it is therefore the source of all ethics. This new basis for ethical action, faith active in love, sounds at first very similar to the Roman conception of faith formed by love (*fides caritate*

this definition is that it causes people to turn their attention toward their own righteousness. Concern for the neighbour is replaced by a self-judgement. The self attempts to judge its own behaviour concerning love for others. In such an event, faith in Christ is replaced with the person's behaviour toward others:

For the papists dream about a kind of faith 'formed by love'... For if it is true that we abolish sins by the works of the Law and by love, then Christ does not take them away, but we do. But if He is truly the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world... it necessarily follows that we cannot be justified and take away sins through love.<sup>346</sup>

The "alien" righteousness of Christ cannot even be conceptualized as a possession of human consciousness. While giving his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1535), Luther offers his theological students some advice on what to say to people who are distressed about their place before God. In the event of meeting such a person you should say:

Brother... you want to be conscious of righteousness in the same way you are conscious of sin. This will not happen. But your righteousness must transcend your consciousness of sin and you must hope that you are righteous in the sight of God. That is, your righteousness is not visible, and it is

---

*formata*); however, Luther explained the difference fully and in detail. Human love does not and cannot form faith; on the contrary, all true Christian love is the result of the creative activity of faith." George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), p.89.

<sup>346</sup> WA 40 I, 436,27-28...31- 437,3; LW 26,279: "Papistae enim somniant fidem quandam informatam charitate,... Nam si verum est, quod operibus legis et charitate abolemus peccata, Ergo Christus peccata, ergo non Christus portat. Si vero istud verum, quod agnus dei et factus maledictum et involutus peccatis nostris, tum necesse per charitatem non iustificari,..."

not conscious...<sup>347</sup>

It should be noted here that Luther assumed that there was a natural connection between the conscience and the "Law".<sup>348</sup> This connection, according to Gerhard Forde, is a result of the human fall.<sup>349</sup> According to Luther, while the "Law" is universally present, comfort from its terrors is rare.<sup>350</sup> According to Randall C. Zachman, Luther condemns a religion of conscience on two counts:

First, given the corruption of our nature by original sin, we are unable to do anything other than sin. Thus the attempt to worship God according to works only heaps sin upon sin before God. [reference to WA 40 I, 223, 35-36] Second, the self-invented worship of the conscience is not even required by God, but is instead idolatry.<sup>351</sup>

In conclusion, there are two implications of Luther's definition of righteousness as the *iustitia Christi aliena*. The first is concerned with the doctrine of justification as it addresses soteriological matters. Salvation comes to the sinner

---

<sup>347</sup> WA 40 II, 24, 27-31; LW 27, 21: "Tu, frater... cupis ita sentire iusticiam, ut peccatum sentis; hoc non fiet. Sed tua iusticia debet transcendere sensum peccati et sperare te coram Deo iustum esse. Hoc est, tua iusticia non est visibilis, non est sensibilis..."

<sup>348</sup> Bernhard Lohse, "Conscience and Authority in Luther" in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1974), p. 165.

<sup>349</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, "Called to Freedom" in *Lutherjahrbuch* 62 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), p. 15: "Rather it is that fallen beings, we are tempted - by the devil, for Luther - to believe that the Law is our salvation, the remedy for sin, our escape hatch over against the sting of death."

<sup>350</sup> See WA 40 I, 209, 20-22: "Sed quando ad experientiam venit, tum invenis Evangelium rarum et e contra legem assiduum esse hospitem in conscientia."

<sup>351</sup> Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 44.

because of the *aliena iustitia Christi* rather than on the basis of any qualities within the individual or on the basis of what happens between individuals. The two are mutually exclusive. The *aliena iustitia Christi* excludes the attempt to locate righteousness with right reason or judgement, the attempt to build righteousness in a faith formed by love, and the attempt to situate righteousness in human consciousness. The second implication is related to the first and actually forms Luther's hermeneutic. The righteousness of God directs the gaze of the interpreter away from the self:

Thus if I look at Christ, I am completely holy and pure... But if I look at my flesh, I feel greed, sexual desire, anger, pride, the terror of death, sadness, fear, hate, grumbling, and impatience against God.<sup>352</sup>

According to Luther, the redemption that comes from God is shaped by the fact that human beings are hopelessly "curved in on themselves."<sup>353</sup> Luther's hermeneutic and his understanding of the righteousness of God are formulated in such a way that they reflect this human condition. The proclamation of the "Gospel" drives the

---

<sup>352</sup> WA 40 I, 537,24-28; LW 26,350: "Sic, si Christum inspicio, totus sanctus et purus sum,... Si vero meam carnem inspicio, sentio avaritiam, libidinem, iram, superbiam etc., Timorem mortis, tristitiam, pavorem, odium, murmurationem et impatientiam contra Deum."

<sup>353</sup> According to Luther, the human condition is *curvitas in se*. This human situation fits the soteriological and hermeneutical solution which we have identified as the *iustitia Christi aliena*. The *iustitia Christi aliena* rescues the individual from equating his or her own virtue with godliness and directs the interpreter away from the self. In this regard, Steven Ozment claims that Luther's theology "originates and develops as a highly polemical answer to the anthropology of late medieval theology." Steven E. Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson and Martin Luther (1509-16)*, (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1969),p.3.

listener away from the self and directs life, hope, love and trust towards God. The mystery of faith is that righteousness before God is to have Christ present.<sup>354</sup>

#### The External Word: Given by God for Us

The concept of the external Word (*extra nos*) was one that Luther employed often. He found it especially helpful in his conflicts with his former colleague Andreas Karlstadt and the various other expressions of religion which began with an internal revelation. The righteousness that saves is an "alien" or external righteousness, in Christ Jesus. In the same way, the Word that saves is also external. As was the case when considering the "alien" righteousness of Christ, the Word, in its very externality, cannot be reduced to some possession of human life. Neither can it be defined in terms of what human reason and senses can determine from the structures of life.<sup>355</sup> Also, the external Word is not an ethical discourse existing between moral subjects and it cannot be

---

<sup>354</sup> See LW 26,132: "Faith takes hold of Christ and has him present, enclosing him as the ring encloses the gem. And whoever is found having this faith in the Christ who is grasped in the heart, him God accounts as righteous."

<sup>355</sup> God hides in order to serve the proclamation of Jesus Christ. See introduction, pp.2-4. Thus, the external Word is not to be defined as a visible *Logos* which underlies creation.

identified as the terrors or comforts generated by the conscience. The external Word is Christ and, like the "alien" righteousness of Christ, can only be existentially appropriated by faith. Faith can be variously defined and here, in Luther's hermeneutic concerning the external Word, faith has a particular and narrow meaning. For Luther, faith and salvation are intrinsically related to one another. Faith is not a precondition for salvation but is a description of what it means to be saved by Christ, the external Word.<sup>356</sup> Faith is not an attribute, quality or action of the believer, but is created externally by God's promises of mercy and life in Christ Jesus.

The externality of the Word is clearly seen in the Sacraments. Christ is present in a way that can be felt, tasted and consumed. This externality is also seen in the text of Scripture which, for Luther, is clear. This clarity, according to Gerhard Ebeling, puts the interpreter into the role of a servant of Scripture, rather than having Scripture utilized as a tool for the interpreter:

Der Grund zur Auslegung der Schrift liegt also nicht in ihr selber, sondern in der Knechtsgestalt dessen, der ihre Erfüllung und Auslegung ist. Es besteht eine doppelte Beziehung zwischen Christus und der Schrift. Erst Christus macht die Schrift klar, erst die Schrift macht Christus klar.<sup>357</sup>

---

<sup>356</sup> See introduction, p. 11.

<sup>357</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik*, (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1942), p. 103. ["The basis of the interpretation of Scripture lies not in the self, but rather is fulfilled and interpreted in the form of a servant. There exists a dual relationship between Christ and the Scripture. First Christ makes the Scripture clear,

As God should not be used as a tool to accomplish human agendas, so too, the external Word is no instrument for human designs:

Therefore, he who seeks his own glory in the Gospel speaks on his own authority; 'the one who speaks on his own authority is a liar and has no righteousness in him'<sup>358</sup>

Two days before he died, Luther wrote, in Latin, that we are beggars. This statement is preceded by a verse which gives an ascending sense of awe concerning understanding. While Virgil has no understanding of agriculture after five years of study and Cicero has no understanding of statehood after twenty, Luther confesses that we have no understanding of the prophets even after one hundred years of diligent study.<sup>359</sup>

Luther upholds the following hermeneutical principle. Luther changes the hermeneutical focus from an inward look for godly attributes in oneself to one that is drawn to God regardless of the self's action or attributes. Luther's critique of religion which is centred on the conscience reveals the relationship between his

---

first Scripture makes Christ clear." (my translation)]

<sup>358</sup> WA 40 II 129,12-14: "Ideo qui in Euangelio suam gloriam quaerit, a semetipso loquitur, 'qui autem a semetipso loquitur, mendax est, et iniustitia in illo est....'"

<sup>359</sup> The whole text is as follows: "Virgilium in Buccolicis et Georgicis nemo potest intelligere, nisi fuerit quinque annis Pastor aut agricola. Ciceronem in Epistolis (sic praecipio) nemo intelligit, nisi 20 annis sit versatus in republica aliqua insigni. Scripturas sanctas sciat se nemo gustasse satis, nisi centum annis cum Prophetis Ecclesias gubernarit. Quare ingens est miraculum: 1. Johannis Baptistae, 2. Christi, 3. Apostolorum. Hanc tu ne diuinam aeneida tenta, Sed vestigia pronus adora. Wir sind Bettler, hoc est verum." See: Oswald Bayer, "Vom Wunderwerk, Gottes Wort recht zu verstehen" *Kerygm und Dogma* 37 (1991) 258-279.

theology and his hermeneutic. A theology which is formulated so that it gives priority to personal judgements of the conscience is one that is not serving "Christian or evangelical freedom".<sup>360</sup> Over against a conscience which relies on its own works and righteousness, Luther describes a conscience which trusts in the external (*aliena*) works and righteousness of Christ:

Such a soul knows with absolute certainty that it can have neither confidence nor peace except in Christ, alone, and that in its own works nothing but guilt, fear, and condemnation can abide. It is in this way that conscience discerns and judges between Christ's works and its own. It embraces the works of Christ and speaks this way: through these works shall I be justified, through them be saved, through them set free from all sin and evil....It is by the works of Christ that conscience is victorious and despises its own works, lest they destroy it.<sup>361</sup>

This certainty is the result of the work of the "external Word" which creates faith in the proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection. In this regard, the role of theology is to describe the person and events of this proclamation in such a manner that the faithful Church has no other option but to bring this "external Word" to the people of every time, place, and culture. Theology serves the proclamation which gives consciences comfort in the

---

<sup>360</sup> This is the language Luther uses as he, in his *De votis monasticis Martini Lutheri iudicium*, launches into his description of the Christian conscience in opposition to a conscience that relies on its own awareness of righteousness through works.

<sup>361</sup> WA 8,607,2-10; LW 44,298-299: "...sciens certissime, se non posse securam et quietam esse nisi in solo Christo, in omnibus vero operibus propriis non posse nisi ream et pavidam damnatamque manere. Sic ergo discernit et iudicat inter opera Christi et sua. Christi opera apprehendit et dictat in hunc modum: Per haec ego iustificabor et servabor et liberabor ab omnibus peccatis et malis,... sed in Christi operibus vincit et contemnit, ne sese mordere possint."

mercy of God in Christ. These same consciences are thereby freed from all attempts to create their own salvation.

This relationship between Luther's theology and hermeneutic ensures that there is no theological possibility available to circumvent this external Word. This stress on the "external Word" disallows three popular theological options in Luther's time. It was a direct attack on a certain expression of mysticism. Referring to Dionysius, the Areopagite, Luther writes:

But in his *Theology*, which is rightly called *Mystical*, of which certain very ignorant theologians make so much, he is downright dangerous, for he is more of a Platonist than a Christian....So far, indeed, from learning Christ in them, you will lose even what you already know of him. I speak from experience. Let us rather hear Paul, that we may learn Jesus Christ and him crucified. He is the way, the life, and the truth, he is the ladder by which we come to the Father, as he says: 'No one comes to the Father, but by me.'<sup>362</sup>

Luther's insistence on a visible, tangible and external Word was also an attack on the groups Luther called "Schwarmer."<sup>363</sup> According

---

<sup>362</sup> WA 6,562,8ff.; LW 36,109: "In 'Theologia' vero 'mystica', quam sic inflant ignorantissimi quidam Theologastae, etiam perniciosissimus est, plus platonisans quam Christianisans,... Christum ibi adeo non discas, ut, si etiam scias, amittas. Expertus loquor. Paulum potius audiamus, ut Iesum Christum et hunc crucifixum discamus. Haec est enim via, vita et veritas: haec scala, per quam venitur ad patrem, sicut dicit 'Nemo venit ad patrem nisi per me'."

<sup>363</sup> The "Schwärmer" was a derogatory term used by Luther and others to refer to the various Anabaptist movements that arose during the Reformation. It was spoken in order to evoke images of disorganization and chaos. However, as Egil Grislis has pointed out in conversation, such an appearance of chaos might actually hide a very high level of organization. Bees swarm, but with a purpose and organization that might not be readily evident. Luther's use of such language against his opponents is of such a nature that his own hermeneutic can be applied negatively against him. Luther's judgements or interpretations of these others, whatever their political and social function at the time, communicate more about himself than about them. The same can be said concerning

to Luther, their problem was located by the way they defined the mystery of the Christian revelation solely in terms of the spirit:

I don't want the Christ the Enthusiasts have. They have the sort of Christ that makes them hold the Gospel and the sacraments in contempt as symbols.... They call Christ a mystery in spirit, so that a person can perceive it. But to have Christ known and possessed, to make use of Him, as what He Himself has done - that function we have in us. But because no one knows Him except the man who feels Him in his heart, He is called a mystery. It is a magnificent mystery because it is so well known, so clear.<sup>364</sup>

Luther's hermeneutic which contends that Christ is present in the "Gospel" and the sacraments also upholds an anti-docetic Christology.<sup>365</sup> Luther maintained that the Holy Spirit, who reveals

---

his polemical statements against the Roman Catholic Church. Harry McSorley, a Roman Catholic theologian, reads Luther with charity and claims that he can be recognized today as a "beloved preceptor" for the Church catholic. This charitable reading is done at the prompting of Luther's theology which says the Ten Commandments can be summarized as follows "in all things, charity." McSorley applies this same Commandment to criticize Luther's attacks on the Roman Catholic Church. Since Luther had claimed that the Ten Commandments demand obedience of all creatures even Reformers should act with charity in all things. Harry McSorley, "Luther: Exemplar of Reform - Or Doctor of the Church?" *The Theology of Martin Luther: Five Contemporary Canadian Interpretations*, ed. Egil Grislis, (Winnipeg: The Lutheran Council in Canada, 1985), p.44.

<sup>364</sup> WA 26,65,28-30...66,4-8; LW 28,305: "Hunc Christum, quem habent Schwermeri, nolo, qui habent talem, ut oporteat contemnere Euangelium et sacramenta pro symbolis.... qui Christum vocant [mysterium] in spiritu, *das einer kan bei marcken*, sed Christum cognitum, possessum, eum habere in suo usu, ut quod fecit ipse, *gebrauch* in nobis. Sed quia nemo novit, nisi qui sentit in corde, ideo dicitur mysterium. Est magnificum mysterium quia vulgatissimum, manifestum."

<sup>365</sup> See Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp.198-199. Asendorf writes: "Wenn der Spiritualismus der Schwärmer sich weiter ausbreitet, „werden bald Marcion, Manichäus, Valentin kommen“. Die Ketzer der alten Kirche stehen wieder auf. In der Verachtung des Wortes sind sie alle gleich. Ihnen gegenüber geht es darum, den ganzen Christus zu behalten oder zu verlieren.... Die Gegner gehören in die Reihe der christologischen Ketzer der alten Kirche, denen gegenüber die reine Lehre des Evangeliums zu verteidigen ist. Dazu kommt, daß das „zeugnis yhrer ynnwendigkeit“ bei den Schwärmern die

the Word inwardly, never does so without the "external Word." According to Luther, the "external Word" always come first:

This sort of doctrine, which reveals the Son of God, is not taught, learned or judged by any human wisdom or by the Law itself; it is revealed by God, first by the external Word and then inwardly through the Spirit. Therefore the Gospel is a divine Word that came down from heaven and is revealed by the Holy Spirit, who was sent for this very purpose. Yet this happens in such a way that the external Word must come first.<sup>366</sup>

Luther's insistence on the "*externo verbo*" over against these other hermeneutical options concerning God's revelation evokes the issue of existential appropriation. For Luther, the Word touches human life existentially by orientating it toward faith. The divine Word reaches the inner life of the one addressed solely through the work of the Holy Spirit. For Luther, this ensures that, at every level, there is no possibility of basing salvation on the self. Nevertheless, there has to be a movement of the "external Word" so that it does not remain external.

The internalization of the "Shepherd's voice" is not a movement of meaning or signification.<sup>367</sup> It is a movement, caused by the workings of the Holy Spirit, which brings Christ to the one

---

deutlich: die Christologie die Schwärmer endigt im Dokerismus."

<sup>366</sup> WA 40 I,142,14-19; LW 26,73: "Hoc genus doctrinae quod revelat filium Dei, non discitur, non docetur, non indicatur ulla sapientia hominum nec per ipsam legem, sed per Deum revelatur, Primum externo verbo, deinde intus per spiritum. Est itaque Evangelium verbum divinum quod de coelo descendit et per spiritum sanctum revelatur qui et ad hoc missus est, Sic tamen, ut verbum externum praecedat."

<sup>367</sup> See Introduction, pages 11-16. See, also, page 150.

encountered by the Word. Luther believed that if the external Word remained external the results would be truly horrifying: "When it comes to justification, therefore, if you divide Christ's Person from your own, you are in the Law; you remain in it and live in yourself, which means you are dead in the sight of God and damned by the Law."<sup>368</sup> The existential appropriation of Christ actually depends on the externality of the Word:

Now, these people [the enthusiasts] are so foolish as to separate faith from the object to which faith is attached and bound on the ground that the object is something external. Yes, it must be external. Yes, it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the sense and thus brought into the heart, just as the entire Gospel is an external, oral proclamation.<sup>369</sup>

The external Word which remains external by not being appropriated in faith is only a word which speaks about Christ. For rhetorical effect, Luther would sometimes write about a hypothetical situation where some false description of life was actually true.<sup>370</sup> Luther does this in his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1535) and dreams about a person who lives by a faith about Christ

---

<sup>368</sup> WA 40 I,285,15ff.; LW 26,168: "Quare si in causa iustificationis discernis personam Christi et tuam, tum es in lege, manes in ea et vivis in te, quod est mortuum esse apud Deum et damnari a lege..."

<sup>369</sup> (*Large Catechism*) *Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959),p.444.

<sup>370</sup> Mark U. Edwards, Jr. remarks that Luther used this rhetorical technique in his tractate *Warning to His Dear German People*. In this work, Luther spoke in a dream where there was no God. Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983),p.27.

rather than *in* Christ:

But let us concede that a man could be found who had such a faith. Even if he had it, he would actually be dead, because he would have only a historical faith about Christ, something that even the devil and all the wicked have (James 2:19).<sup>371</sup>

If the external Word remains external in this way, the one addressed by that Word would still have to rely on the self. The righteousness of Christ would then remain separate from those addressed by the Word and they would have to rely on their own righteousness for identity and redemption. In this regard, a hermeneutic which assumes that the Word is one that is *about* Christ has the same result as a theology which describes faith as being "formed by love." Both throw the troubled conscience back on itself. In this "dream" concerning "a historical faith," faith becomes what Luther calls an "idle quality" and must be opposed in the following way<sup>372</sup>:

But faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: 'I am as Christ.' And Christ, in turn, says: 'I am as that sinner who is attached to Me, and I to him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and one bone.'<sup>373</sup>

---

<sup>371</sup> WA 40 I 285,20-23; LW 26,168: "Sed concedamus reperiri posse hominem qui talem fidem habeat, tamen eam habens esset vere mortuus, quia tantum haberet historicam fidem de Christo quam etiam Diabolus et omnes impii habent."

<sup>372</sup> See WA 40 I,286,17ff.

<sup>373</sup> WA 40 I,285,24-286,15; LW 26,168: "Verum recte docenda est fides, quod per eam sic conglutineris Christo, ut ex te et ipso fiat quasi una persona quae non possit segregari sed perpetuo adhaerescat ei et dicat: Ego sum ut Christus, et vicissim Christus dicat: Ego sum ut ille

A "historical" faith is problematic for Luther because the distance between the past and the present separates Christ from the believer. Thus, the judgements made concerning any person in the past must be distinguished from faith *in* Christ. The relationship that occurs between a researcher and a historical figure is different from the relationship that occurs between the believer and Christ. The difference is found in the fact that Luther seriously takes the resurrection of Jesus Christ into account in his hermeneutic. Christ is currently alive while another historical figure of the past is not.

This difference can be seen in this present study. It is conducting research *about* the dead and historical figure named Martin Luther. Egil Grislis, in his study "Piety, Faith, and Spirituality in the Quest for the Historical Luther", shows the nature of such historical research. He points out that Luther's vast corpus can be understood under a variety of organizing paradigms which produce related but different interpretations of Luther.<sup>374</sup> As one attempts to organize Luther's work under a particular paradigm that might best help him speak to contemporary religious issues, invariably, some aspect of his writings are

---

peccator, quia adhaeret mihi, et ego illi; Coniuncti enim sumus per fidem in unam carnem et os,"

<sup>374</sup> Egil Grislis, "Piety, Faith, and Spirituality in the Quest for the Historical Luther" *Consensus* 19 no.1 (1993) 29-51.

downplayed or ignored.<sup>375</sup> In the interplay that occurs between Luther's significance for the present and the historical research of Luther's own life, the various interpretations which result can always be improved upon. Another interpretation might better reflect Luther's own life or concerns and might better "speak" to present issues. Thus, all research into Luther, including this present research, must necessarily produce preliminary, tentative interpretations. The interplay between the past and the present in historical research also means that the result of that investigation remains *one's own* interpretation. In this case, it is a judgement made by the interpreter about Luther. The historical figure remains dead and can only become alive to the researcher in a metaphorical sense. Research will produce some interpretations that are plausible and others which are not. Eventually, some decision has to be made concerning these various interpretations. This decision about an interpretation concerning a historical figure should not be confused with what Luther calls "faith in Christ."

In Luther's hermeneutic, the Word of God, which is Christ, has an active voice which actually accomplishes something. This Word causes an encounter between the one addressed and the resurrected Jesus who is alive and not dead. Rather, Jesus is present in this

---

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., pp. 45f.

Word which "kills" and makes alive.<sup>376</sup> In contrast, a historical archeology of Scripture about Jesus is always open to discover another deeper layer of interpretation which could potentially undo all previous knowledge.<sup>377</sup> The decisions of confidence concerning the various interpretations that such research into Scripture will produce have to be distinguished from Luther's hermeneutic concerning faith. In faith, Christ and the believer are "cemented" together.<sup>378</sup>

A different hermeneutic is needed because God, God's Word and eternal life cannot be captured and made into a possession of human language, memory and reason. It is not a human attribute but is a divine possibility. That human beings cannot make themselves have faith is just a succinct description of the human problem after the Fall. Faith is created by God. The believer's trust in God is a succinct description of what it means to be saved. The way that such faith is created and the external Word is existentially appropriated is that God speaks the "Gospel for us".<sup>379</sup> For Luther,

---

<sup>376</sup> See Chapter 1 above for a description of what it means for Luther that Christ is present in the Word which comes to human beings in the form of the "killing" "Law" and the life-giving "Gospel." See, especially, pages 75 and following.

<sup>377</sup> See Introduction, pages 2 and following.

<sup>378</sup> WA 40 I,285,24: "...quod per eam sic conglutineris Christo,..."

<sup>379</sup> Both "Gospel" and "for us" are important concepts for Luther which have a particular meaning. "Gospel" refers to the promise of mercy and eternal life given through Jesus Christ. The fact that this is spoken "*pro nobis*" is emphasized so that the Gospel is not some knowledge made universally available to human investigation but is a Word spoken to particular people at particular times. An example of this is at the Lord's Supper where Christ, the content of the

Jesus is not a dead and past figure but is alive and is living the trinitarian life of God.<sup>380</sup> This means that Jesus is not merely righteous in and of himself but is "righteous for us".

This movement of the Trinity in the creation of faith is Luther's hermeneutic of *sola gratia*. The trinitarian Word is not subject to historical research and is not subject to the judgements of natural reason.<sup>381</sup> Rather, this "external" Word changes human reason. Luther's *Disputation de sententia: Verbum caro factum est (Joh. 1,14)* (1539) is one place where he opposes correct human logic with the Word which witnesses to the Trinity.<sup>382</sup> According to Luther, the following syllogisms are correct in logical form but lead to false theological conclusions:

*Pater in divinis generat*  
*Pater est essentia divina*  
*ergo essentia divina generat.* [thesis 16]

*Omnis essentia divina est pater*  
*Filius est essentia divina*  
*Ergo filius est pater.* [thesis 18]

---

"Gospel", is spoken "to us".

<sup>380</sup> See Reijo Työrinoja, "Proprietas Verbi: Luther's Conception of Philosophical and Theological Language in the Disputation: Verbum caro factum est (Joh. 1:14), 1539," in Heikki Kirjavainen, ed. *Faith, Will, and Grammar: Some Themes of Intensional Logic and Semantics in Medieval and Reformation Thought*, (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1986), pp.141-178.

<sup>381</sup> See WA 6,32,9 (*Questio theologica cum septem conclusionibus de naturali potentia voluntatis hominis*): "Ratio naturalis nec rectum habet dictamen."

<sup>382</sup> Again, see: Reijo Työrinoja, "Proprietas Verbi: Luther's Conception of Philosophical and Theological Language in the Disputation: Verbum caro factum est (Joh. 1:14), 1539," in Heikki Kirjavainen, ed. *Faith, Will, and Grammar: Some Themes of Intensional Logic and Semantics in Medieval and Reformation Thought*, (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1986), pp.141-178.

*Quidquid factum est caro, factum est creatura.  
 Filius Dei est factus caro.  
 Ergo filius Dei est factus creatura. [thesis 22]*<sup>383</sup>

These syllogisms follow the dictates of reason and, at the same time, they contradict the Word of God.<sup>384</sup>

Luther's statements against reason are, according to B.A.Gerrish, a "defence of the Reformation principle, *sola gratia*."<sup>385</sup> Reason which is engaged in an attempt to discover the truths of God will fail. Such attempts at finding salvation will self-destruct so that only the fallen nature of human reason will be revealed. According to Luther, human reason is dictated by what it sees and feels. As such, it is in opposition to faith, which hopes in that which unseen. This opposition can be seen in Luther's *narratio* of the 23rd Psalm<sup>386</sup>:

But when you have Him as your Shepherd, you will surely not want. Yes, you already have what you shall have - eternal life.... For this Shepherd's voice will surely

---

<sup>383</sup> WA 39 II 4,24ff. (16) "The Father generates in divine things; the Father is the divine essence; therefore, the divine essence generates." (18) The Father is the entire divine essence, the Son is the divine essence, therefore, the Son is the Father." (22) "Whatever was made flesh became a creature; the Son of God was made flesh; therefore, the Son of God became a creature." LW 38,240-241.

<sup>384</sup> WA 39 II 4,37-38.

<sup>385</sup> B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p.170. Gerrish notes that, in his career, Luther said many things about reason and not everything was negative. Gerrish distinguishes between reasonable thinking and what he calls a "thought". This "thought" attempts to make its own way without God. The process of thinking, which includes making proper distinctions, is necessary on earth and in heaven.

<sup>386</sup> This opposition between fallen human reason and divinely-given faith is the fount for the experience of *Anfechtungen*. See Chapter 5, especially pages 305 and following.

not lead you astray.... But if you ignore this voice and are guided by what your eyes see and your old Adam feels, then you will lose the faith and the confidence that you ought, as a sheep, to have in Him as your Shepherd. Sometimes this thought, sometimes that one comes to you, so that you...must argue with yourself and say:...I am sitting in the midst of the wolves, I am not sure of my life for a moment; but I do not see any shepherd who would protect me.<sup>387</sup>

Christ is God's grace, mercy and righteousness and Christ is given to us without a reason.<sup>388</sup> Immanuel Kant is quite correct when he says that the doctrine which claims that God has mercy on whom God wills is the death leap of human reason.<sup>389</sup> Luther celebrated such a death, at least, as reason is used to find human salvation. In Luther's descriptive hermeneutic, the person of faith trusts God more than God-given human attributes such as reason.

The doctrine which states that salvation comes *sola gratia* also announces the ultimate end of human divisions or distinctions between religions, culture and social function:

Male, female, slave, free, Jew, Gentile, king, subject - these are, of course, good creatures of God. But in Christ, that is, in the matter of salvation, they amount to nothing, for all their wisdom, righteousness, devotion, and authority.<sup>390</sup>

---

<sup>387</sup> WA 51,277,13-17; LW 12,158.

<sup>388</sup> See WA 1,219,30-34: "Christus ist gottis gnaden, barmherzikeit, gerechtickeit, warheit, weizheit, stercke, trost und selickeit, uns von gott gegeben an allen vordinest. Christus sag ich, nit (als etlich mit blinden Worten sagen) causaliter, das er gerechtickeit gebe unnd bleibe er drauzen."

<sup>389</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, tr. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960), p. 111.

<sup>390</sup> WA 40 I,542,19-21; LW 26,354: "Masculus, foemina, servus, liber, Iudaeus, Gentilis, Rex, subditus etc. sunt quidem creaturae Dei bonae, sed in Christo, hoc est, in re salutis, cum omni

What does matter is putting on the garment of Christ, which occurs at Baptism.<sup>391</sup> This garment of Christ, which Luther describes as Christ's innocence, righteousness, wisdom, power, salvation, life, and Spirit, is not a matter of imitation according to the "Gospel".<sup>392</sup> This new garment is a matter of a new birth and a new creation which replaces the old leather, deadly garment of Adam, which is not only a slavery to sin but also a hatred of God.<sup>393</sup>

Luther's claim that the Word must remain "external" prevents the final interpretive authority from resting on the self. The fact that this "external" Word must also be appropriated does not represent a return to the subject. Faith and the presence of Christ are equated in Luther's hermeneutic.<sup>394</sup> Jesus, the Word, is not locked in the past. Jesus does not signify anything other than himself.

---

sapientia, iustitia, religione, potentia sua nihil sunt."

<sup>391</sup> WA 40 I,543,25-26: "Indumentum Christi quem in Baptismo induimus."

<sup>392</sup> WA 40 I,540,17-19: "Induere vero Christum Evangelice non est imitationis, sed nativitatis et creationis novae, Quod videlicet ego induor ipso Christo, hoc est, ipsius innocentia, iustitia, sapientia, potentia, salute, vita, Spiritu etc."

<sup>393</sup> WA 40 I,540,19-22: "Nos vestiti sumus pellicea tunica Adae quae mortalis tunica est et vestis peccati, Hoc est, omnes subiecti sumus et venundati sub peccatum, horribilis caccitas, ignorantia, contemptus et odium Dei est in nobis."

<sup>394</sup> See Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, tr. Herbert J. A. Bouman, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), p.104. Von Loewenich writes: "The connection between faith and Christ is so intimate that for its presentation neither the subject-object model nor the teleological relation of matter and form are adequate."

## Christ is Signifier and Signified

It is clear that Luther's hermeneutical principle which insists that the Word is "external" is correlative to his soteriology which upholds the doctrine of *sola gratia*.<sup>395</sup> This relationship between Luther's hermeneutic concerning the Word and his doctrine of *justification by faith* was expressed through Luther's careful establishment of limits for his hermeneutic and his doctrine concerning the salvation of the sinner. These limits prevented saving righteousness from being situated in the self and prevented the interpretive centre for God's revelation being established in human beings or institutions. Within these limits, Luther contends that the Word and Christ's righteousness must be "external" and must also be existentially appropriated. Under a hermeneutic of signification this cannot be done without falling into either subjectivism or objectivism.

Luther did not have a hermeneutic of signification. Thus, the relationship between Luther's expression of the doctrine of

---

<sup>395</sup> Luther admonished the Church to keep several *solas* at the forefront of its theology and proclamation. The four that were central to Luther's thought and particularly Luther's thinking concerning the relationship between his hermeneutic and his theology was his insistence that the Church must uphold a soteriology which proclaimed by "faith alone, by grace alone, by Christ alone, and by Scripture alone."

*justification by faith* and his hermeneutic must be further clarified by examining how Luther criticized the Western tradition's application of the old Alexandrian distinction between the *res significans* and the *res significata*. In the Latin appropriation of the Alexandrian hermeneutic, the *res significans* was equated with the "letter" of the text in their "letter-spirit" distinction. The outer word or "dead" letter served to point towards the more important inner, spiritual meaning (*res significata*).

One consequence of equating the outward form (*res significans*) with the "letter" and the *res significata* with the "spiritual" is that the letter is thought to be unclear in its meaning and significance. Its true significance transcends whatever surface significance it might have. It functions by pointing to something beyond itself. The letter is opaque, and because of its lack of clarity some hermeneutical key must be found for understanding and interpretation.

Luther objected to this hermeneutic. The character of his opposition is shown in one of his many complaints directed against Origen and Jerome:

For they take the outward form and historical account to be the 'letter.' But the mystical and allegorical interpretation they call 'spiritual.' And they call that man 'spiritual' who understands everything in a lofty sense, and...allows nothing of

the Jewish tradition.<sup>396</sup>

If Scripture is outwardly opaque, then the locus for interpretation must be the self or one of the tools of the self. The *res significata* is "generated" by the individual as that person reads the text. In such an hermeneutic, authority is situated in the individual or in some extension of the individual found in a larger community. For Luther, the problem with this hermeneutic was that it necessarily causes a lack of certainty in the "face" of God. Living life *coram Deo* was central in Luther's theology and hermeneutic. All the attributes, skills and tools that allow people to live successfully and confidently *coram hominibus* do not help one in the "face" of God, who created and gave those attributes in the first place.

The issue then becomes whether Scripture is outwardly clear or whether its meaning needs to be extricated from its outward form. Luther claimed that Scripture was clear. Priscilla Hayden-Roy clarifies this part of Luther's hermeneutic by comparing it with the hermeneutical assumptions operating in Sebastian Franck's reading of Scripture.<sup>397</sup> According to Hayden-Roy, Franck

---

<sup>396</sup> WA 2,551,18-20; LW 27,312: "Literam enim ipsi figuram et historiam accipiunt: mysticum autem et allegoricum spiritualement dicunt, et virum spiritualement, qui sublimiter omnia intelligat, nihil (ut inquit) iudaicae traditionis admittat."

<sup>397</sup> As described in Priscilla Hayden-Roy, "Hermeneutica gloria vs. hermeneutica crucis: Sebastian Franck and Martin Luther on the Clarity of Scripture", *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 81 (1990) 50-68. The following description is a summary of Hayden-Roy's work.

distinguished between two *res significatae* that the *res significans* pointed toward. There is the fleshly *res significata* that the world gives to the *signa* and there is the spiritual *res significata* that only the spiritually-minded were able to discern.<sup>398</sup> The power for a spiritual interpretation only lies within the spiritually gifted. While it is acknowledged that this power is given by God, the stress is on the actual existence of this gift. For correct interpretation, then, the first step is to identify the spiritually gifted. Since the fleshly *res significata* and the spiritual *res significata* are identical in texts which are clear in their meaning, the way to isolate the powers of the spiritually gifted is to start with the more difficult texts. In this way, the mind of God will be revealed and, in the process, the identity of the spiritually-gifted will arise. The interpretations that come from these difficult texts will then establish a pattern by which to understand the rest of Scripture. Thus, Franck's hermeneutic begins with the assumption that Scripture is unclear and continues by the theory that, fortunately, there exist elite interpreters of God's Word.

Luther's hermeneutic is the opposite of this and begins with the assertion that Scripture is clear. It is clear because both the *res significata* and the *res significans* are identified as Christ.

---

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., p. 56. According to Hayden-Roy, this spiritually-mindedness is identified as the divine spark by Franck.

Hayden-Roy explains:

Luther, however, maintains that the final *res significata* behind all *res significantes* is not the mind of God, but the Word of God, *deus revelatus* in Jesus Christ. He places both *res significans* and *res significata* within the *potentia dei ordinata*. There is no break between visible flesh and obscured, transcendent spirit as the sign points to its meaning. Both sign and signified are flesh, revealed.<sup>399</sup>

The difference between a "spiritual" and a "fleshly" interpretation, therefore, does not lie in the interpreter's *intellectus* but in the *ipsissima verba* of the text. God's speaking, the proclamation of the "Gospel," is Christ. Christ is both the content of what is said and is the one who testifies to what is said.<sup>400</sup> Luther's hermeneutic operates in such a manner that the interpreter is never in a position to understand Christ better than Christ understands himself.

The proclamation of Jesus Christ occurs in the form of "Law" and "Gospel". Luther appealed to St. Augustine for this hermeneutical principle. With St. Augustine, Luther notes that the biblical distinction between "letter" and "spirit" was none other than the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel". Although these two must be properly distinguished from one another, the proclamation

---

<sup>399</sup> Hayden-Roy, pp.62-63.

<sup>400</sup> See: Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.58. See, also, pages 13 and following above.

of "Law" and "Gospel" cannot be divided.<sup>401</sup> As Luther affirms in his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1519): "For the letter, as Augustine says with beautiful brevity on Ps.71, is the Law without grace."<sup>402</sup> The "Gospel", which corresponds to "spirit" in the "letter-spirit" distinction, is defined by Luther as follows:

For 'gospel' (*Euangelium*) is a Greek word and means in Greek a good message, good tidings, good news, a good report, which one sings and tells with gladness....Thus this gospel of God or New Testament is a good story and report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them, and thereby rescued all those who were captive in sin, afflicted with death, and overpowered by the devil.<sup>403</sup>

There can be no "Gospel" without "Law". The Spirit does not operate apart from the letter. This is the reason for Luther's insistence that the "Law" must be spoken first before the "Gospel" is heard.<sup>404</sup> Randall C. Zachman, while noting that the bulk of Luther's theology sets forth the order of "Law" then "Gospel", this should not be overread. Any temporal sequencing of the "letter" without the "spirit" will result in the terrified conscience justifying itself

---

<sup>401</sup> See above, pp.62-72.

<sup>402</sup> WA 2,551,27-28; LW 27,312: "Nam litera, ut idem psal. lxx. pulchre et breviter dicit, est lex sine gratia."

<sup>403</sup> (*Preface to the New Testament (1546)*), Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p.112.

<sup>404</sup> This part of Luther's hermeneutic has come under close scrutiny after Karl Barth came to the conclusion that the "Gospel" should be spoken first.

in the "face of God."<sup>405</sup> The necessity of both "letter" and "spirit" is an expression of the necessity of both the cross and resurrection of Christ in the proclamation:

Through this office of preaching and of forgiving sins, souls are resurrected here from sins and from death, and confidently await also the resurrection of the body and life everlasting through the same Holy Spirit who has now begun this in the soul.<sup>406</sup>

While Luther, with St. Augustine, identifies the distinction between "letter and spirit" as the distinction between "Law and Gospel", his hermeneutic can be also be distinguished from St. Augustine's. Luther's hermeneutic is not a hermeneutic of signification. In chapter ten of St. Augustine's *On the Spirit and Letter*, he understands Christ to be the *res significans* of a *res significata* that happens within the believer: "It is quite clear that by the figure of the Lord's death and Resurrection is signified the setting of our old life and the rising of the new, and that here is shown the abolishing of iniquity and the renewal

---

<sup>405</sup> Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.53. Zachman notes that the "theologus absconditus" behind his comparison of Calvin and Luther is Karl Barth. See p.viii. The idea of living *coram Deo* is very important for Luther's hermeneutic. What might comfort the conscience *coram hominibus* only increases the terror *coram Deo*. This insight of Luther's theology was the generative force behind Søren Kierkegaard's creative critique of "bourgeois" Christianity and his critique of Hegel's *system*. For example: Søren Kierkegaard (Johannes de Silentio), *Fear and Trembling*, tr. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).

<sup>406</sup> WA 11,451,14-17; LW 36,299: "Durch wilchs ampt des predigens unnd sund vergebens die seelen hie aufferstehen von sunden und von dem todt und wartten sicher auch der leiplichen aufferstehung und ewigs lebens durch den selben heiligen geist, der solchs izt an der seele angefangen hatt."

of righteousness."<sup>407</sup> For Luther, the death and resurrection of Christ does not have a signifying function concerning righteousness. The death and resurrection of Christ can only be proclaimed and, in this proclamation, salvation is accomplished. In contrast to St. Augustine the death and resurrection of Christ never points toward some hidden, spiritual aspect of the self or the future self. For Luther, the signifying function of the kerygma concerning Christ is one that points back to Christ. Christ, as Word of God, is both the signifier and the signified. This is the reason why Luther can be certain that Scripture is clear. Both that which is signified and that which signifies are part of the *Deus revelatus*. It is Christ speaking "to us."

In Luther's hermeneutic, it is not the meaning of Scripture which saves. One's eternal salvation does not depend on the reader of Scripture getting the correct meaning. Rather, it is the Author of Scripture who saves. God speaks and accomplishes redemption through the work and testimony of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This speaking causes the death of the "interpreter" in the cross and unites this "dead" person with Christ who has been raised from the dead.<sup>408</sup>

---

<sup>407</sup> St. Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, tr. and commentary by W.J. Sparrow Simpson (London: The Macmillan Co., 1925), pp.44-45.

<sup>408</sup> Luther used this language of "death" often, especially in connection with the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel". The "death" of the "interpreter" referred to here is what Luther calls an eternal death which he also identifies as being very good: "Hence, we must note that there is a double death, namely, the natural or, better, temporal one and the eternal one. Temporal death

## Subject and Object

Luther's hermeneutic has a unique relationship with his doctrine or theology. In comparison to much of western Christianity, this distinctiveness is due to the fact that Luther's is not a hermeneutic of signification. Gerhard O. Forde writes:

Where one tries to move from the "dead" letter to the 'life-giving spirit' in allegorical fashion, one needs assurance as to which "interpretation" is "right." An authoritative office is demanded by the hermeneutic itself. Where the word actually kills and makes alive matters are quite different. The one so killed and made alive needs no earthly structure to guarantee the 'doctrine.'<sup>409</sup>

Forde continues by noting that without this stress on Luther's language of "death" and "life," his hermeneutic appears to be a solipsistic subjectivism in that it eventually leads toward the relief of the terrified conscience.<sup>410</sup> In fact, if Luther's hermeneutic is thought to be one of signification, it will necessarily cause interpreters of Luther to either gravitate toward

---

is the separation of body and soul.... Also eternal death is twofold. One is a very great good. It is the death of sin and the death of death, by which the soul is freed and separated from sin and the body from corruption, and the soul is united by grace and glory with the living God.... This is the principle theme of the Scripture." Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: Lectures on Romans*, tr. Wilhelm Pauck, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961),p.179.

<sup>409</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith - A Matter of Death and Life*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982),p.100n10.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

subjectivism or objectivism.<sup>411</sup>

Knowledge of correct doctrine does not redeem the sinner. Yet, Luther was also obviously concerned with correct doctrine. In fact, many of his conflicts with others during the Reformation were about the precise formulation of Christian doctrine. These seemingly opposing ideas are both necessary for the proper relationship between Luther's theology and hermeneutic to be maintained. Thus, one might have an orthodox formulation concerning God's redemption of the sinner which, existentially, would be undermined by a hermeneutic which encouraged one to look at the attributes of the self. An example where Luther argued against such a phenomenon was when he argued against an orthodox theology which existentially led one to *facere quod est in se*.<sup>412</sup> Another negative alternative would be to have a hermeneutic which led to trust in God without being concerned with the content of that trust. This would break the relationship between Luther's theology and his hermeneutic so that faith became faith in faith.<sup>413</sup>

---

<sup>411</sup> The history of Lutheranism is filled with examples from both sides. The subjectivism of many pietist movements of Northern Europe was a response to the objectivism of Lutheran orthodoxy represented in the leadership of the churches of 17th century. These old issues have continued into the present and are now further complicated with the objectivism of fundamentalism which is in conflict with the subjectivism of liberalism.

<sup>412</sup> See above, pages 127 and following.

<sup>413</sup> See below, pages 85 and following. Paul Hacker's thesis is that Luther had precisely this kind of reflexive faith. See Paul Hacker, *The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970). Hacker believes that Luther's certainty before God is the result of a subjective faith in believing. Against this thesis,

The content of theology describes how God drives the sinner to faith and away from relying on the self. While theology does not redeem the sinner, for Luther, there is are few expressions of theology which will do its "proper work" of forcing the Church to proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Thus, Luther's theology has a strong existential focus while, at the same time, being concerned with the correct formulation of Christian doctrine. That Luther can have both these preoccupations is a function of the relationship between his theology and his hermeneutic. God, who is described in the formulation of Christian doctrine, drives the sinner to redemption through the proclamation of the "Gospel" of Jesus Christ.

Thus, Luther's theology and his hermeneutic aim to describe how a trusting relationship with God is created by God. This relational emphasis of his theology and hermeneutic is in keeping with Luther's definition of righteousness.<sup>414</sup> The correlation between Luther's theology and his hermeneutic cannot focus on the believing subject so that "faith" can be described as an attribute

---

Otto Pesch points out that Luther's certainty of salvation must not be understood under the category of knowledge but should be seen as a way of existing. Pesch's statements about Luther's existential paradigm were consciously made as a contribution to the modern day ecumenical discussions concerning the relationship between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Communions. He notes that while the Council of Trent used Thomas Aquinas as an authority it failed to note the similarity between Luther's certainty of salvation with Aquinas' certainty of hope. Otto H. Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology: The Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," (61-81) *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*, ed. Jared Wicks, (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), pp.66-67.

<sup>414</sup> See above, pages 115 and following.

of that person. For Luther, faith does not exist without reference to the relationship in which faith consists.<sup>415</sup> At the same time, Luther's theology and hermeneutic do not make Christ an object:

[Faith] takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself.<sup>416</sup>

Faith remains a mystery because Christ cannot be made an object of knowledge. According to Luther, this mystery of faith is also the mystery of human righteousness:

Thus faith is a sort of knowledge or darkness that nothing can see. Yet the Christ of whom faith takes hold is sitting in this darkness as God sat in the midst of darkness on Sinai and in the temple. Therefore our 'formal righteousness' is not a love that informs faith; but it is faith itself, a cloud in our hearts, that is, trust in a thing we do not see, in Christ, who is present especially when He cannot be seen.<sup>417</sup>

An important element of Luther's hermeneutic concerning Christ's presence is that the crucified and risen Christ is the opposite of what human beings project concerning God from their own

---

<sup>415</sup> Christ in Scripture and faith cannot be separated from one another. In this unity lies the basis for Luther's doctrine concerning the authority of Scripture. See: Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), pp.354-358.

<sup>416</sup> WA 40 I 228,34-229,15; LW 26,129: "quo Christus apprehenditur, Sic ut Christus sit obiectum fidei, imo non obiectum, sed, ut ita dicam, in ipsa fide Christus adest."

<sup>417</sup> WA 40 I 229,15-21; LW 26,129-130: "Fides ergo est cognitio quaedam vel tenebra quae nihil videt, Et tamen in istis tenebris Christus fide apprehensus sedet, Quemadmodum Deus in Sinai et in Templo sedebat in medio tenebrarum. Est ergo formalis nostra iustitia non charitas informans fidem, sed ipsa fides et nebula cordis, hoc est, fiducia in rem quam non videmus, hoc est, in Christum qui, ut maxime non videatur, tamen praesens est."

consciences.<sup>418</sup> Human salvation, identity and righteousness are not fulfilled or accomplished by human achievements but by the work of Christ.<sup>419</sup> By focusing on the work of Christ Luther has a hermeneutic with existential ramifications which does not centre on the choosing subject. In his arguments against Erasmus' *De libero arbitrio*, Luther attacks any hermeneutic grounded in a choosing subject. According to Luther, such a hermeneutic necessitates imagining that the Living God be "nothing but a kind of shallow and ignorant ranter declaiming from some platform, whose words you can if you wish interpret in any direction you like, and accept or reject them accordingly as ungodly men are seen to be moved or affected by them."<sup>420</sup> The presence of Christ accomplishes the will of God through the proclamation of the Word. The "Law" tears down human pretensions of righteousness and the "Gospel" gives salvation in Christ. In this way, the interpreter of Scripture is

---

<sup>418</sup> See Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.61ff.

<sup>419</sup> See Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), p.358. Asendorf writes: "Das Evangelium spricht nicht von meinem Werk, sondern von dem Christi, das er selbst getan hat und das nur im Glauben empfangen werden kann. Das ist die wahre Lehre und der wahre Glaube. Das ist der Hauptartikel des Evangeliums [reference to WA 36,504,1-507,5]."

<sup>420</sup> WA 18,631,23-26: "Sic loqui deberet, qui Deum vivum imaginaretur nihil esse nisi levem et imprudentem aliquem rabulam in aliquo suggesto declamantem, cuius verba liceat, si velis, quorsum libuerit, interpretari, acceptare, refutare, secundum quod videret, impios homines illis moveri vel affici."

interpreted.<sup>421</sup>

### Certainty of Salvation

The relationship between Luther's theology and his hermeneutic is not one of logical signification but a relation of existential proclamation. Luther's hermeneutic of proclamation results in the certainty of salvation.<sup>422</sup> According to Luther, this certainty of salvation is not only the mark of righteousness but also a

---

<sup>421</sup> See: Albrecht Beutel, "Erfahrene Bibel: Verständnis und Gebrauch des verbum dei scriptum bei Luther" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 89 (1992) 302-339. p.313. Beutel writes: "Die Bibel kann darum auch nicht eigentlich ein Gegenstand der Auslegung sein. Zielt sie doch umgekehrt darauf, den Ausleger zum Gegenstand des Textes werden zu lassen." See above, pages 21-22.

<sup>422</sup> See: Heiko A. Oberman, "The Shape of Late Medieval Thought: The Birthpangs of the Modern Era" in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus with Heiko A. Oberman, (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1974),p.11. According to Oberman, the people of Luther's time were engaged in a desperate search for "new symbols of security". This had been a problem for many generations before Luther. At the time of Joan of Arc's condemnation, the dominant theological position upheld God's sovereignty so that a distinction was made between God's absolute power and will and God's ordained power and will. Joan of Arc had stated that she could be sure of her salvation and that not all were *viatores* in God's sight. Steven Ozment cites the Theological Faculty of the University of Paris who made this as their damning judgement: This woman sins when she says she is certain of being received into Paradise as if she were already a partaker of... glory, seeing on this earthly journey no pilgrim knows if he is worthy of glory or of punishment, which the sovereign judge alone can tell. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980),pp.30-31.

necessary component of wisdom.<sup>423</sup> Righteousness and wisdom begin and end with a reliance on God. In Luther's words, the reason why Evangelical theology is certain lies in the fact that:

...it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.<sup>424</sup>

Certainty of the conscience before God is not only a result of Luther's theology but also his hermeneutic. His theology and hermeneutic are unified with one another through the activity of the Trinity. As Randall C. Zachman writes:

The external testimony of Christ to the conscience must be combined with the internal witness of the Holy Spirit to the heart and conscience so that we acknowledge the Word as true.<sup>425</sup>

For Luther, Scripture is clear. In the language of Alexandrian hermeneutical reflections, Luther understands that both the *res significans* and the *res significata* are Christ. Both are part of the revealed will of God.<sup>426</sup> That is to say, God in Christ is both

---

<sup>423</sup> WA 40 I 589,30-31: "Imo si iusti et sapientes sunt, certo sciunt se diligi a Deo, vel iusti et sapientes non sunt."

<sup>424</sup> WA 40 I 589,25-28; LW 26,387: "Quia rapit nos a nobis et ponit nos extra nos, ut non nitamur viribus, conscientia, sensu, persona, operibus nostris, sed eo nitamur, quod est extra nos, Hoc est, promissione et veritate Dei, quae fallere non potest."

<sup>425</sup> Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.61.

<sup>426</sup> Priscilla Hayden-Roy, "Hermeneutica gloria vs. hermeneutica crucis: Sebastian Franck and Martin Luther on the Clarity of Scripture", *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 81 (1990) 50-68; pp.62-63.

the content and the Speaker in Scripture. Scripture is therefore clear because Luther's hermeneutic and theology are grounded in the *potentia Dei ordinata*:<sup>427</sup>

You have already heard Christ refer to Himself as the Son of Man. With this term He wants to indicate that He has our true flesh and blood, which He obtained from the Virgin Mary and which contains eternal life. This is the article of justification. The Holy Spirit insists that we never teach, know of, think of, hear or accept any other god than this God, whose flesh and blood we imprint on our hearts if we want to be saved. We must not let ourselves be taught a god who sits in his throne room up in heaven, one who is to be sought only in the godhead... In the Son of Man you will encounter God.<sup>428</sup>

It is the Trinity of the οἰκονομία that works and witnesses in the revealed Word.<sup>429</sup> The Trinity of the οἰκονομία identifies the Christian God who is in mission for us. Thus, it is not the power of language which redeems and gives Scripture its clarity. Such

---

<sup>427</sup> See Introduction, pages 18-19.

<sup>428</sup> WA 33,201,3ff; LW 23,129: "Droben habt ihr gehöret, das ehr sich nennet des menschen Sohn, das ehr sei warhafftig fleisch undt blutt, das ehr von der Jungkfrauen Maria an sich genommen hat. Das ist der ärtikel von der Iustification, da der heilige geist wil, man sol nimmermehr einen andern gott lernen, wissen, gedenken, hören noch erfahren da den gott, des fleisch wir selig werden. Sonst sollen wir uns nicht lassen lehren von einem gott, der droben in einem saal fizet, undt ihnen allein in der gottheit suchteft.... so las keinen gott zu dir kommen dan des menschen Sohn..."

<sup>429</sup> Ted Peters succinctly describes the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity as follows: "However, by extending the notion of οἰκονομία introduced earlier by Tertullian, post-Nicene theologians began to speak of an economic Trinity (or "Trinity of manifestation"). This is the Trinity as manifested externally in the world through creation, redemption, and sanctification.... The cross of Jesus occurring within the stream of temporal history belongs to the economy of God's saving work but not within the eternal immanent Trinity. To that belongs only the eternal Logos." Ted Peters, *God- the World's Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p.107.

Logos-based hermeneutics confuse the economic Trinity with the immanent and attempt to seek "the godhead" in the heavenly "throne room" by some access to the mediation of the eternal Logos.<sup>430</sup>

Luther's hermeneutic which describes Scripture as being clear is not, however, based on a theory concerning the perspicuity of language.<sup>431</sup> Language and words can not only reveal but also have the power to deceive. The Devil is an example of a wordsmith who can even use Christ's own words to terrify the conscience. He cites: "some passage of Scripture or some saying of Christ and thus strikes our hearts and gives the impression of being Christ Himself."<sup>432</sup> Language does not need an evil manipulator to communicate the opposite of the reality found in Christ Jesus. Without a hermeneutic which centres on the proclamation of the "Gospel," the words of Scripture contradict one another and also terrify consciences:

---

<sup>430</sup> See previous note. See also, Luther's distinction between the Hidden and Proclaimed God: Chapter 3, pages 221 and following.

<sup>431</sup> This is the assumption of Julian Roberts who claims that Luther's clarity of Scripture is based on a faith in the common-sense or intuitive sense of a literal reading of Scripture. Although Luther often espoused a literal reading of Scripture his attack on allegory was not based on a confidence in the power of the words to communicate. Luther's hermeneutic was not a hermeneutic of signification but is based on the proclamation of the "Gospel." See Julian Roberts, "The Politics of Interpretation: Sacred and Secular Hermeneutics in the work of Luther, J. S. Semler, and H.-G. Gadamer," *Ideas and Production* 1 (1983) 15-32; pp.20-22,27.

<sup>432</sup> WA 40 I,92,21-22; LW 26,38f: "Et aliquo scripturae loco vel Christi dicto subito percutiens cor sic sese nobis obiicit, ac si esset verus Christus."

Therefore if He Himself is the price of my redemption, if He Himself became sin and a curse in order to justify and bless me, I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if you were to produce six hundred in support of the righteousness of works and against the righteousness of faith, and if you were to scream that Scripture contradicts itself. I have the Author and the Lord of Scripture, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you.<sup>433</sup>

Luther is aware that sometimes even one passage, never mind six hundred of them, is enough to establish a contradiction in the conscience between one's relationship with God through the Gospel and what the Law says: "Thus even one passage in Scripture that presents some of the threats of the Law overwhelms and swamps any other comfort; it shakes our insides in such a way that it makes us forget justification, grace, Christ, and the Gospel."<sup>434</sup> Scripture's clarity and the certainty of salvation are not grounded in the power of words or in their logical coherence. It is due to God's speaking which, according to Luther, is effective.<sup>435</sup>

---

<sup>433</sup> WA 40 I 458,30-34; LW 26,295: "Quare si ipse est pretium redemptionis meae, si Ipse factus est Peccatum et Maledictum, ut me iustificaret et benediceret, nihil moror Scripturae locos, si etiam sexcentos producas pro iustitia operum contra fidei iustitiam et clamites Scripturam pugnare; Ego Autorem et Dominum Scripturae habeo, a cuius parte volo potius stare quam tibi credere," The reference to six hundred passages is made in order to call to mind Erasmus' claim that he had six hundred proofs from Scripture that, on the path to salvation, there is a union of God's grace and human freedom to do good. See Erasmus, *On Free Will*, in *Erasmus- Luther: Discourses on Free Will*, tr. and ed. By Ernst F. Winter, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1961),p.59.

<sup>434</sup> WA 40 I 129,23-26; LW 26,64: "Sicut vel unus locus comminationis ex scriptura omnes obruat et obnubilet consolationes adeoque omnia interiora nostra concutiat, ut plane obliviscamur causae iustificationis, gratiae, Christi et Evangelii."

<sup>435</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff's discussion about the difference between God's revelation and speaking is helpful here. After noting that in the theological and philosophical reflections of the

Rather, the clarity of Scripture and the certainty of salvation are derived from the One who gives the *aliena iustitia sola gratia*. Christ, who testifies to his own redeeming work, proclaims to sinful humanity the "Gospel". This proclamation draws sinners out of themselves and grants them Christ. In this, Christ exhibits and acts out righteousness by being a man for others. The proclamation of this "alien" righteousness "kills" the "*cor curvatum in se*."<sup>436</sup>

Surprisingly, Luther's doctrine concerning the certainty of salvation is a function of the hiddenness of God's revelation.<sup>437</sup> Christ's testimony cannot be verified through reason, the senses or

---

West, God's speaking and revelation have habitually been subsumed into one another, he goes on to declare that the difference is important. Revelation depends on someone who receives the knowledge or insight as manifested and does not even need a revealer. God's speaking may not pass on any information or knowledge, it just gets something done. Wolterstorff uses the example of St. Augustine's conversion as told in his *Confessions*. A child chants "take and read" in a garden of a villa in Milan and St. Augustine interprets this as God's speaking to him alone. This speaking accomplishes God's purposes. See: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 19-36.

<sup>436</sup> This summarizing statement uses four of Luther's programmatic concepts: 1) *Proclamation* is how the "Gospel" gets into the world. "Gospel" is *good news*. 2) The *alien righteousness* of Christ communicates Luther's soteriology which insists that saving righteousness cannot be located within human life. 3) That the proclamation *kills* communicates a real ending to all that made up life before being found in the presence of God. 4) The *heart which is curved into itself* is a description of the human condition. This fallen condition rules all theological systems and every hermeneutic. Only the advent of the transcendent Living God (in the proclamation of Jesus Christ) can put an end to such a heart. Thus, Luther takes great care in making sure that no epistemological transcendence be confused with the transcendence of God.

<sup>437</sup> The concern for certainty of salvation is also a concern for reality over against the salvations and realities that arise from the self. Salvation and reality are marked with the sign of the cross in his theology and his hermeneutic.

the judgements of the conscience. Certainty, for Luther, is the certainty of faith which results from Christ's testimony of his work. Such faith is a description of salvation. Jesus Christ, who demonstrates righteousness by being for others, drives sinners out of themselves so they trust in Christ. This emphasis on the relational basis for Luther's hermeneutic resonates well with what was observed earlier concerning Luther return to a Hebrew understanding of "righteousness".<sup>438</sup>

The hidden nature of God's revelation in Luther's hermeneutic and his concurrent emphasis on a relational definition of righteousness is incarnationally lived through the "cloud of witnesses" who are God's saints. Randall C. Zachman writes:

These testimonies to the mercy and forgiveness of God are given through human witnesses to Christ. Thus, those who weigh the testimony by the authority of the speaker per se will conclude that the witness is from humans and not from God.... The human words that bear witness to Jesus Christ are to be heard as the words of Christ himself, For Christ has promised to speak to us through his witnesses and the testimonies he entrusted to them—preaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and brotherly consolation.... Only Christ can bear testimony to us concerning the mercy of God for sinners, even if he does so through the testimony of human beings.<sup>439</sup>

The human witnesses to the "Gospel" have been given this task as an

---

<sup>438</sup> See pages 115 and following.

<sup>439</sup> Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.59. Zachman uses the following references to support his contention concerning Luther's hermeneutic: 1) WA 44, 166,23-25: "But such is the perversity of human nature that we do not believe that we are hearing the Word of God whenever He speaks through a man." 2) WA 13,550,5-9: "However, Christ continues to bear witness to himself through others, so that whoever hears them hears Christ."

expression of Christ's righteousness. In no way are these witnesses masters of Scripture so that the mysteries of God are uncovered through their interpretive powers:

Here<sup>440</sup> Paul subordinates himself, an angel from heaven, teachers on earth, and any other masters at all to Sacred Scripture... The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven - these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture.<sup>441</sup>

Paul, an author of Scripture, is subordinate to Scripture because it is God who is communicating.

Christ's righteousness for others is concretely realized in that the saints have others to witness to and they have others who proclaim God's love and mercy to them.<sup>442</sup> Thus, for Luther, a personal presence is much better than any written text, even the

---

<sup>440</sup> Galatians 1:8-9: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed, as we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed."

<sup>441</sup> WA 40 I, 120,18ff.; LW 26,57f.: "...quod Paulus simpliciter Seipsum, Angelum e coelo, doctores in terra et quicquid est Magistrorum, hoc totum rapit et subiicit sacrae scripturae... Non eius Magistri, Iudices seu Arbitri, sed simplices testes, discipuli et confessores esse debent, sive sit Papa, sive Lutherus, sive Augustinus, sive Paulus, sive Angelus e coelo."

<sup>442</sup> It should not be assumed here that Christian righteousness is merely a righteousness of reciprocity. Antti Raunio develops the thesis that Luther scholarship of this century has suffered under Kantian assumptions that natural Law must be separated from divine Law. This has caused Luther's references to the *Golden Rule* to be interpreted as a rule of reciprocity. Over against these assumptions, Raunio focuses on Luther's use of the *Golden Rule* and shows that Christian righteousness starts with the emptying of Christ for others and this self-sacrifice determines Christian love for others. Antti Raunio, *Summe des christlichen Lebens: Die „Goldene Regel“ als Gesetz der Liebe in der Theologie Martin Luthers von 1510 bis 1527*, (Helsinki: The University of Helsinki, 1993), pp.11-56.

text of a personal letter. Commenting on Galatians 4:20<sup>443</sup>, Luther writes:

No letter is written so carefully that nothing is lacking in it. Circumstances vary; so do the elements of time, place, person, custom, and attitude, none of which a letter can express. Therefore it affects the reader in various ways; sometimes it makes him sad and sometimes happy, depending on how the reader feels. But the living voice, on the other hand, is able to interpret, soften, and correct whatever has been said in a rather harsh or intemperate way.<sup>444</sup>

When temptations are especially intense, God's Word is best delivered by another believer in person:

Unless there is added a faith that will raise one up again, or unless, in accordance with that saying of Christ about "Where two or three", there is a brother present who will comfort such a person, oppressed and bruised by the Law, with the Word of God, despair and death are sure to follow. Therefore it is very bad for a man to be alone, especially amid temptations.<sup>445</sup>

This does not only apply to one-to-one comforting but also applies to the more public presence of the preacher. Although Luther published a number of his own sermons, he writes that there is a vast difference between a preached sermon and a written one: "Es

---

<sup>443</sup> "I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone."

<sup>444</sup> WA 40 I,651,22-28; LW 26,431f: "Et nulla Epistola tum accurate scripta est, in qua non desideretur aliquid. Varias enim sunt circumstantias, et momenta temporum, locorum, personarum, morum et affectuum varia sunt, quae Epistola nulla potest exprimere. Ideoque varie afficit lectorem, iam contristat, iam exhilarat, prout lector affectus est. Viva autem vox, si quid asperius aut intempestivius dictum est, potest illud interpretari, mitigare et corrigere."

<sup>445</sup> WA 40 I,493,17-20; LW 26,318: "Hic nisi accedat fides quae iterum erigat, aut iuxta illud Christi: 'Ubi duo vel tres' etc. adsit frater qui consoletur verbo Dei sic oppressum et contusum lege, certa desperatio et mors sequitur. Igitur pessimum est hominem, praesertim in tentationibus esse solum."

ist ein gross unterscheyt, etwas mit lebendiger stymme adder mit todter schrifft an tag zubringenn."<sup>446</sup>

### Conclusion

This chapter began with the acknowledgement that Luther's doctrine concerning the salvation of sinners by God's work of creating faith was also his hermeneutic. The salvation of the sinner is accomplished *sola gratia* in the creation of faith. This faith is created by Jesus himself, whose presence promises forgiveness, mercy and love. Nothing can separate the believer from Christ, not even death.

Luther's description of his hermeneutic and his formulation of the doctrine of *justification by faith* reflect the concern that human salvation is accomplished by God *sola gratia*. Luther is resolute in his description of Christ's work so that the righteousness that saves is always Christ's. Such an expression of the doctrine of justification ensures that the Church will direct its energies and mission in such a way that faith in Christ's righteousness will be cultivated. Concurrently, faith in the various attempts of human beings to accomplish righteousness will be denounced.

---

<sup>446</sup> WA 2,166,10f.

Luther was convinced that it was the nature of fallen humanity to try and find its own salvation. He was also convinced that experience and the faculties of reason, conscience and the senses tended to confirm these attempts. Thus, expressions of existence will be many and varied but the formulation of correct doctrine will be narrow indeed<sup>447</sup>:

Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack.<sup>448</sup>

The narrow range available for describing correct doctrine and the high stakes involved caused Luther to be unyielding over doctrine.<sup>449</sup> Luther is aware that it is the nature of love "to bear everything and to yield to everyone" and that love does this freely while believing, condoning and tolerating everything.<sup>450</sup> Love is happily deceived while faith is not.<sup>451</sup> This is not to say that Luther's theology can be conceptualized as a scheme for salvation. Faith cannot be defined as trust in doctrine. The relationship between Luther's theology and his hermeneutic prevents this

---

<sup>447</sup> See Introduction, pages 37 and following.

<sup>448</sup> WA 40 II, 47,17-19; LW 27,38: "Debet igitur doctrina esse unus quidam perpetuus et rotundus aureus circulus, in quo nulla sit fissura; ea accedente vel minima, circulus non est amplius integer etc."

<sup>449</sup> See LW 27,36-37: "For the sectarians who deny the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper accuse us today of being quarrelsome, harsh, and intractable, because, as they say, we shatter love and harmony among the churches on account of the single doctrine about the Sacrament."

<sup>450</sup> WA 40 II,48,13-14: "Charitatis est omnia tolerare, omnibus cedere."

<sup>451</sup> WA 40 II,48,14-27.

possibility. Such a trust would subtly shift the hermeneutical focus away from Christ, who works and witnesses to the redemption on the cross, toward the ones who formulate pure doctrine and those who possess it.

Thus, Luther's hermeneutic causes two points to be emphasized concerning doctrine. Since the self-centredness of humanity is reflected in its continuing attempts at finding its own redemption, it is important for the Church, the proclaimers of Christ's death and resurrection, to combat these attempts with the formulation of correct doctrine. At the same time, correct doctrine can itself take the place of the work of Christ and becomes one more expression of self-expansion. Luther's hermeneutic ensures that the path to salvation can only be described as coming from God, *sola gratia*. Luther's hermeneutic directs a the Church to proclaim Christ's death and resurrection. In this way, Christ brings a promise of life and salvation in the face of the powers of death.

Luther's description of this doctrine concerning redemption and his description of the hermeneutic of proclamation that accompanies this doctrine do not accomplish salvation. This relationship between his hermeneutic and theology is at odds with hermeneutical attempts to turn the "Gospel" into an object of knowledge. Such faith in "saving knowledge" is foreign to Luther's hermeneutic. For Luther, the doctrine of *justification by faith* is so formulated that it describes how Christ speaks his promises and

creates faith. It forces the Church to proclaim the "Gospel," thereby announcing the good news of God's righteousness in Christ. The "Gospel" does not save because it is an object of knowledge which "enlightens." Such a scheme for salvation is focused on the changes that occur in the self. The assumptions of the traditional hermeneutics will necessarily create a division between subject and object that will perpetually offer a choice between the two poles of subjectivism and objectivism. Luther has been traditionally interpreted as advocating one pole or the other.<sup>452</sup> In this chapter, it has been shown that doctrines about Christ and salvation are formulated so that Christ may speak a Word of promise. It is Christ who is righteous and it is Christ who witnesses to his redeeming work.

As Luther is relentless in this description of Christ's work, so Luther is likewise consistent in his description of how that work is proclaimed. The interpreter of Christ's work is never allowed to make that work into an object so that the interpreter becomes "all in all."<sup>453</sup> Instead, when Christ becomes present in the

---

<sup>452</sup> For a good overview of Lutheran struggles over method arising from the division between subject and object, see: John Reumann, "The Lutheran 'Hermeneutics Study': An Overview and Personal Appraisal" *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann in collaboration with Samuel H. Nafzger and Harold H. Ditmanson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 1-76. For a description of Luther's concern for wisdom and the justification of the sinner over against the concerns of science or subjectivism, see: Oswald Bayer, *Theologie* (Gütersloher: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), pp. 36-55.

<sup>453</sup> Luther's hermeneutic is very much concerned with idolatry, particularly, the idolatry of the self.

proclamation he interprets the interpreter through the announcement of "Law" and "Gospel." The "Law" tears down all pretensions of righteousness and the "Gospel" grants a new life where the righteousness of Christ becomes the righteousness of the sinner through the promise of God.

## Chapter 3

## THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

## Introduction

This chapter will examine some of the parts of Luther's theology which western modernity has found particularly offensive. It will focus on the bondage of the will but, in that discussion, it will necessarily highlight Luther's doctrine of the hiddenness of God, predestination and the wrath of God. These are the themes in Luther's theology which Albrecht Ritschl, among others, had identified to be throwbacks from Luther's nominalist training which contradicts Luther's God of mercy and love.<sup>454</sup> Instead, this chapter

---

<sup>454</sup> Albrecht Ritschl finds the basis for Luther's use of the *deus absconditus* in his training in the nominalistic form of scholasticism. He claimed that this idea is ultimately derived from the thinking of Dionysius the Areopagite: "Theologians of the older school have set these considerations aside because, under the influence of the Areopagitic conception of God, they cannot bring themselves to assume a real fellowship between God and man. The God who is conceived only as not being the world, must always be negatively related to everything that is real.... Therefore the creation of the world, even when explained by Divine love, is yet derived from God's arbitrary volition." Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, English translation edited by H.R.Mackintosh and A.B.Macauley, (New Jersey: Reference Book Publishers, inc, 1966),p.271. For a history of the development of this Ritschlian reaction in other religious thinkers in the early twentieth century, see: John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed: The interpretation of Luther's deus absconditus and its significance for religious thought*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1953). Adolph Harnack thought that the distinction between the *deus absconditus* and the *deus praedicatus* is evidence that Luther had "not yet rid himself of the bad practice of the scholastic understanding of treating theological perceptions as philosophical doctrines". This "bad practice"

will show that these "offensive" elements of Luther's theology arise from his hermeneutic. The *Deus absconditus* does not function to hide and protect an arbitrary and free divine will but functions to serve the proclamation of the "Gospel". As already stated, Luther insists that there is no such thing as the love of God apart from that proclamation. There is only the universal "Word" of "Law", "death", and God's "wrath".

Relationship between the Bondage of the Will and  
Justification by Faith

A heated scholarly discussion has developed on the question of whether there exists an inherent relationship between Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and his doctrine concerning God's free will and humanity's bound will. Harry McSorley, a Roman Catholic interpreter of Luther, takes the position that salvation which is based on God's faithfulness and God's free will is another way to say that it is based on the *iustitia aliena Christi* and the

---

prevented the proper joining of objective revelation and the subjective appropriation of that revelation. Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol VII, tr. Neil Buchanan, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1961), p. 203.

Word of God which remains *extra nos*.<sup>455</sup> His thesis is that there is an inherent connection between Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and his doctrine concerning the bondage of the will. Alister McGrath, on the other hand, states that the connection between the unfree human will and the doctrine of justification by faith is due to aspects of Luther's personality. McGrath has offered the development of subsequent Lutheranism as a testimony to this thesis that there is no inherent connection between justification by faith and the doctrine of the unfree will. McGrath writes:

...the history of Lutheran theology indicates that a wedge was driven between the concepts of an alien justifying righteousness and an enslaved will at a comparatively early stage, the former being consistently maintained as *de fide*, the latter being abandoned or reduced to the mere assertion that man cannot justify himself - a far cry from its original meaning.<sup>456</sup>

McGrath goes on to propose that Luther's understanding of an alien justifying righteousness and his understanding of the human enslaved will are two "essentially independent statements about justification, related only by the personality of Luther."<sup>457</sup>

---

<sup>455</sup> See Harry J. McSorley, "The Key Issue of the Reformation," *Dialog* 6 (1967) 261-264. McSorley writes: "...it should be noted that the doctrine of the unfree will is simply the reverse side of the same coin on which justification by grace alone is stamped... We simply suggest, however, that the doctrine of the unfree will is the article upon which Luther's doctrine of justification stands or falls." (p.262.)

<sup>456</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, From 1500 to the present day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

McGrath's statement is a difficult one to argue against directly since it is hard to imagine anyone who shows a profound interest in certain theological themes without also assuming that those themes would not correlate in some way with the personality or the experiences of that person. Therefore, this analysis will attempt to discover whether Luther's doctrine of the unfree will is only a result of some aspect of his personality.

Others have also suggested that Luther's doctrine of the unfree will is only a function of his personality. They have pointed out negative aspects of his personality and have used these to argue against various theological positions furthered by Luther. One example of an opinion that suggests that this doctrine stems from Luther's personality can be found in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* where Paquier suggests that Luther's doctrine of the bound human will is just a product of the German temperament.<sup>458</sup> Another example was observed above where Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle suggests that Luther dangerously desires to abdicate all moral responsibility so that life can be blamed on either God or the devil. In a similar vein, H. Denifle suggests that Luther's doctrine of the bound will is a result of his desire to be released from the necessity of self-discipline and mortification.<sup>459</sup>

---

<sup>458</sup> Paquier, "Luther" DTC, 9, 1287.

<sup>459</sup> Heinrich Denifle, *Luther and Lutherdom*, tr. Raymund Volz, vol 1, Part 1, (Somerset: Torch Press, 1917), pp.454ff.

This chapter will demonstrate that Luther's understanding of the human will is inherently connected to his doctrine of the "alien" righteousness of Christ. They are connected by way of Luther's hermeneutic. Luther's hermeneutic, in fact, is the doctrine of justification by faith. His hermeneutic is the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel". Both the the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel" and the doctrine of justification function to describe the formation and nature of the relationship established between God and humanity.<sup>460</sup>

For Luther, the human will must be understood within the confines of the relational ontology by which he operates. This is a special type of relational ontology. Its nature is determined by the relationship established with the living God. This ontology is based on the trinitarian mission of God as witnessed in Scripture. Salvation is to be understood as the active rescue of humanity caught under bondage to the powers of "flesh", that is, the powers of the Law. The human will is also bound by these powers. Therefore, the rescue accomplished by God's Word comes from outside the believer as the proclamation of the "Law" and "Gospel". This is a performative "Word" which accomplishes what it says, namely God's

---

<sup>460</sup> See George A. Lindbeck, "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment" *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996) 144-160. Lindbeck characterizes Luther's hermeneutic as one that is decriptive in nature. This places it in opposition to many renaissance-enlightenment hermeneutics which start with ontological dualisms. A hermeneutic begun and developed from such methodological considerations is a hermeneutic which starts from the assumption that there is a "neutral" place from which to theorize. As already established above, Luther was vehemently opposed to any hermeneutic which assumed such a neutral position.

will *pro nobis*. The mission of God accomplishes the *feliciter commutans* by slaying the sinner and giving the believer a new identity marked by the *iustitia Christi aliena*. Thus, the connection between the bound human will and the *iustitia Christi aliena* is seen in Luther's hermeneutic of salvation. The two are inherently connected.

Nevertheless, McGrath's observation is correct that subsequent Lutheranism did not always share Luther's insistence that the bondage of the will and the doctrine of Justification by faith must be spoken together.<sup>461</sup> In 1558, Philip Melanchthon addresses "all the Electors, Princes, and Estates of the Augsburg Confession" by softening Luther's stance on the human will as found in his *De servo arbitrio*. Melanchthon writes:

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word. This rule people can understand and can profitably employ. It also leads man to God's Word, and does not create any confusion in regard to predestination, or other irrelevant disputes about necessity. And although Luther in the *De Servo Arbitrio* wrote harshly, yet in other writings he counsels just as we now have done.<sup>462</sup>

Melanchthon's position regarding the human will is a long way from Luther's image of the beast of burden which is either driven

---

<sup>461</sup> See: Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, From 1500 to the present day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.44. McGrath writes: "The Augustinian concept of justification as both event and process, still evident in Luther, is rejected by later Lutheranism."

<sup>462</sup> Found in: Clyde Leonard Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1975), pp.297-298.

by the devil or by God.<sup>463</sup> The heart of this change is that Melanchthon operates with a hermeneutic of signification. While utilizing Luther's concepts concerning justification by faith, the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel", and the stress that the "Word" is spoken *pro nobis*, Melanchthon does so with a different hermeneutic than Luther describes. This reveals itself when dealing with the human will. Melanchthon's hermeneutic of signification "protects" God's equity and fairness by developing the theme that God's salvation is offered to all.<sup>464</sup> He then goes on to approve the statement made by St. Chrysostom who had said that "God draws, but he draws *those who are willing*."<sup>465</sup> Melanchthon interprets this statement in such a manner that the human will takes priority. In Melanchthon's hermeneutic, the person addressed by the Word is directed to ask whether he or she is willing to be drawn into God's salvation:

The only cause for rejection is *our* striving against God's Word. Therewith, we should console ourselves and be content... When you hear the preaching of the Word, remember that it applies to you, and do not be puzzled over election or predestination. If you have the beginning of faith, then God will help you

---

<sup>463</sup> This fact was noticed and sharply criticized by Nikolaus von Amsdorf and Matthias Flacius.

<sup>464</sup> (*Loci communes* 1555) Philip Melanchthon, *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci communes 1555*, tr. and ed. Clyde L. Manschreck, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), pp.187-190.

<sup>465</sup> Philip Melanchthon, *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci communes 1555*, tr. and ed. Clyde L. Manschreck, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), pp.187-190.

farther.<sup>466</sup>

Without giving an in-depth analysis of Melanchthon's hermeneutic, the above quotation is sufficient to show how it is different than Luther's.<sup>467</sup> On the one hand, he has a "Luther-like" emphasis on the Word as it applies to the one addressed. However, he also talks about the possibility of human striving against God's Word.

Luther believes that the raptured will acts willingly.<sup>468</sup> However, for Luther's theology and hermeneutic it is crucial that it is understood that human willing has no bearing on the question of salvation. Only God's will has any bearing on salvation. God does not need any "protection" from unfavourable interpretations gathered from the "Word" concerning God's righteousness. In Luther's hermeneutic, it is God who interprets humanity and not the other way around. Melanchthon, however, stresses human willing in order to have a theology which maintains God's universal offer of salvation and therefore God's fairness.<sup>469</sup>

---

<sup>466</sup> CR 22,417.

<sup>467</sup> See Günter Frank, "Die theologische Philosophie Melanchthons (1497-1560): Ein Plädoyer zur Rehabilitierung des Humanisten und Reformators" *Kerygma und Dogma* 42 (1996) 22-36. Frank concludes that Melanchthon's philosophy is optimistic concerning human potential: "Melanchthons (nominalistisches) Philosophieverständnis resultiert gerade nicht aus der nominalistischen Erkenntniskritik des Spätmittelalters, sondern aus der sprachhumanistischen Basis seines Denkens, die ihn eher mit italienischen Renaissancehumanisten verbindet." , p.29.

<sup>468</sup> See page 204.

<sup>469</sup> Luther instead stresses that God's Word is directed *pro me*: "Den in diese hefftige anfechtung bringet dich der Teuffel, das du meinst, Christus sei nicht Gottes Sohn, und dein glaube gefalle ime nicht, und plaget dich mit der ewigen versehung, mit dem zorn und Gerichte

In Luther's hermeneutic, there is no room for someone to be above the "Word" so that they could strive against it. The Word in Luther's hermeneutic judges, "kills", makes alive. For Luther, this "Word" is the source of faith in that it actively destroys all other sources of confidence and it actually gives Someone to believe. In opposition to Melanchthon, the Word in Luther's hermeneutic is not that which allows God to help you farther once you already have the beginnings of faith. For Luther, the source and beginning of faith is Christ who makes himself real-ontically present in faith through the Word.<sup>470</sup>

There is, indeed, a difference between Luther's understanding of the human will and Melanchthon's. There is also an inherent connection between Luther's understanding of the bound will and his doctrine of the *iustitia Christi aliena*. Melanchthon operates with a different hermeneutic than Luther. This is significant for providing another rationale to explain the position on the will

---

Gottes. Do sage du dan: Ich will Gott nicht wissen noch kennen oder hören, den das er mich liebe, von einigem zornigen Gott, von seinem Gerichte und Zorn, Hellen, Tod und verdammniss will ich nichts wissen. Sehe ich aber seinen Zorn, so weiss ich, das er mich treibt zum Sohn, das ich zu im Zuflucht habe, und wen ich zu im komme, so hab ich einen gnedigen vater,..." WA 47,92,19-26.

<sup>470</sup> See Tuomo Mannermaa, *Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus: Rechtfertigung und Vergottung Zum ökumenischen Dialog*, (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus GmbH, 1989), p.92: "Luther unterscheidet nicht - wie die Konkordienformel und das spätere Luthertum es tun - begriffsmäßig die Rechtfertigung und die essentielle Gegenwart Gottes im Gläubigen voneinander. Christus ist nach Luther in ein und derselben Person *sowohl* Gottes „Gunst" (der Konkordienformel gemäß: Vergebung der Sünden, Aufhebung des Zornes Gottes, „Rechtfertigung") *als auch* Gottes „Gabe" (Gott als in seinem Wesen gegenwärtig, „Teilhabe an der göttlichen Natur"; 2. Petr. 1,4)."

taken by Lutheranism after Luther. It is no doubt true that Luther's personality was a factor in his theology of the human will. However, the change in hermeneutic between Luther and Melanchthon lessens the force of McGrath's argument concerning the inherent connection between the bound human will and justification by faith. The quick change of doctrine concerning the will from Luther to Lutheranism does not support McGrath's contention that the doctrine of the bound will is only a result of Luther's personality and experience. The change from Luther to the Lutheranism represented by Melanchthon is also a change in hermeneutic.<sup>471</sup>

Luther's theology concerning the bondage of the will arises from the proclamation of the "Gospel" to sinful human beings. Since the proclamation of the "Gospel" is intimately connected with Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and his distinction between "Law" and "Gospel", it is not too surprising that Luther draws a connection between these two doctrines and the doctrine of the bound human will. In 1532, when Luther's poor health had caused

---

<sup>471</sup> The relationship between Luther and Melanchthon remains a "perplexing question of Lutheran confessional scholarship." James Arne Nestingen writes: "For all their friendship and theological agreement, they could come to deep conflict at both levels. In fact, in Luther's last years, Melanchthon was attempting a theological overhaul of the Lutheran witness which subsequently divided the church into contending parties and necessitated the *Formula of Concord*." As Nestingen contends, one of the critical factors in this argument is "a shift from Luther's apocalyptically interpretation to Melanchthon's later substantialist ontology taken over from Aristotle." James Arne Nestingen, "The End of the End: The Role of Apocalyptic in the Lutheran Reform," *Word and World* XV (1995) 195-205; pp.195-196. Luther's hermeneutic of proclamation announces the end of the "Law."

him to doubt that his remaining vitality would allow him to take on a major book of the Bible, he had decided to teach several selected Psalms. After finishing Psalm 51 (*Miserere*), which in his words "teaches the true nature of repentance, faith and justification," he decided to start lecturing on the joyful Psalm 45 (*Eructavit*). Luther notes that the different moods and themes taken up by these two Psalms illustrate how the fluent Holy Spirit is able to "express and picture one the selfsame thing in various ways": "Rather He adorns and illustrates the same thing - namely, faith and the doctrine of justification - now with one and then with another ornament and dress."<sup>472</sup> Luther's faith and the doctrine of justification are far from being a scholastic anachronism. Quite the contrary, Luther's hermeneutic lets him use these old arguments to adorn afresh the thorny question of the human will. The precise relationship between the gift of faith and the working of the human will is very important for Luther. So much so that, after being criticized by Erasmus of Rotterdam in *De libero arbitrio*, Luther compliments Erasmus for attacking him on the "real issue, the essence of the matter in dispute".<sup>473</sup>

---

<sup>472</sup> The entire reference is as follows: WA 40 II,472,21-25; LW 12,197: "Proposui igitur mihi Psalmum 45.: 'Eructavit', in quo videbimus, quam copiosus Orator sit Spiritus sanctus, qui rem unam et eandem variis modis eloqui et figurare potest. Nam materia ubique est eadem neque diversum quiddam docet, Sed alio atque alio ornatu ac vestitu eandem rem, nempe fidem seu locum iustificationis, ornat et illustrat,..."

<sup>473</sup> See WA 18,786,26-29: "Deinde et hoc in te vehementer laudo et praedico, quod solus prae omnibus rem ipsam es aggressus, hoc est summam causae, nec me fatigaris alienis illis caussis de

For Luther, the question of the will, like righteousness, is strongly influenced by a relational understanding of reality. In the previous chapter, it was concluded that the appropriation of the "alien righteousness" of Christ is the result of Christ cementing himself to the one addressed by the "Word".<sup>474</sup> This "happy exchange" of Christ's righteousness with the believer's is a joining so intimate that the Luther can describe it in terms of language that was used to describe the relations between the persons of the Trinity. The uniting of Christ with the believer is a *perichoresis*.<sup>475</sup> This understanding precludes a hermeneutic which conceptualizes the Word as a witness that was spoken solely in the past. God speaks now in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which comes to humanity in the form of "Law" and "Gospel".

God's Word is not a Past *Logos*

At its core, Luther's hermeneutic is in opposition to a hermeneutic of signification. It is not some *gnosis* or knowledge

---

Papatu, purgatorio, indulgentiis ac similibus nugis potius quam caussis, in quibus me hactenus omnes fere venati sunt frustra."

<sup>474</sup> See pages 148 and following.

<sup>475</sup> See Chapter 1, especially pages 81 and following.

that causes a new person of faith to be created from the encounter with the "Word". In a hermeneutic governed by the power of the past *Logos*,<sup>476</sup> God loses the power to speak in the present and so be One who encounters humanity with God's eternal life. If the encounter between God and humanity is thought to be an encounter between a past word of God and the listener, then the new self resulting from that encounter will be nothing other than the self that results from any gain in understanding or knowledge. What the "Word" accomplishes in the believer should not be confused with the maturity and insightfulness that might arise from a gain in knowledge. For Luther, it is not the transcendence of self-consciousness which is the hermeneutical key. Rather, God encounters humanity with a "Word" which creates faith, the "alien" righteousness of Christ.<sup>477</sup> Jesus Christ, as the "Word" which confronts humanity as "Law" and "Gospel", interprets the interpreter so that the "old Adam" is mortified and a new person is created in unity with the "new Adam".<sup>478</sup> Luther's hermeneutic arises

---

<sup>476</sup> "Logos", like the term "Word", has a long and varied history of meaning. Throughout this work, when using these terms in a positive sense, we have attempted to be faithful to the sense that Luther understood these terms. He, following the Johannine example, equated the *Logos* with Jesus Christ. Here, however, when contrasting Luther's hermeneutic with a hermeneutic which attempts to "mine" the past *Logos* for meaning, *Logos* refers to a message or rationality which attempts to give life coherence.

<sup>477</sup> This is the theme of Chapter two.

<sup>478</sup> This is the theme of Chapter one. The use of the comparison between Adam and Christ is one that stems from Romans 5:12-21. This language is used by countless Christian interpreters, including Luther.

from the conviction that it is the particular God revealed in Christ who is presently speaking.<sup>479</sup>

In his *De servo arbitrio*, Luther develops his arguments against a hermeneutic of the past *Logos* by complaining about people who use the authority of various saints to further their agendas concerning the human will in relationship with God. Luther refutes this hermeneutical strategy by citing the example of St. Peter as one who should obviously not be used as an authority in every instance. This is the case even though Luther also admits that St. Peter is one of the highest Christian authorities:

It is as though someone relying on the sanctity and authority of St. Peter should contend that everything St. Peter ever said was true, even including what he said when in Matthew 16 he sought through the weakness of the flesh, to dissuade Christ from suffering, or when he bade Christ depart from him out of the ship (Luke 5:8), and many other instances, for which he was rebuked by Christ himself.<sup>480</sup>

Quoting holy authorities is not authoritative. Luther asserts that the supporters of free choice who collect various statements of the

---

<sup>479</sup> In this respect, Luther's pre-modern hermeneutic parallels the concerns of the post-modern hermeneutic of Emmanuel Levinas. Like Levinas, Luther's hermeneutic is incommensurate with the "Dit." Levinas also avoids a hermeneutic which treats the relationship with the "other" as analogous to the relationship between the self and the self found in the following statement: "I will look after myself." See Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 144ff.

<sup>480</sup> WA 18,648,33-649,3; LW 33,83: "Ac si quis sanctimonia et autoritate Sancti Petri nixus contenderit omnia quae S. Petrus unquam dixit, esse vera, ut etiam illud persuadeat esse verum, quod Matthei 16, ex carnis infirmitate suasit Christo, ne pateretur, aut illud ubi iussit Christum exire a se de navi, et multa alia, in quibus ab ipso Christo reprehenditur."

Fathers are actually using the weakness of these Fathers as an authority. He then continues by showing the absurdity of willy-nilly collecting the statements of respected authorities. According to Luther, collecting the sayings of the Fathers is hermeneutically equivalent to those who quote Matthew 26:66 ("He [Jesus] deserves death") to prove that Scripture is not always true.<sup>481</sup>

Luther continues his argument against those who look to the past for authoritative statements about God's will by citing a number of examples from the past which show that God's true Church had been hidden from sight and the standards of reason. Luther points out that the identity of the true saints had been hidden from the common judgements of reason when: the unnamed saints were burned at the stake by the "minions of the Inquisition"; the five Catholic bishops who preserved the truth while the Arians ruled the church; the disciples of Christ who deserted him at the cross; Elijah and the seven thousand were preserved by God out of the entire nation of Israel.<sup>482</sup> For those who had lived with these saints, Luther poses the question: "But who saw them, or knew them to be the People of God?"<sup>483</sup> The hidden nature of God's saints is a key element in Luther's theology concerning the bound will. It will be shown that this hiddenness of God and God's workings makes God

---

<sup>481</sup> WA 18,649,4-16.

<sup>482</sup> WA 18,650,13ff.

<sup>483</sup> WA 18,650,16-17; LW 33,86: "quos quis vidit aut novit esse populum Dei?"

unavailable to human willing. God's hiddenness makes room for proclamation whereby the one standing before God is driven to the announcement made *pro nobis*.<sup>484</sup>

God's will remains a mystery to human reason and "speculation"<sup>485</sup>:

God does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word. Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his.<sup>486</sup>

Human "speculation" concerning God encounters the God who "does many things not disclosed in his Word".<sup>487</sup> No matter what "image" of God is extrapolated through the powers of the senses, reason and the conscience such "speculation" will confront a God who predestines the "speculator" to death. Using a scholastic distinction, Luther calls this God the *Deus absconditus*. God actively "hides" from human "speculation" and other workings of the human will so that God can become present to the sinner in the *Deus*

---

<sup>484</sup> Luther's insistence that God's Word is always spoken *pro nobis* is a necessary adjunct of his hermeneutic of Christ's presence in the proclamation. God's Word is not part of the historical record which is available to anyone who cares to seek it out. Rather, it is spoken *to us*.

<sup>485</sup> "Speculation" is a negative term for Luther. It refers to the process by which human beings extrapolate an "image" of God from their own experiences of life. Against such a hermeneutic, Luther claims that God hides.

<sup>486</sup> WA 18,685,27-29; LW 33,140: "Multa facit Deus, quae verbo suo non ostendit nobis. Multa quoque vult, quae verbo suo non ostendit sese velle. Sic non vult motem peccatoris, verbo scilicet, Vult autem illam voluntate illa imperscrutabili."

<sup>487</sup> See previous footnote.

*praedicatus*.<sup>488</sup>

In this distinction between the *Deus praedicatus et absconditus*, Luther is not positing two gods.<sup>489</sup> Rather, Luther uses this distinction to create space for the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's "hiding"<sup>490</sup> prevents self-centred human beings<sup>491</sup> from divining God by interpreting the signs of creation or of Scripture. This hiding applies both to whatever

---

<sup>488</sup> WA 18,685,25ff: "Illudit autem sese Diatribe ignorantia sua, dum nihil distinguit inter Deum praedicatum et absconditum, hoc est, inter verbum Dei et Deum ipsum." This hiding includes God hiding from scholarly research into the love of Jesus so that we might know what God and love are really like. In Luther's hermeneutic, God does not give a map of God's work and love for various interpreters to read. God loves. See 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. Grislis notes that the doctrine of the *deus absconditus* acts to safeguard against an interpretation of the love of God which is based on sinful humanity's various readings of the love of the historical Jesus.

<sup>489</sup> Again, WA 18,685,25ff: "Illudit autem sese Diatribe ignorantia sua, dum nihil distinguit inter Deum praedicatum et absconditum, hoc est, inter verbum Dei et Deum ipsum." In this regard, Paulson notes that in Luther's doctrine of the Trinity, the "economic" Trinity must be theologically distinct from the "immanent" Trinity. Only in proclamation are the two brought together: "It is rather a statement of how one must preach so that economic becomes equated with immanent. It is not equated before or outside proclamation. So 'immanent' and 'economic' trinity are necessarily distinguished if proclamation is the goal. For only there, i.e. only for faith is the economic the immanent and vice versa." Steven Paulson, *Analogy and Proclamation: The struggle over God's hiddenness in the theology of Martin Luther and Eberhard Jungel*, (Chicago: Th.D. Dissertation for Lutheran School of Theology, 1992), p.229

<sup>490</sup> That is, the *Deus absconditus*.

<sup>491</sup> For Luther, following the Augustinian tradition, all human beings are "curved into themselves". Luther's description of the hermeneutic arising from the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ makes sure that no aspect of the self be seen as the hermeneutical key in this encounter. The human will cannot be the determining factor in this encounter with the "Word" since that would only mean that the self would be so expanded that its seeking reaches God.

"meaning" such signs might provide "for me" and to whatever objective meanings might arise.<sup>492</sup> God actively "hides" so that God can be "preached" "to us" in Baptism, the Lord's Supper and in the Church's *proclamation*.<sup>493</sup> This "hiding" is not a challenge laid before humanity to find the proper hermeneutic of signification. In this regard, it is significant that in his *De servo aritrio*, Luther only develops the distinction between the *Deus praedicatus et absconditus* after first insisting that Scripture is clear and not obscure.<sup>494</sup> As noted above, for Luther, Scripture is clear since it is the testimony of Christ about the redeeming work of Christ.<sup>495</sup> Human "weakness" is not what makes the "Word" and will of God obscure,<sup>496</sup> but such "weakness" is what is used as an opportunity to reveal God's will of mercy to sinners.<sup>497</sup>

---

<sup>492</sup> Luther's hermeneutical focus on the "Word" spoken *pro nobis* is not an expression of subjectivism. It is an integral part of a hermeneutic which describes Jesus Christ being *present* in the *proclamation*.

<sup>493</sup> This is what Luther describes as the *Deus praedicatus*.

<sup>494</sup> See WA 18,652,23ff.

<sup>495</sup> That which is signified is the same as that which signifies. See pages 153 and following.

<sup>496</sup> Luther complains to Erasmus that *De libero arbitrium* describes this clear Scripture as being ambiguous while, at the same time, it rushes in and pries into that part of God which God has willed to be hidden. See: WA 18,631,26ff.

<sup>497</sup> WA 18,659,27-33: "Non enim imbecillitatis ingenii est (ut tu caussaris), ne verba Dei capiantur, imo nihil aptius capiendis verbis Dei imbecillitate ingenii, propter imbecilles enim et ad imbecilles Christus et venit et mittit verbum suum, sed nequitia Satanae est in nostra imbecillitate sedentis, regnantis ac verbo Dei resistentis. Ni Satanus faceret, uno sermone Dei semel audito totus mundus hominum converteretur nec pluribus opus esset."

According to Luther, God's hiddenness is a function of the Divine Majesty which demarcates the boundary between Creator and creature.<sup>498</sup> It is a particular and peculiar kind of majesty whereby the "Gospel" of God's death in Christ destroys human idolatry and all attempts at "majesty".<sup>499</sup> Space for faith is created in that God remains so deeply "hidden" *sub contrario*. Luther succinctly explains God's "hiddenness" "under the opposite" using the "theology of the cross," that primary image of eternal love from which Luther never strays:

It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it. Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, ...<sup>500</sup>

The *Deus absconditus in sua maiestate* is defined by the *Deus absconditus sub contrario*.

---

<sup>498</sup> See Reinhard Brandt, *Die ermöglichte Freiheit: Sprachkritische Rekonstruktion der Lehre vom unfreien Willen*, (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus GmbH, 1992), pp.44ff.

<sup>499</sup> Luther's hermeneutic describes an encounter with God that "kills" all human *causa sui* projects. See above, pages 75 and following. All attempts at establishing the self by the self are instances of a *theology of glory* in operation.

<sup>500</sup> WA 18,633,8-12; LW 33,62: "Non autem remotius absconduntur, quam sub contrario obiectu, sensu, experientia. Sic Deus dum vivificat, facit illud occidendo; dum iustificat, facit illud reos faciendo; dum in coelum vehit, facit id ad infernum ducendo,..."

*Liberum arbitrium* Belongs to God Alone

Near the beginning of his *De servo arbitrio*, Luther lays down the gauntlet against Erasmus by delivering what he calls a "thunderbolt". According to Luther, this thunderbolt puts to an end any and all arguments that claim *liberum arbitrium* for human beings: "Here, then, is something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will."<sup>501</sup> Luther asserts that *liberum arbitrium esse plane divinum nomen*.<sup>502</sup> Luther uses the Socratic dictum "*quae supra nos, nihil ad nos*" to express the boundary between the human will and God's will.<sup>503</sup>

Like "righteousness", the "will" is a relational concept for Luther. When Luther turns his attention to such issues as freedom and the redemption of human beings he contends that there is no

---

<sup>501</sup> WA 18,615,12-14; LW 33,37: "Est itaque et hoc imprimis necessarium et salutare Christiano, nosse, quod Deus nihil praescit contingenter, sed quod omnia incommutabili et aeterna infallibilique voluntate et praevidet et proponit et facit."

<sup>502</sup> WA 18,636,27-29: "Sequitur nunc, liberum arbitrium esse plane divinum nomen, nec ulli posse competere quam soli divinae maiestati."

<sup>503</sup> For example: WA 18,685,6-7: "Hic enim vere illud: Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos." See Eberhard Jüngel, "Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos" Eine Kurzformel der Lehre vom verborgenen Gott - im Anschluß an Luther interpretiert," *Evangelische Theologie* 32 (1972) 197-240. According to Jüngel, that which is above us is beyond us is an expression of Luther's *Deus absconditus*.

neutral power called the "will."<sup>504</sup> Human ability to choose between various options that are presented to them should not be confused with what is at issue in the debate over *liberum arbitrium*. Harry J. McSorley reports that it is Luther's pastoral concern to abolish the term *liberum arbitrium* altogether since most people hear it as a "power of turning in any direction" and do not realize that it "actually refers only to a 'tiny spark' of power and that 'this is totally ineffective of itself, since it is the devil's prisoner and slave.' If the people understood this, says Luther, they would probably stone us as deceivers when we speak of free will."<sup>505</sup>

For Luther, the claim of *liberum arbitrium* in relationship with God is to demand to be in control of the future, particularly the promised redemption. Luther is not denying that human beings are free to make choices. Human beings make all kinds of choices concerning those things given to humanity in the created order.<sup>506</sup> In his arguments against Erasmus, Luther often qualified his

---

<sup>504</sup> See above, pages 72 and following, where Luther's argument against Origen's tripartate picture of human being was introduced.

<sup>505</sup> Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (New York: Newman Press, 1969), p.306. (Reference: WA 18,637,10-14)

<sup>506</sup> See: C.S.Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1940), pp.22ff. C.S.Lewis makes the observation that human beings have free will within the created order the same way that a chess player has "free will" within the rules of a game of chess. There would be no way to talk about choice if one's opponent could remove chess pieces outside the rules at will. Within this analogy, Luther's God does not remove pieces willy-nilly. Nevertheless, just as a beginner chess player has no chance to win a game against an experienced master, so the sinner cannot thwart God's will in redeeming that sinner.

statements by insisting that human beings have "free will" in those things that are below them. What matters for Luther, however, is the human will *in relationship* with the God who makes promises in Christ Jesus. If human beings had "free will" in this relationship, they would possess a power which could prevent God from accomplishing His will "*pro nobis.*" One's ultimate future and destiny would then depend on the choices of these free autonomous beings. If the future is dependent on the decisions and actions of human beings, God's promises would also depend on whatever future would be thus created.<sup>507</sup> The unconditional nature of the "Gospel" would be violated and the choosing subject would become "god" in relation to the God spoken in Christ Jesus. In opposition to this, Luther claims that the promises of God are certain because it is only God who has *liberum arbitrium*:

For when he promises anything, you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety and a denial of the Most High God<sup>508</sup>

The statement that God alone has free will is thus a claim that God is able to accomplish what is promised in the Gospel and

---

<sup>507</sup> See WA 18,783,28-34: "At nunc cum Deus salutem meam extra meum arbitrium tollens in suum receperit, et non meo opere aut cursu, sed sua gratia et misericordia promiserit me servare, securus et certus sum, quod ille fidelis sit et mihi non mentietur, tum potens et magnus, ut nulli daemones, nullae adversitates eum frangere aut me illi rapere poterunt."

<sup>508</sup> WA 18,619,3-6; LW 33,42: "Cum enim promittit, certum oportet te esse, quod sciat, possit et velit praestare, quid promittit. Alioqui eum non veracem nec fidelem aestimabis, quae est incredulitas et summa impietas et negatio Dei altissimi."

is also an assertion that God is faithful: "For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered."<sup>509</sup> God's faithfulness and God's free choice are of a different quality than human faithfulness and human ability to choose. God's promises are certain. The statement that God has free will is a corollary to the unconditional nature of the "Gospel." In the "Gospel," God has freely made promises *pro nobis*. If God's will is not free, it would be conceivable that some power might be able to thwart that will. In such an event, faith would shift from being faith in God and God's faithfulness in Christ to a faith that has confidence in God's power to overcome competing powers.

It is not "promise" itself which is the key to Luther's hermeneutic concerning the will. Rather, it is the presence of Christ in those "Gospel-promises". God's promises in Christ are different to human promises in three major ways. The first is connected to human sinfulness. Human beings are unfaithful and untruthful to one another. For this reason, social mores and laws have developed in every culture which prevents most human beings from having free will in their relationships with others. Humans

---

<sup>509</sup> WA 18,619,19-21; LW 33,43: "Christianorum enim haec una et summa consolatio est in omnibus adversitatibus, nosse, quod Deus non mentitur, sed immutabiliter omnia facit et voluntati eius neque resisti neque eam mutari aut impediri posse."

are bound to sin in their relationships with one another.<sup>510</sup> The second difference lies in the fact that it is the Resurrected One who is making the promises. Death limits the most faithful of human promises to one another. Death invades all of human living so that we have to limit our time and energy for one another. The third contrast is found in the nature of God's creative will. Human will is focused on what is and is thus limited by context and circumstances. God's will is focused on what is not and creates disciples *ex nihilo*.

#### Raptured

Luther's assertions that God's will is free while human will is not, raises the question of fate and determinism. That God determines human lives cannot be equated with "blind" fate because God is not "blind". Providence and fate are not the same thing since faith trusts the God acting in Christ for redemption. Luther uses the terms "choice" and "will" in a relational sense. If God determines the type of relationship that exists between Him and others it cannot be a "blind" determination that governs life.

In keeping with this relational sense, God's determination of

---

<sup>510</sup> The word "bound" is consciously chosen with its two meanings in mind. Humans are liable to sin and they are enslaved to sin. Therefore, God, in mercy uses sin to save us.

life does not operate apart from the human will. Human beings choose all kinds of things but, when attention is focused on the relationship between God and the human being, Luther's theology insists that the human will can never be understood to be the deciding factor. That would place the human will above the God who is preached and worshipped. Luther, however, does not object:

if the power of free choice were said to mean that by which a man is capable of being taken hold of by the Spirit and imbued with the grace of God, (*aptus est rapti spiritu et imbui gratia Dei*) as a being created for eternal life or death...<sup>511</sup>

The will that is raptured by God acts willingly.<sup>512</sup> Luther also asserts:

...if God works in us, the will is changed, and being gently breathed upon by the Spirit of God, it again wills and acts from pure willingness and inclination and of its own accord...<sup>513</sup>

A person who is *rapti spiritu* is a person who is free. This freedom, however, is not defined in terms of an autonomous will. Christian

<sup>511</sup> WA 18,636,16-18; LW 33,67: "At si vim liberi arbitrii eam diceremus, qua homo aptus est rapti spiritu et imbui gratia Dei, ut qui sit creatus ad vitam vel mortem aeternam..."

<sup>512</sup> For this reason it would be wrong to force the *truth* by military means on others. See Janet E. Strohl, "Luther's Invocavit Sermons" *Freiheit als Liebe bei/Freedom as Love in Martin Luther*, ed. Dennis D. Bielfeldt/ Klaus Schwarzwäller, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), pp.162-163.

<sup>513</sup> WA 18,634,37-635,2; LW 33,65. The whole sentence reads as follows: "Rursus ex altera parte, si Deus in nobis operatur, mutata et blande assibilata per spiritum Dei voluntas iterum mera lubentia et pronitate ac sponte sua vult et facit, non coacte, ut nullis contrariis mutari in aliud possit, ne portis quidem inferi vinci aut cogi, sed pergit volendo et lubendo et amando bonum, sicut antea voluit et lubuit et amavit malum." Note the two alternatives given at the end of this sentence: the changed will now wills, delights and loves the good whereas it used to will, delight and love the evil.

freedom results from being raptured by God instead of the "weak and beggarly spirits of this world".<sup>514</sup>

According to Luther, there are only two alternatives by which the will makes a choice.<sup>515</sup> This does not mean that there are two choices confronting human beings. It means that the human will is either drawn by God or by Satan: "For if God is in us, Satan is absent, and only a good will is present; if God is absent, Satan is present, and only an evil will is present."<sup>516</sup> It should be noted that Luther also presents the same alternatives concerning the conscience. The Devil attacks God's saints through the

---

<sup>514</sup> Being in bondage to the weak and beggarly elements of the world is equivalent to returning to the Law and being ignorant of the doctrine of Justification. See WA 40 I 601,30ff.

<sup>515</sup> Robert W. Jenson points out that that the fact that there are two alternatives is a result of sin and that if there was no sin: "we would be and always have been rapt by God, and the problem of moving or being moved from one rapture to another would not appear, nor then would anyone dream of positing an unraptured *velle*. The soteriological problem is set by the circumstance that we are in fact rapt by Satan and so not by God" Robert W. Jenson, "An Ontology of Freedom in the *De Servo Arbitrio* of Luther" *Modern Theology* 10:3 July (1994) 247-252; p.250. Concerning the human sinful nature, Denis R. Janz writes: "Luther treats 'nature' not as a substance, but rather as a relational concept. Thus human nature is corrupt only insofar as it refuses to ground its existence in God. The corruption of human nature consists in the fact that the divinely willed relationship between God and man is disrupted. This, then, is what Luther has in mind when he speaks of sin." Denis R. Janz, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983), p.20.

<sup>516</sup> WA 18,670,6-8; LW 33,115: "Quia si Deus in nobis est, Satan abest, et non nisi velle bonum adest. Si Deus abest, Satan adest, nec nisi velle malum in nobis est." This statement does not contradict what was said above concerning humans being *simul iustus et peccatum* nor what was said concerning this life being ruled by the powers of the Devil, Law, Sin and Death. Luther immediately follows with: "Nec Deus nec Satan merum et purum velle sinunt in nobis, sed sicut recte dixisti, amissa libertate cogimur servire peccato, hoc est, nos volumus peccatum et malum, loquimur peccatum et malum, facimus peccatum et malum."

conscience.<sup>517</sup> The alternative to a conscience bound by the Devil is not one that is free in itself but one that is "imprisoned by God's Word".<sup>518</sup> Luther is here describing two different ontological realities.

The person who is not raptured by God will be trapped by the powers of the "Law," Sin, Death and the Devil. That person will also act willingly even though, in fact, that person's will is enslaved by these powers. By formulating his arguments in this way, Luther is attempting to undercut the assumption underlying Erasmus' arguments for human free choice. According to Luther, this assumption is that there exists a neutral human will which is in a position to be presented with either evil or good choices.<sup>519</sup> Luther calls this a "dialectical fiction" which is a result of the theorists "paying too much attention to words, as if a thing were always in reality just as it is represented in words."<sup>520</sup> Luther explains:

---

<sup>517</sup> WA 30 I,49,30-31. Referring to the Devil, Luther writes: "Ideo semper impugnat nos: externe per phanaticos spiritus, interne in conscientia."

<sup>518</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications*, tr. Andrew Colin Gow, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p.65.

<sup>519</sup> See the discussion given in the last chapter concerning Luther's arguments against Origin's anthropological theory concerning the tripartite theory of humanity. Luther criticizes the theory which asserts that in between "flesh" and "spirit" there existed "soul." The soul would be the "place" conceptualized as the neutral middle ground which is in position to decide between good and evil.

<sup>520</sup> WA 18,670,1ff.; LW 33,115: "...observantia vocabulorum natum est, quasi continuo sic sit in re, sicut disponitur in vocabulis..."

For the power of applying itself to salvation cannot be a merely abstract willing, unless salvation itself is to be called nothing. Nor again can desire and endeavor be a merely abstract willing, since desire must strive and endeavor in some direction...<sup>521</sup>

Abstract willing, like the idea of a neutral will, is a reality only in name. Abstract willing would place the human subject outside God's will.<sup>522</sup> A power of applying itself to nothing competes with God's will which creates *ex nihilo*. Luther demonstrates in his *De servo arbitrio* that the result of a hermeneutic which posits the power of free choice or assigns a neutral will to humanity would then necessarily result in a Pelagian soteriological position.<sup>523</sup> In the sixteenth century, it

---

<sup>521</sup> WA 18,669,29ff.; LW 33,114f.: "Neque enim vis ea applicandi ad salutem potest esse primum velle, nisi salus ipsa nihil esse dicatur. Deinde studium et conatus quoque primum velle esse non potest..."

<sup>522</sup> See the judgement given by Peter Steinacker where he says: "Erasmus' Freiheitsbegriff erfordert einen quasi neutralen Standpunkt außerhalb von Gut und Böse, von dem aus der Wille Entscheidungen trifft." Peter Steinacker, "Luther und das Böse: Theologische Bemerkungen im Anschluß an Luthers Schrift »De servo arbitrio« (1525)" *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 33 (1991) 139-151; p.141. Friedrich Schiller identified freedom with the human potential to change "life" to "form" and has called such freedom "infinite." The dominant Christian tradition, including Luther, identifies such infinite freedom with God. However, God's infinite freedom is shown in God working on "nothing" to create "life." See, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, tr. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), especially Letters 20-22.

<sup>523</sup> See for example: WA 18,674,37ff.: "Fingamus vero, studium et conatum illum liberi arbitrii aliquid esse... plane vicerint Pelagiani, si sequela Diatribes constet." These observations concerning the connection between Luther's concern for the doctrine of the unfree will and his understanding of Justification support Oberman's suggestion that "Luther's concept 'extra nos' is related to *raptus*". This connection implies that "one of the major arguments for a forensic interpretation of Luther's doctrine of justification has been preempted. Though we have no claim to the *iustitia Christi* which is not our 'property' (*proprietas*), it is granted to us as a present possession (*possessio*). *Extra nos* and *raptus* indicate that the *iustitia Christi* - and not our own

would be considered desirable by all major theological combatants to avoid being labelled "Pelagian" in their soteriology.

One should also observe that Luther's criticism of Erasmus' assumptions regarding a neutral human will parallels his criticism of Erasmus' theological methodology. Abstract willing removes the subject from an existential engagement with life.<sup>524</sup> Near the beginning of *De servo arbitrio*, Luther takes hold of Erasmus' proud claim that he takes no delight in assertions.<sup>525</sup> Luther believes that such a statement is symptomatic of someone removed from a life of commitment:

What Christian would agree that assertions are to be despised? That would be nothing but a denial of all religion and piety, or an assertion that neither religion, nor piety, nor any dogma is of the slightest importance.<sup>526</sup>

---

powers - is the source and resource for *our* righteousness." Heiko A. Oberman, "*Simul Gemitus et Raptus: Luther and Mysticism*" in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven E. Ozment, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), pp.236-237.

<sup>524</sup> It has to be noted that this passionate engagement in life and "delight in assertions" has had tragic and unwanted consequences: "... such as the division of Western Christianity, a long period of cruel and bloody wars, and finally the emancipation of modern culture from its Christian roots, a process we call secularization. In the Lutheran community we would be well advised to appreciate the peace-minded prudence and presentiment of Philipp Melancthon more than in the past, when some of his actions and statements in 1530 were considered disloyal to the principles of the Reformation and to the truth of the gospel itself." Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Freedom and the Lutheran Reformation," *Theology Today* 38 (1981) 287-297; p.288.

<sup>525</sup> WA 18,603-605. See also: Erasmus, *On Free Will*, in *Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, tr. and ed. by Ernst F. Winter, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1961), pp.6-11.

<sup>526</sup> WA 18,604,2-4; LW 33,21: "Quis Christianorum ferat, Assertiones esse contemnendas? hoc esset aliud nihil, quam semel totam religionem ac pietatem negasse, aut asseruisse, nihil esse religionem, aut pietatem, aut ullum dogma."

Luther sarcastically continues by asking Erasmus a question which, in its asking, reveals the flaw in Erasmus' logic: "Why, then, do you too assert, 'I take no delight in assertions' [*italics mine*]...?"<sup>527</sup> This exchange between the two antagonists delineates how each attempted to keep his method consistent with his conclusions. Erasmus wants to maintain a critical distance to Scripture in order to make a well-reasoned conclusion regarding the human will. This method is in line with his evaluation of the human powers of free choice. He assumes that there is a neutral space for the will. It is consistent with Erasmus' hermeneutic. Luther, however, has no patience for such neutrality.<sup>528</sup>

Luther tells "the Sceptics and Academics" to keep away from the Christians.<sup>529</sup> Luther's method is coherent with his conclusion which posits two ontological alternatives for human existence. It

---

<sup>527</sup> WA 18,604,4-5; LW 33,21: "Quid ergo tu quoque asseris, non delector assertionibus,..."

<sup>528</sup> See Steven D. Paulson, "From Scripture to Dogmatics" *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) 159-169. Paulson writes concerning Erasmus' method of interpretation of Scripture: "It was the method of the Schools, and its interpretation forced two basic assumptions: that Scripture is obscure and that it is a disunity, a conflict of interpretation, which must then be set up in the dialectic of *sic et non* with either a reasonable solution, or the abandonment of the proposed dogma if it proved to be 'irreverent inquisitiveness.' By asserting both the obscurity and disunity of Scripture, Erasmus assumed a low lying boundary beyond which humans cannot go, as described by the Socratic dictum: *quae supra nos nihil ad nos...* [for Luther] the proper relationship of Scripture and doctrine was to move from Scripture as normative (but past) proclamation, to present proclamation. In that case, the line of 'what is above us' had to be drawn differently... It was not 'interpretation,' or hermeneutics, which straddled doctrine and Scripture, but the event of true proclamation which provide the only test of and reason for doctrine and Scripture." *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>529</sup> See WA 18,603,22-23; LW 33,20: Absint a nobis Christianis Sceptici et Academici, Assint vero vel ipsis Stoicis bis pertinaciores assertores.

is also in keeping with what was observed in the last chapter concerning Luther's statements about the "fortunate exchange." The Christian lives in Christ: "The Christian... is utterly dead through the Law but living in Christ, or rather with Christ living in him, he lives an alien life."<sup>530</sup> A method that insists on maintaining a critical distance would be one that contradicts the faith that Luther is here describing.<sup>531</sup>

For Luther, an abstract will is a fictional concept and theories which expound it are symptoms of sinful humanity's attempts at storming heaven by force. According to Luther, all attempts to get behind the will must fail: "the will cannot change itself and turn in a different direction."<sup>532</sup> The impossibility of this kind of self-transcendence is a corollary to Luther's rejection of a neutral will and his assertion that the will must be either raptured by God or subverted by the Devil.

---

<sup>530</sup> WA 40 I,287,31-33; LW 26,170. The full reference is: "Quis tum vivet? Christianus. Paulus ergo ut in se vivens plane per legem mortuus est, Sed ut in Christo vel potius ut Christus in eo vivens vivit aliena vita..."

<sup>531</sup> See Reinhard Brandt, *Die ermöglichte Freiheit: Sprachkritische Rekonstruktion der Lehre vom unfreien Willen*, (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1992), pp.18-20. Brandt also connects Luther's understanding of the unfree will with Luther's understanding of faith in order to show why Luther insists that this doctrine is not a peripheral or spurious issue.

<sup>532</sup> WA 18,634,30f.; LW 33,64: "...quod voluntas sese mutare et vertere alio non possit..."

## Freedom

Human freedom is a possibility when faith has been created by God. The source of this freedom is the God revealed in Christ since, for Luther, only this God has free will. Thus, a corollary to Luther's "thunderbolt" that only God has free will is that only God is able to grant freedom. Human liberty is only possible through a trusting relationship with God in Jesus Christ is that it is only God who has free will. In the life created between human beings who do not have free choice, freedom is not a possibility because no one has it to give. Freedom received from God can be shared through love to the neighbour. For Luther, such freedom is not a possibility apart from God.

Over against this claim, the western philosophical tradition has attempted to find freedom in a variety of bids for self-transcendence. One of these attempts that Luther criticized focused on reason as being able to give the will the necessary transcendence for human freedom. After honouring human reason in glowing terms, Luther goes on to say in his *Die Disputation de homine* that reason "does not know itself a priori, but only a posteriori."<sup>533</sup> Thus, according to Luther, they are wrong who say:

that the light of God's countenance is in man,  
as an imprint on us, that is, free will which

---

<sup>533</sup> WA 39 I,175,22-23: "Tamen talen sese Maiestatem esse, nec ea ipsa ratio novit a priori, sed tantum a posteriore."

forms the precept right and the will good; In like manner, that it rests with man to choose good and evil, or life and death, etc.<sup>534</sup>

In the same Disputation, Luther goes on to argue against Aristotle who had theorized that the soul is "the first driving force of the body which has the power to live" by counter-arguing that the human being, both body and soul, is subject to the power of the Devil, Sin, Law and Death.<sup>535</sup> Reason and the will are in bondage to these same powers and thus cannot be held up as the hope for human freedom.

Just as one cannot step outside oneself in order to choose what to choose, reason is not a power that can lift oneself beyond one's own bondage to the Devil, Sin, Law and Death. Reason is a part of the self it is attempting to transcend. Such attempts are a parody of the Creator. The creature also wants to be creator and uses that which is at hand, that is, that which is already created. The new person arising from the efforts of reason and the choices of the human will should not be confused with the redeemed person who God creates *ex nihilo*. Living under Sin, Death, Law and the Devil is an ontological reality and all attempts to free oneself from that bondage are symptomatic of that reality. One of the effects of the human will's bondage is that it either believes

---

<sup>534</sup> WA 39 I,176,26-30; LW 34,139: "quod in homine sit lumen vultus Dei super nos signatum, id est, liberum arbitrium ad formandum rectum dictamen et bonum voluntatem. Item, quod hominis sit eligere bonum et malum, seu vitam et mortem etc."

<sup>535</sup> WA 39 I,175,34ff. (Disputatio # 16-22)

itself to be already free or that it can make itself free.<sup>536</sup>

In opposition to this, Luther describes another ontological reality. This is the realm of God and God's promises and Luther portrays this other ontological reality by using "freedom" as a major and controlling paradigm. This freedom is the result of God's activity in the believer's life. The freedom given by God is structured with the already/not yet shape that also arises in Luther's hermeneutical distinction between Law and Gospel. Even as believers are called by God (*rapi spiritu*), they groan for the fulfillment of God's promises.<sup>537</sup> Luther maintains this structure of freedom by grounding both the divine "calling" and the human "groaning" in the Divine mission of the Trinity. Luther illustrates the double mission of the Trinity in his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1535):

Now that it is established that we have received the Spirit through the hearing of the Word and that we can cry in our hearts: 'Abba! Father!' then it is surely defined in heaven that there

---

<sup>536</sup> See: WA 39 I,176,12-13. Luther writes: "Nec nisi per filium Dei Iesum Christum liberanda (si credat in eum) et vitae aeternitate donanda." The inability to lift oneself out of bondage is consistent with what was observed above concerning Luther's understanding of the human condition of being *curvitas in se*. With Luther's understanding of the unfree will he attempts to eliminate from theology and pastoral practice every kind of Pelagianism. He does this by stressing the totality of sin (*curvitas in se*). McSorley writes: "According to Scripture, man in the concrete is a 'slave of sin and as such is bound, imprisoned and miserably lost.' He is so blind that he thinks he is free and happy. (WA 18,697,23) He has fallen completely into the power of Satan. (Example: WA 18,659,6)" McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* p.305.

<sup>537</sup> See Heiko A. Oberman, "*Simul Gemitus et Raptus: Luther and Mysticism*" in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven E. Ozment, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971),

is no slavery anymore, but sheer liberty, adoption, and sonship.<sup>538</sup>

Luther shows the human results of being taken hold by the Spirit through the Word. There is sheer liberty and a release from slavery.<sup>539</sup> This liberty is defined as the liberty of being in Christ and lives itself out as liberty from something and liberty for something.<sup>540</sup> Freedom is from the bondage to the complex web of power that Luther alternatively called the power of the Law, Sin, Death and the Devil. Paradoxically, the defence of *libero arbitrio* actually leads to a position which can only be described as one of human bondage. Gerhard O. Forde has spelled out the relationship between the enslaving power of the law and the defence of free choice and the autonomous will:

The effect of the free will defense, however, is not to liberate but to enslave. Human beings are granted just enough freedom to be found guilty for their sin... As a defensive doctrine, freedom does not liberate, but makes certain that one remains enslaved under the law. It is Law that

---

<sup>538</sup> WA 40 I,593,16-19; LW 26,389: "Hoc stante, quod accepimus Spiritum per auditum verbi et possumus clamare in corde nostro: Abba, Pater, tum certo definitum est in coelo, quod non sit amplius servitus, sed mera libertas, adoptio et filiatio."

<sup>539</sup> Another example where Luther takes up these themes in a succinct way comes from *The Freedom of a Christian*: "The word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching." LW 31,346. This complements the above quotation given from *Galaterbriefvorlesung* 1535. The trinitarian structure of the sending of the Word is evident as it takes hold of the believer and sets the believer free.

<sup>540</sup> WA 7,58,4-5: "Ex iis clare videre potest quilibet, quo modo Christianus homo liber est ab omnibus et super omnia..."

gives freedom its opportunity. The result is that law takes over the conscience and traps the self in its own deeds, whether they be good or evil."<sup>541</sup>

Freedom is defined negatively against the devil and all human attempts at self-justification. It is also positively defined as liberty to love. As early as his *Galaterbriefvorlesung* (1519)<sup>542</sup>

Luther locates human freedom in love to the neighbour:

To become circumcised, therefore, is a characteristic of slavery. But to love one's neighbour is a characteristic of freedom, because the former is done under the threat of the Law by those who are unwilling, while the latter is done by those who are willing out of love that flows freely and gladly.<sup>543</sup>

In the ontological reality governed by Sin, Death, Law and the Devil the neighbour becomes the limit or boundary to freedom.<sup>544</sup>

---

<sup>541</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, "Called to Freedom" *Lutherjahrbuch* 62 (1995) 13-27; p.15.

<sup>542</sup> The importance of Galatians for Luther and his audience can be seen by Luther's re-working of his "commentary" and by the many versions of these works that exist. See the Bibliography in: Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538* (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993), pp.166-167.

<sup>543</sup> WA 2,574,25-27; LW 27,346-347: "Circumcidi ergo servitutis est, sed diligere proximum libertatis, quia illud minante lege fit ab invitis, hoc fluent ac hilarescente charitate agitur a spontaneis." See Rudolf Mau, "Liebe als gelebte Freiheit der Christen: Luthers Auslegung von G 5,13-24 im Kommentar von 1519" *Lutherjahrbuch* 59 (1992) 11-37; p.17. Rudolf Mau observes: "Liebe zum Nächsten ist selbst eine Sache der Freiheit." Note also, that in the quotation given above, Forde makes a distinction between the law that enslaves and the Law that is the opportunity for freedom. This opportunity for freedom is also identified as love to the neighbour.

<sup>544</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre's statement that the "other" is hell was made because the neighbour functions as the boundary to his personal freedom. This statement accurately describes life lived under the power of Sin, Death, Law and the Devil, according to Luther. However, such a statement must be distinguished from Luther's ontology of being in Christ. See: Oswald Bayer, "Luthers Verständnis des Seins Jesu Christi im Glauben" in *Luther und Ontologie: Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers*, Herausgegeben von Anja Ghiselli, Kari Kopperi und Rainer Vinke, (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1993), p.99. For

Therefore, issues of autonomy between human beings will continuously be important because humans are bound to sin against one another. A call for autonomy in one's relationship with God actually defines a lack of faith in the good will of God. In the life in the Spirit, where freedom is given by the One who has freedom, the neighbour is the opportunity for freedom. Freedom, exercised and shared in love to and with the neighbour, is a gift given by God through the love established and communicated through the Word of the Gospel.<sup>545</sup>

Just as righteousness is a gift from God and cannot be attained as a human attribute so freedom is also a gift. Freedom, like righteousness, results from the creative love of God in Christ Jesus. God's love, which is the source of these gifts of righteousness and freedom, is different than the love that exists

---

a view which distinguishes Sartre's understanding with a relational, trinitarian basis of "being" and "freedom", see: John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), p.45. Sartre's view is one that resonates with that of Wilhelm Dilthey who writes: "Among such experiences which establish the reality of the world around us and our relations to it, the following are the most important: the world and our relations to it hem us in, oppress us in a manner which we cannot overcome, and they restrict our intentions unexpectedly and beyond our control." Wilhelm Dilthey, *Philosophy of Existence: Introduction to Weltanschauungslehre*, tr. with introduction by William Kluback and Martin Weinbaum, (London: Vision Press, 1960), p.23.

<sup>545</sup> See Antti Raunio, *Summe des Christlichen Lebens: Die "Goldene Regel" als Gestz der Liebe in der Theologie Martin Luthers von 1510 bis 1527*, (Helsinki: University of Helsinki XIII, 1993). See also: George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954)

in human community.<sup>546</sup> The dynamics of God's love for humanity are consistent with the description Luther gives concerning how a believer is rapt by God. God creates a new reality in the one who is loved or rapt by God. This becomes evident when Luther makes a distinction between God's love and human love in Thesis 28 of his *Disputatio Heidelbergae habita* (1518): "*Amor Dei non invenit sed creat suum diligibile, Amor hominis fit a suo diligibili.*"<sup>547</sup> Just as God does not find human freedom but creates it, God's love also creates someone as pleasing. In other words, God creates and is creating someone who is free to love.

Tuomo Mannermaa claims that Anders Nygren's distinction between eros love and agape love is based on Luther's distinction between the *amor Dei* and the *amor hominis*. In a landmark work, Nygren divides the history of Christian thought into two major streams.<sup>548</sup> One identifies God's love as a love that creates what is pleasing to God. Nygren calls this agape love. The other stream of Christian thinking on God's love describes it in terms of seeking that which is desirable. It centres on human potential rather than

---

<sup>546</sup> See: Tuomo Mannermaa, "Reformation und Orthodoxie" *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* Band XXI, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), pp.152-156.

<sup>547</sup> WA 1,354,35f. ("The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.") Timothy F. Lull, ed. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p.32.

<sup>548</sup> See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, Translated by Philip Watson, (S. London: S.P.C.K., 1957).

the creative Word *ex nihilo*. After stating his appreciation for Nygren's reading of Luther and the implications of this aspect of Luther's thought, Mannermaa goes on to suggest that Nygren's distinction is too attached to the meaning of words and thus has the potential of being detached from the divine mission of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Instead, he concludes that for Luther: "Die notwendige Bedingung der agape-Liebe des Menschen ist die reale Partizipation an Gott, der Liebe ist, d.h. die »Vergöttlichung«.<sup>549</sup> This *Vergöttlichung* is understood within the terms of the trinitarian life of God:

Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus bringt die Liebe mit sich, weil die Teilhabe an Christus ein Teilhaftigwerden an Gott bedeutet und weil Gott die Liebe ist.<sup>550</sup>

God's love is an activity of the trinitarian mission of God and is described in terms of the presence of Christ. God's love is the result of God's free will and in just this way is radically

---

<sup>549</sup> Tuomo Mannermaa, "Reformation und Orthodoxie" *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* Band XXI, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991),p.154. [ "The necessary condition for the agape-love of humanity is the real participation of God, which is love, that is the 'Vergöttlichung'." ]

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.,p.155. [ "In faith, the presence of Christ brings love with it, because the participation in Christ signifies a participation in God and because God is love." ] See also F. Yves M.-J. Congar, *Je Crois en l'Esprit Saint*, tome 1: *L'Esprit Saint dans l' « Économie » révélation et expérience de l'Esprit*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1979),p.111. where Congar outlines the tradition which makes connections between trinitarian theology and soteriology: "Dans la perspective des Pères orientaux, mais également pour nous, il y allait non seulement de la vérité de Dieu, mais de la vérité de l'homme et de sa destinée absolue. Si l'Esprit n'est pas substantiellement Dieu, nous ne serons pas vraiment divinisés, disent Athanase en 356, Grégoire de Nazianze en 380, avec référence à la formule du baptême. Avec ou sans référence au baptême, l'argument partant de notre sanctification est commun aux Pères, surtout orientaux: le Saint-Esprit est Dieu, puisqu'il opère ce que Dieu seul peut opérer!"

different from human love. *Amor Dei non invenit, sed creat suum diligibile, Amor hominis fit a suo diligibili.*<sup>551</sup> God is creating salvation, the *deificatio* of humanity.

This connection between the love of God, Christ's presence and the trinitarian mission of God prevents God's love from being conceptualized as a standard by which human love is judged. Instead, God's love is an active loving. This difference is at the heart of Luther's criticism of the scholastic idea concerning faith formed by love. In such a scheme, God's love becomes an attribute which is given to others as a power. Being an attribute, it is then conceptualized existentially as a standard of human behaviour rather than God's active loving toward humanity. In this description of Luther's theology concerning will, freedom, and love it is evident that it is love that is formed by faith rather than faith that is formed by love. Over against the defence of human free will which enslaves, Luther insists that God is the one who has free will and because God has exercised that will in loving action toward humanity human freedom is a divine possibility.

The transcendence arising from the efforts of reason and the choices of the human will should not be confused with the redeemed person who God graciously creates *ex nihilo*. Oswald Bayer delineates this difference by showing that the experience of the

---

<sup>551</sup> ("The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.")

"Law" cannot be thought together with the concept of being.<sup>552</sup> This is not only the case with human experience of the world but also with human experience of God. God, speaking the "Law" against me can only be hated with my whole heart while God, speaking the "Gospel" of the Son, can only be loved with my whole heart.<sup>553</sup> The "free" human will can only hate the Righteousness of God. As Bayer has noted, when God only enters life as a *sign* and God is the narrating "I", this infinite hatred will be directed to the other.<sup>554</sup> Instead, human freedom results from the action of God in the "Gospel" which tells of "a true David who strove with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them, and thereby rescued all those who were captive in sin, afflicted with death, and overpowered by the devil."<sup>555</sup> Living under Sin, Death, Law and the

---

<sup>552</sup> Oswald Bayer, "Luthers Verständnis des Seins Jesu Christi im Glauben" in *Luther und Ontologie: Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers*, Herausgegeben von Anja Ghiselli, Kari Kopperi und Rainer Vinke, (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1993),p.101. Bayer uses Luther's song "Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein" as the basis for his analysis. WA 35,422-425.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid. "Es ist nicht nur eine im Menschen und seiner Welt liegende Vermittlung nicht zu denken. Nicht zu denken ist nicht einmal eine Einheit des Gottes, der - im Gesetz - gegen mich spricht, so daß ich ihn und sein Gericht von ganzen Herzen nur hassen kann, mit dem Gott, der - im Evangelium - für mich spricht, so daß ich ihn und seinen Sohn von ganzem Herzen nur lieben kann."

<sup>554</sup> Ibid.,p.99. In this regard, Bayer points to Jean-Paul Sartre's statement that "Hell is the other."

<sup>555</sup> (*Preface to the New Testament 1546*) Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989),p.113. See: Oswald Bayer, "Luthers Verständnis des Seins Jesu Christi im Glauben" in *Luther und Ontologie: Das Sein Christi im Glauben als strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers*, Herausgegeben von Anja Ghiselli, Kari Kopperi und Rainer Vinke, (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1993),pp.97-

Devil is situated where God's righteousness and love are viewed as a standard for human behaviour. Instead, Luther contends that Christ:

...gave to all who believe, as their possession, everything that he had. This included: his life, in which he swallowed up death; his righteousness, by which he blotted out sin; and his salvation, with which he overcame everlasting damnation. A poor man, dead in sin and consigned to hell, can hear nothing more comforting than this precious and tender message about Christ; from the bottom of his heart he must laugh and be glad over It, if he believes it true.<sup>556</sup>

*Deus revelatus and Deus absconditus*

The temptation to posit a free will for humanity existentially inverts humanity's trust in the power of God. Trusting the self's ability to choose the good is to separate the "Law" from the "Gospel." It is to use God's "Law" for one's own projects of "glory." Luther's hermeneutic directs the person encountered by the Word to trust God.

Directed to God, one also enters the dangerous inquiry concerning the nature of God. Concerning the revelation of God, Luther insists that a distinction must be made "when one deals with

---

98.

<sup>556</sup> (*Preface to the New Testament 1546*) Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p.114.

the knowledge, or rather the subject, of the divinity."<sup>557</sup> Luther calls this the distinction between *de Deo abscondito* and *de Deo revelato*.<sup>558</sup> This distinction is one that, like the question of free will, illustrates the boundary of creaturehood. According to Luther, inquiries directed toward "something more sublime above or outside the revelation of God, are altogether devilish."<sup>559</sup> Luther continues: "this inquisitiveness is original sin itself, by which we are impelled to strive for a way to God through natural speculation."<sup>560</sup>

Speculation about the unrevealed God would undo the hermeneutic observed so far.<sup>561</sup> In Luther's hermeneutic, it is God's

---

<sup>557</sup> WA 43,458,35-37; LW 5,43-44: "Sig igitur in libello de servo arbitrio et alibi docui. Esse distinguendum, quando agitur de notitia, vel potius de subiecto divinitatis."

<sup>558</sup> WA 43,458.

<sup>559</sup> WA 43,459,1f; LW 5,44: "...quae supra aut extra revelationem Dei sublimius aliquid rimantur, prorsus Diabolicae sunt..."

<sup>560</sup> WA 43,459,9-10; LW 5,44: "Est enim curiositas ista ipsum peccatum originis, quo impellimur, ut ad Deum adfectemus viam naturali speculatione." This equating of original sin with curiosity about the hidden nature of God brings to mind the references to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2:15ff. Scott S. Ickert says: "Inquisitiveness, which promotes a righteousness based on works, is a flagrant violation of the First Commandment, a misguided effort to be godlike." Scott S. Ickert, "Luther on the Timelessness of God" *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) 45-66; p.54.

<sup>561</sup> The distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity does not constitute such "speculation". This distinction helps explain how it is possible that human beings can be constituted in their personal relationship with God while God remains free. This is possible because of the personal relations of the Trinity as expressed in the tradition concerning the immanent Trinity. See Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation*, (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992), p.43. Schwöbel writes: "The doctrine of the immanent Trinity as the expression of the eternal personal communion of the Father, Son, and

Word which interprets the hearer of that Word. Luther's hermeneutic does not invite the one addressed by that Word to use it as a signifier so that one can speculate about God beyond the Word. The Word is not a map. According to Luther, investigation into the unrevealed will of God would reverse this hermeneutic and would place such an investigation outside Christian proclamation:

Therefore when we approach the unrevealed God, then there is no faith, no Word, and no knowledge; for He is an invisible God, and you will not make Him visible.<sup>562</sup>

In the language of the previous chapter, it is "Law" without the "Gospel". In his *De servo arbitrio* Luther calls this distinction the difference between the preached or proclaimed God and the hidden God:

Diatribes [i.e. Erasmus' argument], however, deceives herself in her ignorance by not making any distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God himself.<sup>563</sup>

---

Spirit explains why God's relationship to humanity in the divine economy is a personal relationship although the personal being of God is not constituted in the personal relationship of the creator to the personal creatures."

<sup>562</sup> WA 43,459,12-14; LW 5,44: "Ideo quando ad Deum non revelatum accedimus, ibi nulla fides, nullum verbum, neque ulla cognitio est, quia est invisibilis Deus, quem tu non facies visibilem."

<sup>563</sup> WA 18,685,25-27; LW 33,140: "Illudit autem sese Diatribe ignorantia sua, dum nihil distinguit inter Deum praedicatum et absconditum, hoc est, inter verbum Dei et Deum ipsum." The *Deus praedicatus* is equivalent to the *Deus revelatus* in Luther's writings. See Eberhard Jüngel, "Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos" Eine Kurzformel der Lehre vom verborgenen Gott - im Anschluß an Luther interpretiert," *Evangelische Theologie* 32 (1972) 197-240;p.236: "...deshalb nennt Luther den deus revelatus einen deus praedicatus, deshalb ist das Ereignis der Offenbarung Wort Gottes ein Ereignis des Wortes, deshalb wird Gott selbst zum Gottes."

In this way, Luther's hermeneutic ensures that humanity does not stand in judgement of God through the interpretation of God's Word but is in fact interpreted by that Word.

Luther studiously avoids a hermeneutic which attempts to unearth hidden things behind God's communication. That which is signified is nothing other than the signifier, Jesus Christ. This is in keeping with an ancient Christian tradition found as early as Irenaeus' struggles against the *Gnostics*. In Irenaeus' writings there are constant declarations that what Jesus seems to be is what he is.<sup>564</sup> Luther's hermeneutic does not unearth hidden meanings about God but is one which describes how the interpreter is "unearthed" in the encounter with God. The interpreter is the one who is revealed as a sinner and is given faith through the promises of the "Gospel".

The distinction between the *Deus praedicatus et absconditus* leads to the question of whether Luther had a dualistic conception of God.<sup>565</sup> A metaphysic which posits two powers changes faith from faith in God's faithfulness and goodness to confidence in one's

---

<sup>564</sup> See: Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.197.

<sup>565</sup> Erasmus, in his *Hyperapistes Diatribe Adversus Servum Arbitrium Martini Lutheri*, charges Luther's theology to be Manichaeian. Referenced in Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "Luther's Rider-gods: From the Steppe to the Tower" *Journal of Religious History* 13 (1984-1985) 260-282. It is interesting to note that when Luther argues against the Manichees he often focuses on the existential implications of their doctrine. See, for example, his complaint against them that they have a doctrine which posits that it is only the flesh and not the whole person who is sinful. LW 2,14.

champion to better the other power. This problem is not solved by conceptualizing the two powers into God. A dualistic image of God would also have the effect of removing the hearers of God's Word from the particular lived experiences of this life. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle accuses Luther of committing just this sin.

On the basis of this distinction between the proclaimed and the hidden God in Luther's hermeneutic Boyle attempts to make a case that Luther is a dualist of a Zoroastrian variety.<sup>566</sup> Her argument begins with Luther's use of an image for the human will that pictures it as a beast of burden that must be either ridden by God or the devil.<sup>567</sup> Boyle finds the same image in the writings of the Zoroastrian sages and concludes that, for them, it was useful "to avoid the logical contradiction of attributing the origin of

---

<sup>566</sup> Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "Luther's Rider-gods: From the Steppe to the Tower" *Journal of Religious History* 13 (1984-1985) 260-282. Boyle may be following Erasmus here. Erasmus had written: "But now people put forward things that in common opinion are more than paradoxes, yet not one has so far arisen among them *who could cure even a lame horse.*" [Italics mine] LW 33,72 n. 4 (*Diatribes*, EAS 4,30). The religious leader Zoroaster had, according to the *Zartusht Namah*, cured the king's horse. "Zoroaster had been imprisoned as the result of a plot of the hostile nobles (Kavis) and priests of the daevas (Karpans). Thereupon King Vishtaspa's horse fell to the ground, unable to move, its four legs drawn up toward its belly. Zoroaster sent word from his cell that he could cure the animal. But he promised to act only on one condition - that the king would grant a boon for each leg he restored. Zoroaster was summoned to the king's presence. The first boon asked was that Vishtaspa accept the faith. When the king agreed, the right front leg was straightened." The other three legs of the lame horse were cured when the king agreed to have his son fight for the faith, his wife convert, and Zoroaster's enemies punished. David S. Noss and John B. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*, ninth edition, (New York: MacMillan College Publishing Company, 1990), p.397.

<sup>567</sup> WA 18,635. For a discussion on the use of this image before and after Luther, see: Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will*, (Newman Press, New York, 1969), p.335ff.

evil to a principle of good."<sup>568</sup> Boyle notes that there are significant differences in the dualism found in Luther and that found in Zoroastrianism. For our discussion, the most significant difference is that Zoroastrian dualism supports free will. Nevertheless, Boyle concludes that Luther's dualism is structurally the same as Zoroastrianism in that it uses the cosmological struggle between good and evil as a way to remove personal guilt in a flight from history.<sup>569</sup>

Confusion is relatively easy concerning the question of dualism because those elements in Luther's thought that suggest some type of metaphysical dualism are also elements that are inherent in a relational ontology. In Luther's ontology, individual identity and being is ultimately derived from God.<sup>570</sup> Attempting to

---

<sup>568</sup> Boyle, p.265.

<sup>569</sup> Boyle, p.282: "This assertion represented more than a refusal to assume personal responsibility by blaming the spirit world. This was denial, in its flight from history to mythology a violent threat to civilization itself, as his critics, even within his own circle, sensed." Boyle's thesis can be placed in contrast with the story of David's sin of counting the people of Israel and Judah found in 1 Chronicles 21 and 2 Samuel 24. 1 Chron. 21:1 starts the story with the following statement: "Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel." (2 Sam.24:1 says it is the Lord who causes David to sin in order to punish Israel) Nevertheless, in 1 Chron. 21:17 David confesses: "Was it not I who gave the commandment to count the people? It is I who have sinned and done very wickedly." Thus, even when the temptation is irresistible and when it is put in cosmological terms, human responsibility is still affirmed. See Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), p.150. See also, Hans Schwarz, *Evil: A Historical and Theological Perspective*, trans. Mark W. Worthing (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp.61-63.

<sup>570</sup> See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, tr. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), pp.248-249. See also Antti Raunio, "Sein und Leben Jesu Christi im Glauben bei Luther: Korreferat zum Vortrag von Oswald Bayer" *Luther und Ontologie: Das Sein Christi im Glauben als Strukturierendes Prinzip der Theologie Luthers*,

establish identity through other means is an attempt to establish something other than the identity God gives.<sup>571</sup> In this relational ontology there are only two very different ways of being. Either one is in a trusting relationship with God or one is not.

Peter Steinacker also approaches Luther's theology with the question of the existence of evil and reaches a conclusion opposite to the one reached by Boyle:

...weil der Gott, den Luther beschreibt, den Gedanken eines Dualismus nicht verträgt. Die metaphysische Frage nach dem Bösen in allen seinen Schichten darf nicht durch ein dualistisches System entspannt werden.<sup>572</sup>

The reason given for this conclusion is:

Das Böse muß mit dem Grund des Seins in irgendeiner Form verbunden werden. Dieser Notwendigkeit entgeht man auch nicht, wenn man eine Substanzontologie gegen eine Relationsontologie auswechseln will.<sup>573</sup>

---

Herausgegeben von Anji Ghiselli, Kari Kopperi und Rainer Vinke, (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1993), pp.114-141. Raunio writes: "Dieses Sich-selbst Geben Gottes kann „*Theosis*“ genannt werden und es geschieht in einem „frohlichen Wechsel und Streit“, d. h. in einem Tausch von menschlicher Sünde und göttlicher Gerechtigkeit. Dieser Tausch ist zugleich ein Kampf mit den Mächten dieser Welt. Der Kampf zwischen den Mächten unterscheidet auch das reformatorische Denken von der Identitätsontologie verschiedener neuzeitlicher philosophischer Richtungen." Raunio, p. 116.

<sup>571</sup> See WA 18,710,11-13: "Impius (ut diximus) sicut et princeps suus Satan totus est versus ad se et ad sua, non requirit Deum, uec curat ea quae Dei sunt, suas opes, suas glorias, sua opera, suum sapere, suum posse et omnino suum regnum quaerit illisque vult in pace frui."

<sup>572</sup> Peter Steinacker, "Luther und das Böse: Theologische Bemerkungen im Anschluß an Luthers Schrift »De servo arbitrio« (1525)" *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 33 (1991) 139-151, p.149. [ "... because the God that Luther describes is not compatible with dualism." ]

<sup>573</sup> Ibid. [ "Evil must be connected with the ground of being in some form. This necessity is not encountered when a substance-ontology is replaced with a relational-ontology." ]

God is not a power that influences human beings in an impersonal manner but impacts on human beings personally.<sup>574</sup> Identity is ultimately defined and determined by one's relationship with God. The either/or structure of Luther's thought reflects this presupposition.

While Satan and the power of evil is a significant factor in Luther's theology, these powers cannot operate outside God's free will. Otherwise, the promises that God delivers in the "Gospel" would not be certain. Luther insists that God "moves and acts also in Satan and ungodly man."<sup>575</sup> From this, Paul Althaus concludes:

Luther holds dualism within the boundaries set by God's omnipotence, which works all in all.... This means that the devil must still serve God's will for men and for the world - in spite of the fact that his will and activity are directed against God.<sup>576</sup>

This aspect of Luther's theology concerning the relationship between God and Satan further interprets the free will of God and the corresponding unfree will of those wills that act against God. Even though Satan and the ungodly act willingly against God, only God's will is free. In practical terms, this means that the actions of the evil ones further God's glory despite their intentions.

---

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>575</sup> WA 18, 709, 21-22; LW 33, 176: "Quando ergo Deus omnia movet et agit, necessario movet etiam in Satana et impio."

<sup>576</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. by Robert C. Schultz, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 165.

Heiko A. Oberman observes that Luther sometimes even called the Devil *Doctor Consolatorius* because the Devil is only interested in those in whom Christ dwells.<sup>577</sup> Nevertheless, the Devil's will is bound:

Yet the fact that the Devil presses us so hard shows that we are on the right side. (WAT5, 44, 8f.) This hitherto unheard-of view of the Devil is a revolution in the history of thought; a thousand years of Christian piety and western morality are abruptly overturned by this discovery. Satan is forced against his will, grumbling and cursing, into God's service and must, like Balaam's ass, bear witness to the Gospel. This is Luther's doctrine 'de servo arbitrio diaboli', concerning the unfree will of the Devil: against his will, he is forced to proclaim God's Word.<sup>578</sup>

Luther's distinction between *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus* is a claim that God can use evil to accomplish grace. This must be so or God would not be in history. Against the charge of dualism, Luther denies that there is any difference between the unrevealed God and the revealed God:

I [God] will reveal My foreknowledge and predestination to you in an extraordinary manner... From an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. I will remain the same God. I will be made flesh, or send My Son. He shall die for

---

<sup>577</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications*, tr. by Andrew Colin Gow, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 63ff. Oberman also observes that one late night, when Luther was working on his *Wolfenbüttel Psalter*, Luther heard a noise behind the wood pile and concluded that the Devil was present: "so then I closed my manuscript and went to bed assured." p. 60.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

your sins and shall rise again from the dead.<sup>579</sup>

God's hiding serves proclamation as God's "Law" serves the "Gospel."

Even though there can be no ultimate difference between the preached God and the hidden God, this distinction is still crucial in that it serves proclamation of the Gospel *extra nos*. Conceptually, it keeps God Other: "When God reveals himself to us, it is necessary for him to do so through some veil (*velamen*) or wrapper (*involucrum*)."<sup>580</sup> Luther's statement concerning the *velamen* and *involucrum* of God highlights God's transcendence and God's Incarnation.<sup>581</sup> Luther begins by criticizing the papal condemnation of the Anthropomorphites who had spoken of God as if God was a human being, with eyes, ears, arms, etc.<sup>582</sup> God accomodates revelation to the human situation so that humanity might embrace God through the veil (*involucrum*):

'Under this wrapper (*involucro*) you will be sure to take hold of Me.' When we embrace this wrapper, adoring, praying, and sacrificing to God there, we are said to be praying to God

---

<sup>579</sup> WA 43,459,22ff; LW 5,44-45: "Ego tibi praescientiam et praedestinationem egregie manifestabo... Ex Deo non revelato fiam revelatus, et tamen idem Deus manebo. Ego incarnabor vel mittam filium meum, hic morietur pro tuis peccatis, et resurget a mortuis."

<sup>580</sup> WA 42,12,21f; LW 1,15: "Necesse enim est, ut Deus, cum se nobis revelat, id faciat per *velamen* et *involucrum* quoddam."

<sup>581</sup> See above, page 2 and following.

<sup>582</sup> See WA 42,12; LW 1,14.

and sacrificing to Him properly.<sup>583</sup>

The *involucro* allows God, who is totally Other, to be embraced by human beings. At the same time, the *involucro* hides God so that God cannot be the *object* of human striving. Luther calls it idolatry to speculate about God apart from the *involucrum*: "But those who want to reach God apart from these coverings exert themselves to ascend to heaven without ladders [that is, without the Word]."<sup>584</sup> With this in mind, Luther approves of imagining a golden throne marvelously adorned in heaven even while knowing that there is no such material in heaven.<sup>585</sup>

In his *Wider die himmlischen Propheten, von den Bildern und*

<sup>583</sup> WA 42,12,22-25; LW 1,15: "Ecce sub hoc involucro me certo apprehendes. Id involucrum cum amplectimur, cum ibi adoramus, invocamus, sacrificamus, Deum invocasse, Deo sacrificasse recte dicimur."

<sup>584</sup> WA 42,11,28-29; LW 1,14: "Qui autem extra ista involucra Deum attingere volunt, ista sine scalis (hoc est verbo) nituntur ad coelum ascendere..." Luther gives a number of examples: 1) Arius who seeks to comprehend God without a covering; 2) the monk who thinks that there is a God sitting in heaven who intends to save anyone wearing a cowl and following a definite rule of life; 3) the Jews with their idols and groves. LW 1,14. See David C. Steinmetz, "Luther and the Ascent of Jacob's Ladder," *Church History* 55 (1986) 179-192. Steinmetz compares Luther's exegesis with the standard and popular medieval commentaries of Hugh of Saint Cher, Nicholas of Lyra, and Denis the Carthusian. Luther adds a new element to the tradition by stressing the human weakness of the Patriarch, Jacob, and using that aspect as a model for present readers so that one becomes aware that in human weakness one must rely on God's strength. He also stresses the narrative elements so that the reader is made to feel Jacob's temptations, fears and weakness as Christ addresses those concerns. See above, in the first chapter, where Nestingen uses the image of the "world in front of the text" instead of the "world behind the text" to express Luther's focus in interpreting the biblical text.

<sup>585</sup> WA 42,12,33-38: "Hoc cum audiunt simplices, statim cogitant de solio aureo mire ornato, quanquam sciunt nihil tale materiale esse in coelo. Sic Esaias dicit se vidisse Dominum in amplissima veste, quia Deus in absoluta seu intuitiva visione non potest pingi nec cerni. Ideo tales figurae Spiritui sancto placent et opera Dei proponuntur, quae apprehendamus."

*Sakrament* (1525), Luther talked about the necessity of images in his criticism against the iconoclasts who had destroyed visual images in churches. Luther notes that in his German translation of the Bible, which the iconoclasts certainly read, there are many pictures of God, angels, etc.<sup>586</sup> Luther goes on to assert that it would be a good thing to paint similar images from the story of God's activity with human history onto barns and walls and other public places.<sup>587</sup> The Old Testament strictures against worshipping idols obviously does not apply since, according to Luther, it is impossible not to worship God without using images. Even while reading and hearing the gospel stories one cannot help but create mental images in the heart.<sup>588</sup> Purity of the heart is thus a spiritual impossibility if such purity is defined as a lack of physical imagery of spiritual realities.<sup>589</sup> Luther recounts an incident where he confronted a gathering of iconoclasts. One of them countered Luther's presentation with some folk wisdom that many in the crowd believed to be derived from Scripture:

...that the bride must take off her nightgown and be naked, if she is to sleep with the bridegroom. Therefore one must break all the images, so that we

---

<sup>586</sup> WA 18,82,21ff.

<sup>587</sup> WA 18,82,27ff.

<sup>588</sup> WA 18,83,7ff.

<sup>589</sup> WA 18,84,22-23: "...gerad als weren sie da mit der creaturn los im hertzen, das sie mit toben die bilder brechen."

are free and cleansed of what is created.<sup>590</sup>

Luther, with sarcasm, notes that chaste brides and bridegrooms who keep their nightgowns and robes on are not hindered by this fact if they have desire for each other.<sup>591</sup> In the same way, God's desire for humanity is not hindered by created realities, the veils of God.

Nevertheless, God is not available or "at hand" for human "grasping". God ensures that no towers of Babel can gloriously be built to reach heaven. In fact, Luther makes "the startling claim that the trinitarian God is "hidden"<sup>592</sup> precisely in his revelation, that God's hiddenness is a willful act *within* the economy of salvation."<sup>593</sup> Luther's understanding of the *Deus absconditus* as

---

<sup>590</sup> WA 18,84,11-14; LW 40,101: "...das die braut mus das hembd nacket aus zihen, sol sie bei dem breutgam schlaffen, Also mus man die bilder all ab brechen, das wir der creaturen los und rein werden."

<sup>591</sup> WA 18,84,23-25.

<sup>592</sup> For Luther, the "hiddenness" of God is always also a reference to the cross of Christ. Luther's use of this concept, then, becomes a short-hand way of calling to mind God's condemnation of all "theologies of glory" and at the same time forces the Church's hermeneutic toward the proclamation of the "Gospel-promises" inherent in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

<sup>593</sup> Scott S. Ickert, "Luther on the Timelessness of God" *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) 45-66; p.53. See also, Reiner Jansen, *Studien zu Luthers Trinitätslehre*, (Frankfurt/M.: Herbert Lang Bern Peter Lang, 1976), pp.59ff. It is here that Luther is different from Gabriel Biel who also used the distinction between *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus* but does not understand God hiding as being within revelation. See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), p.78. Oberman writes: "We may conclude, therefore, that for Biel there is a *deus absconditus* and a *deus revelatus*: God hidden and God revealed within the one circle of pure faith. This God, however, does not hide himself *in* his revelation. These two aspects of God refer

remaining within the *Deus revelatus* gives a particular shape to the conception of divine transcendence. It prevents a hermeneutical pre-understanding which locates the centre for interpretation in the interpreter's ability to speculate about heavenly things. This theologically ensures that God's free will does not come under the control of the gifted interpreter who is able to probe the mysteries of that will.<sup>594</sup>

The particular shape of this transcendence of God is captured in the Word of the cross: "God's true and final revelation always remains hidden under its opposite (*sub contrario*)..."<sup>595</sup> This aspect of God's transcendence is further clarified by Luther's comments about the existential struggle of Joseph's life. Speculation about God's mercy, strength, goodness and wisdom does not cohere with Joseph's experience of being snatched from his father's house and being thrown into a foreign prison on the false charge of adultery. After reading about this experience, Luther asks whether anyone could interpret this as the good will of God?<sup>596</sup> He concludes from this story that:

...we should know that God hides Himself under the form of the worst devil. This teaches us that the

---

to two different kinds of action: those in the past are revealed, those in the future are hidden."

<sup>594</sup> See above, pages 155 and following where Priscilla Hayden-Roy compares Luther's hermeneutic with that of Sebastian Franck.

<sup>595</sup> Ickert, p.54.

<sup>596</sup> WA 44,429.

goodness, mercy, and power of God cannot be grasped by speculation but must be understood on the basis of experience...Be content with His Word, just as Joseph has the Word of faith.<sup>597</sup>

Luther's hermeneutic is one that always keeps in the forefront that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith, for Luther, is primarily concerned with the future promised in the revelation of the "preached God". Luther claims that Christian faith will, therefore, have a different view of Providence than those who wonder about God's workings without hearing the "Gospel-promises":<sup>598</sup>

...it [philosophy] denies providence and concludes that God does not concern Himself with human affairs, but everything happens by accident and by chance. In his treatises *De finibus* and *De natura deorum* Cicero confronts this very difficulty. He does not venture to say either that God is unjust or that He does not concern Himself with human affairs; yet he does not see any reason why

---

<sup>597</sup> WA 44,429; LW 7,175: "Sciamus igitur Deum abscondere se sub specie pessimi Diaboli ideo ut discamus bonitatem, misericordiam, potentiam Dei non posse comprehendere speculando, sed experiendo.... sis contentus verbo eius, sicut Ioseph verbum fidei habet."

<sup>598</sup> See also LW 2,308: "reason looks only at the adversities of the present and is impressed and overwhelmed by them, but of the promise concerning the future it has no knowledge at all." Jüngel points out that Luther's insistence that theology should be free from philosophy is necessary to establish a theology of freedom: "In Luthers großer Kampfschrift gegen Erasmus verbindet sich die Erörterung über das servum arbitrium des Menschen in einer nicht nur durch den Duktus der Diatribe des Erasmus zu erklärenden Intensität mit grundlegenden Erörterung über das Wesen von Theologie überhaupt. Das alles deutet darauf hin, daß der Theologie im Begriff der Freiheit ihre ureigenste Sache angesagt ist, daß sie sich im Streit um diese Sache als Theologie zu bewähren hat. Insofern müßte eine Besinnung auf die Freiheit der Theologie eine Theologie der Freiheit voraussetzen, um mit theologisch definierten Begriffen arbeiten zu können." Eberhard Jüngel, "Der Freiheit der Theologie," *Entsprechungen: Gott-Wahrheit-Menschen*, (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1980), p.14.

the situation in this life is so unfair that the wicked flourish, while the pious fail even in their most honorable efforts and plans.<sup>599</sup>

Faith, for Luther is always a leap of faith. The Word hides under its opposite, the impious flourish while the pious suffer, the Word remains external while it damns and kills. It is always a leap of faith to also say that the same preached God also makes alive, justifies and brings salvation. Life under the revealing Word takes on a cruciform shape.

All attempts to connect the proclaimed God with the unproclaimed God deny the Gospel of the risen crucified Lord.<sup>600</sup> Living under the God of the proclamation of the Gospel is to live in the hope and faith that God is our Saviour through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Since God's Word comes to us in the form of a promise, life under that Word will have an "already/not yet" character. It is living in hope. This is the existential pattern of life under the cross. In the midst of God's revelation in Christ, God remains hidden. To speculate or inquire beyond this mask (*larva*) is to reverse the proper hermeneutic structure and move from the *hermeneutica crucis* to what Luther calls the *hermeneutica gloriae*:

---

<sup>599</sup> WA 42,482,10-16; LW 2,308: "...ideo offensa negat providentiam, iudicat Deum humana non curare, sed omnia casu et temere ferri. Cicero cum de finibus, Item de Deorum natura disputat, in hunc ipsum scopulum impingit. Non audet dicere, quod Deus aut iniustus sit, aut humana non curat, et tamen non videt causam, cur tam iniqua huius vitae conditio sit, ut mali floreat: Boni autem etiam in honestissimis conatibus et consiliis concidant."

<sup>600</sup> Steven D. Paulson, "The Wrath of God" *Dialog* 33 (1994) 245-251; esp. p.250.

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened (Rom.1:20). He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.<sup>601</sup>

It should be noted that this distinction between the *hermeneutica crucis* and the *hermeneutica gloriae* is one that has a particularly strong existential emphasis. This is shown in an outburst against the Dionysian mystical tradition when Luther writes: "one becomes a theologian by living, indeed by dying and being damned, not by understanding, reading, and speculating."<sup>602</sup> The Word which comes to humanity in the form of the cross is an active Word. The cruciform Word of Law and Gospel actively "kills" the one it encounters. Nevertheless, in faith, through this death one is made alive in Christ.<sup>603</sup> This faith in the preached God can never be understood in

---

<sup>601</sup> WA 1,354,17-22; LW 31,40: "Non ille digne Theologus dicitur, qui invisibilia Dei per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspicit, Sed qui visibilia et posteriora Dei per passiones et crucem conspecta intelligit. Theologus gloriae dicit malum bonum et bonum malum, Theologus crucis dicit id quod res est."

<sup>602</sup> The entire reference is: WA 5,163.24-29: "Haec admonendi gratia dicta velim, quod passim circumferuntur tum ex Italia tum Germania Commentaria Dionysii super Theologiam mysticam, hoc est mera irritabula inflaturae et ostentaturae seipsam scientiae, ne quis se Theologum mysticum credat, si haec legerit, intellexerit, docuerit seu potius intelligere et docere sibi visus fuerit. Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando."

<sup>603</sup> See Marc Lienhard, *Martin Luthers christologisches Zeugnis: Entwicklung und Grundzüge seiner Christologie*, Die Übersetzung ins Deutsche besorgte Robert Wolff, (Berlin: Verlagsanstalt, 1980), p.197. Lienhard writes: "Es vollzieht sich eine gewisse Verschiebung in dem Sinn, daß die Aufmerksamkeit des Reformators nicht mehr nur der Dialektik „sub contraria

a way that lessens the pure terror of being in the presence of the *Deus nudus*. David Tracy writes concerning Luther:

...this literally awe-ful and ambivalent sense of God's hiddenness is so overwhelming that God is sometimes experienced as purely frightening, not tender: sometimes as an impersonal 'It' of sheer power and energy signified by such metaphors as abyss, chasm, chaos, even horror; sometimes as a violent personal reality.<sup>604</sup>

Nevertheless, it is the preached God in which the Christian hopes even if it means his or her own death. For those of us who still love with a "covetous love" it might even be necessary to resign ourselves to hell as St. Paul does for the sake of his people in Romans 9:3.<sup>605</sup> After asking whether God has actually willed that

---

specie“, der Offenbarung in Jesus Christus, gilt, sondern daß Luther im Alter das Gesetz stärker betont, jenes Werkzeug, durch das Gott tötet und sich verbirgt, während er in Jesus Christus lebendig macht und sich völlig offenbart. Die „posteriora“ Gottes sind jetzt das Gesetz und die Schöpfung. (see WA 46,672,24ff.) Die Offenbarung Christi wird jetzt als Offenbarung stärker unterstrichen. Der negative Pol des Gerichts oder der Verborgenheit Gottes liegt jetzt wesentlich außerhalb von Christus im Gesetz, während in Christus Gott sich offenbart und den Menschen erlöst. Gewiß ist auch Christus ein Werkzeug des Gerichtes Gottes über den Menschen; er klagt den Menschen an, weil er selbst das Gesetz in vollkommener Weise erfüllt hat. Aber der Hauptton liegt jetzt auf der Offenbarung der Heilsabsichten Gottes durch Christus.“

<sup>604</sup> David Tracy, "The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation," *Cross Currents* (Spring 1996) 5-16; p.10. Tracy also notes that it was this sense of God's radical hiddenness that "inspired the great Lutheran phenomenologist Rudolf Otto to his brilliant description of the reality of God as both numinous and holy. It is this radical sense of God's Hiddenness I and II which one senses in Paul Tillich at his most dialectical and in such Lutheran artists as Ingmar Bergman at his most profound." (Note: The terminology "God's Hiddenness I and II" comes from B.A. Gerrish where "Hiddenness I" refers to the christological and Word-centred hiddenness *sub contrariis* in the cross while "Hiddenness II" refers to the God who is above us and does not concern us.) See: B.A. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *The Old Protestantism and the New*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 131-149.

<sup>605</sup> "For I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake..." As presented in: *Luther: Lecture on Romans* The Library of Christian Classics, Ichthus Edition, ed.

someone should resign him or herself to hell Luther answers:

Yes, in the case of most men and chiefly of those who are still imperfect in love or in pure devotion to God. For, in their case, the covetous love that is so deep-rooted needs to be extirpated.<sup>606</sup>

### Conclusion

When Luther examined the human will in his *De servo arbitrio* it led to questions about the revelation of God. Claiming *liberum arbitrium* for humanity is claiming too much in the relationship between God and creature since it precludes the creative power of the proclamation of the Gospel *ex nihilo*. Likewise, claims of knowledge concerning what Luther calls the *Deus absconditus* is to reverse the proper Christian hermeneutic of revelation to an improper one of speculation. This hermeneutic of revelation is one that is developed to describe what occurs in the encounter with the Word, that is, the proclaimed God. In a speculative hermeneutic, the Word no longer interprets the one addressed by that Word.

These concerns mirror those observed when Luther developed his doctrines of *iustitia Christi aliena* and the dialectical movement

---

Wilhelm Pauck, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961),p.260.

<sup>606</sup> *Luther: Lecture on Romans* The Library of Christian Classics, Ichthus Edition, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961),p.262.

of the "Word" as "Law" and "Gospel". The *res significans* and the *res significata* are flesh and therefore visible. The *res significans* and the *res significata* are both "Christ" in Luther's hermeneutic. The hermeneutical significance of this is that the speculative interpretation of Scripture by the so-called "spiritually gifted" is undermined. Scripture is clear. It is the Word of Christ which addresses humanity in the midst of creaturely existence about the "good news" or "Gospel" of his death and resurrection.

The witness of Scripture regarding the bondage of the will causes Luther to formulate a doctrine about the will which forces the Church to *proclaim* this "good news" concerning Jesus Christ. The parameters of the formulation of this doctrine, like the doctrines concerning righteousness and salvation, are marked by this relationship between Luther's theology and his hermeneutic. Any doctrine about the will which does not drive the Church to proclamation Luther expends a great deal of energy to combat. Opinions that claim the human will can choose the good, righteousness or God are anathema for Luther. It undercuts his hermeneutic which describes a "Word" performing what it says, which is the will of God for the one addressed.

It is important to note that, for Luther, the speaking God in Christ Jesus cannot be reduced to an existential change of the human will. The encounter with Christ cannot be limited to

volitional obedience in the life of the believer.<sup>607</sup> In the encounter with the "Word", Luther's insistence that the human will cannot have priority separates him from all hermeneutics ruled by Enlightenment assumptions. Luther's relational ontology, based on a thoroughly trinitarian theology, precludes any monism of the will. In our relationships with others, including God, we are bound to sin. In this regard, human will is not free.

Instead, Luther's hermeneutic has been shaped to describe how God draws human beings out of themselves through the proclamation of the "Gospel" of Jesus Christ. This encounter with the "alien righteousness" of God draws us out of ourselves. Such an encounter with someone who cannot be reduced to some category of the self must be the result of someone else's will, namely Christ. This part of Luther's hermeneutic resonates with Emmanuel Lévinas' postmodern hermeneutic. Lévinas claims: "This antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good chose me before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice."<sup>608</sup> For Luther, the encounter with God first comes to us as the Word of the "Law" which names and condemns human bondage to sin. God is Good, not the human being. Once human striving for primacy of the will and establishing their own

---

<sup>607</sup> See pages 29 and following.

<sup>608</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. By Alphonso Lingis, (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981), p.122.

righteousness has been "killed," the "Gospel" is heard as "good news." In this proclamation, the announcement of God's mercy, love, and will *for us* frees us from our own agendas and gives us the "neighbour" to love freely.