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*The Problem of the Hiddenness of God in Luther's Theology*

**I. Introduction**

*Truly, you are a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel, the Savior* – Isaiah 45:15. This verse is a touchstone for one of Martin Luther's most fruitful and provocative contributions to Christian theology, *deus absconditus* - *the hidden God*. For Luther, the cross *alone* stands at the center of his theological activity. The living and true God has most powerfully revealed Himself to humanity in an unlikely way and in an unlikely place - the cross of Jesus Christ. The scandal of this revelation is that this is *not* where we would reasonably expect to find God. The all-powerful maker of heaven and earth has not made Himself most fully known by categories of reason, or by a display of raw force. Instead, God has revealed Himself in the *opposite* of these things, in the weakness of His crucified Son. This hiddenness of God in the revelation of the cross is "foolishness" according to both Paul (I Cor. 1:21-25) and Luther.

Yet, this is not the only way in which Luther speaks of the hiddenness of God. There is a second, potentially *darker*, way in which God hides Himself. For Luther, writing in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will*, God not only hides Himself *in* the revelation of Christ crucified, but He hides Himself *outside* of His revelation as well. This second hiddenness (hereafter *hiddenness II*<sup>1</sup>) is God hiding *behind* and *beyond* revelation in the mystery that forms His work of saving some and damning others.<sup>2</sup> It is in this mysterious, inaccessible realm of *hiddenness II* where "God himself" exists, beyond His word, and not in it.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the designations *hiddenness I* for God's self-hiding *in* revelation and *hiddenness II* for His self-hiding *outside* of revelation, borrowing these from B.A. Gerrish, which he used in his masterful article on the hiddenness of God, please see: Gerrish, B.A. "To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God." *Journal of Religion*. 53.3. (1973). Print. 268

<sup>2</sup> Althaus, Paul. *The Theology of Martin Luther*. Trans. Robert C. Schultz. Philadelphia: Fortress. 1996. Print. 276

And it is *hiddenness II* that is most problematic to many interpreters of Luther. If the concealed God of *hiddenness II* is the *real God*, free and unbound in His will, and unknowable as He truly is, this seems like an altogether different God than the one revealed/hidden in the cross, i.e. *hiddenness I*. The God revealed in *hiddenness I* is gracious, calling all to know Him in the His crucified Son, for it is there that salvation and mercy is found for humankind, unexpected as it might be. But the God who hides Himself outside of revelation, seems altogether different. He is the one who in power and incomprehensibility chooses some to be His elect, and reprobates others to damnation - and for reasons that are unknowable, inscrutable, and apparently unrelated to His self-revelation in the cross. In fact, He is unlike the God revealed in the cross, the God who gives us assurance, and predictability as to His operations in the world (e.g. if you believe in Christ, *you will be saved* is knowable and predictable). Instead, He is unwieldy and terrifying. Michael Allen Gillespie states the problem succinctly when he writes, “if the concealed God (i.e. *hiddenness II*) is the real God and the revealed God (i.e. *hiddenness I*) merely the mask he presents to humans in Scripture, how can Luther know that he will keep his promises, particularly about salvation?”<sup>3</sup> Even Paul Althaus sees Luther’s two forms of God’s hiddenness as a contradiction in his theology that ultimately would lead to faith in God being *destroyed* not established.<sup>4</sup> Why? Because in *hiddenness I*, God’s saving work is merely hidden under an apparent non-saving activity. But in *hiddenness II*, God’s activity does not aim at salvation, and in fact it stands outside of and beside God’s saving work in Christ. This makes God’s purposes – His saving purposes – a point of mystery and uncertainty for us.<sup>5</sup>

*How should we understand these two different streams of God’s hiddenness in Luther’s theology? Is there an irreconcilable tension present? Or, is there a place for God’s hiddenness (II) to work within the framework of his theology as a whole, even a necessary place?* These are important questions that have implications for how we understand Luther, and also for navigating the Christian life. And they set the agenda for the focus of this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> Gillespie, Michael Allen. *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago: U of Chicago P. 2008. Print. 157-158

<sup>4</sup> Althaus. 279-280

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 279

The literature on this problem in Luther's theology is vast and sometimes profound. For my purposes here, I will begin by looking at three primary sources that are key to understanding Luther's theology of the cross in general, and his theology of *God's hiddenness* in particular. The three sources are *The Heidelberg Disputations* (1518), *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), and his *Commentary on Genesis* (1535-1545).<sup>6</sup> In *Heidelberg* we find some of Luther's first and most important expressions of his theology of the cross. *Bondage of the Will* presents Luther's strongest – and most incendiary – statements about the sovereignty of God and *hiddenness II*. And finally, in his *Commentary on Genesis*, we find the mature reflections of Luther on God's hiddenness written up to the time shortly before his death.

After considering these primary sources, I will look at how this tension in Luther's theology has been addressed, along with their strengths and weaknesses. Then I will give my own attempt at providing an answer for how *hiddenness II* relates to *hiddenness I*, by looking at Luther's view of the role and function of *faith* in the Christian life.

## II. The Hiddenness of God in Key Luther's Writings

### *Heidelberg Disputation (1518)*

In the fall of 1517, Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* were published. And while they did not initially “explode onto the playground of theologians,” they aroused immediate concern on the part of the church. This was due primarily to the fact that Luther targeted the ecclesial practice of selling indulgences, along with the consequent misunderstanding of their efficacy by much of the indulgence-purchasing laity.<sup>7</sup> The foundation of Luther's critique of indulgences was a conviction that Christ alone is sufficient for the remittance of sins, and that true repentance marked the shape of the whole Christian life.

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<sup>6</sup> There is some dispute about the authenticity of the text in the *Commentary on Genesis* since the work is a transcription of Luther's lectures, and not a work he wrote himself. This will be briefly addressed later in the paper.

<sup>7</sup> The original title of the *Ninety Five Theses* was *A Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, cf. Lull, Timothy, ed. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005. Print. 40

But the usefulness of purgatory, and the proper extent of church and papal authority also formed much of the substance of the *Theses*, and this is what drew attention to Luther.

Shortly after the publication of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther was invited to further explain his theology to the members of his own monastic order. His spiritual mentor and the regional head of his order, Johannes von Staupitz, asked him to submit a theological disputation to be considered at the General Chapter meeting of the Order of Augustinian Eremites in Heidelberg, during the spring of 1518. For the meeting in Heidelberg, Luther prepared two terse, dense, and rich sets of theses: twenty-eight theological theses and twelve philosophical theses, along with explanations. The entire focus of the philosophical theses is a decidedly negative assessment of Aristotle.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, in the theological theses Luther did not address the issues brought up in *The Ninety-Five Theses*, i.e. indulgences, purgatory, or even the proper extent of papal authority. Instead, he gets to what is the heart of the matter for understanding the relationship of God and man: the role of human works, God's Law, and God's grace. But most importantly for our purposes, the *Heidelberg* theses are "the most basic document" where he powerfully expresses his *theologica crucis* and his theology of the hidden God.<sup>9</sup>

The decisive statements in the *Disputations* are found in Theses 19 and 20:

19. The man who looks upon the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be called a theologian.

20. The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross does, however, deserve to be called a theologian.<sup>10</sup>

The theology of the cross is directed at *how* it is that we know God rightly. Luther is emphatic in pointing out that speculative reasoning does *not* grant us access to knowledge of God – this is folly. We cannot read the data of history or providence and come to a

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<sup>8</sup> Luther had already targeted Aristotle in his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (1517), thesis 41. The root of his disagreement with Aristotle lies in the differences in how each understands righteousness: for Aristotle the righteous man is the one who keeps the law (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*); for Luther, man cannot keep God's law and righteousness is revealed by a gracious God forgiving sinful man. For a helpful discussion please see:

McGrath, Alister. *Luther's Theology of the Cross*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985. Print. 136-141

<sup>9</sup> Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*. trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman. (1967) Minneapolis. Augsburg. Print. 67

<sup>10</sup> I am using McGrath's translation here. He helpfully points out that both von Loewenich and Lull mistranslate a key term (*posteriori Dei*) as 'the manifest things of God' in Thesis 20. Their translation misses Luther's allusion to Exodus 33:23. But more importantly their translation makes it impossible to speak of the *hiddenness* of God's revelation, though this was obviously Luther's intent as per his proof for this thesis. See McGrath, 148

sufficient (i.e. saving) knowledge of the Creator. In fact, as he comments in his proof for thesis 19, even those invisible things – wisdom, godliness, virtue, justice - that shine forth from *God's own creation* are insufficient and still leave us “fools.”<sup>11</sup>

Instead, we become wise in the knowledge of God, not by theoretical speculation about God, but by humbly receiving His special self-revelation to us in Scripture –Jesus Christ suffering on the cross. This revelation of God is contrary to the way that we would reasonably expect Him to reveal Himself to us. In the cross of Christ, the Creator of heaven and earth, reveals Himself in human nature, weakness, suffering, and humiliation. He shows Himself as the *opposite* of the “invisible things,” contrary to omnipotence and wisdom. In his proof of thesis 20, Luther comments that God instead desires to be “recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things,” i.e. knowledge of God through His works. *Why?* Because “men misused the knowledge of God through works.”<sup>12</sup> It does man *no good* to recognize God in His glory and majesty. In fact, the self-revealing of God in Christ is *judgment* against the intellectual pretensions of humanity to attain to knowledge of God independently, which is the theology of glory. And in accord with Luther’s larger framework of works and grace, a theology of glory is a theology of works righteousness.<sup>13</sup>

But the cross is not only a form of judgment. It is also a *revelation* of God, and a revelation in the same mode that He wants people to come to Him for salvation, humility. The humility of God in suffering and apparent weakness on the cross is for Luther the *visible rearward parts* of God. In Exodus 33, Moses asked God to show him His glory. But God instead showed Moses His “back” or “rearward parts,” i.e. *posteriori Dei*, not His face or the fullness of Himself. God indeed showed Himself to Moses, but not in a way that would immediately be recognizable *as God*. Similarly, in the passion and cross of Christ, it is truly God who is revealed, but not apparently so.<sup>14</sup> He is both revealed *and* hidden. He is concealed to those who expect a direct revelation of power and in accord with human reason, i.e. “the face of God.” These do not discern Him in the “rearward parts,” and to them the cross is foolishness and a stumbling block. But God is

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<sup>11</sup> Lull, 57

<sup>12</sup> Lull, 57

<sup>13</sup> von Loewenich, 20

<sup>14</sup> McGrath, 149

revealed to those with eyes of faith. People given the gift of faith know that beneath the humility and shame of the cross, lies the concealed power and glory of God.<sup>15</sup>

Faith for Luther is key to understanding his theology as a whole, and his theology of the cross in particular. In Thesis 25 he states that it is not the person who does much who is righteous, but “he who, without work, believes much in Christ.” Likewise, it is only the one exercising faith that will see God in the cross. Only faith can see God in the *posteriora Dei* because for Luther, faith is *only* faith when it grasps *concealed reality*. Luther highlights this in his proof of Thesis 20, when he compares Philip’s desire in John 14 to see the Father (theology of glory) with Christ’s admonition that Philip has seen the Father if he has seen Christ. It is the crucified Christ who is the doorway to God.<sup>16</sup> As Althaus points out, for Luther “it is necessary that everything which is to be believed be hidden so that there may be room for faith.”<sup>17</sup> In short, there can be no possibility for human boasting or meritorious works if faith is to properly function as faith.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the hidden God is known through suffering and the cross. Obviously, as we have seen, this means that God is recognized through the shame and humility of Jesus’ sufferings. God’s public humiliation and desecration in Christ is the place where He is actually victorious over sin, death, and the devil. And it is the place where He shatters the illusions of human ability to discern God by reason.<sup>18</sup> But not only is God made known to us in Christ’s suffering, in a parallel and related fashion God makes Himself known to us in our sufferings as well. For Luther the chief example of this is justification. When a person is confronted by God’s Law and shown to be a sinner, this produces a personal crisis, or *Anfechtung*. This experience of anguish and suffering is *induced* by God to produce the result that the person would be humbled, and then have eyes of faith to see God in the cross. As Luther writes in his proof for thesis 16, “through knowledge of sin, however, comes humility, and through humility grace is acquired.” God works paradoxically by performing an action that is alien to his

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 150

<sup>16</sup> Lull, 57

<sup>17</sup> Althaus, 56

<sup>18</sup> McGrath, 150

nature (making the person a sinner) to bring about the result that is proper to his nature (making the person righteous).<sup>19</sup> It is the experience of suffering by the person, brought on by God's action that brings that person to God.

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So, in looking at the *Heidelberg Disputations*, there is a rich and theologically fruitful presentation of Luther's theology of the cross, and the hiddenness of God (*hiddenness I*). Several constitutive aspects presented.<sup>20</sup> First, the theology of the cross is a theology of God's self-revelation that stands against speculative attempts at understanding and knowing God. Second, when God reveals Himself in the cross, this revelation is *indirect and concealed, i.e. hidden*, not direct and attainable by human efforts. Third, God's hiddenness in revelation is a form of judgment against human moral effort and fruitless reflection on the created order. The hidden God is only recognized in the suffering Christ. Fourth, God hidden in the cross can only be perceived and received by faith. Fifth, God is particularly known through suffering – Christ's and ours. And our suffering leads us to Him and confirms us in Him.

However, as Luther continued to write and articulate his dogma, especially in the context of polemics with his detractors, his theology of God's hiddenness begins to develop (distort?) in ways that seem to be divorced from God's gracious purposes in Christ. It is in *The Bondage of the Will* where we find Luther most significantly expanding his teaching on the hiddenness of God.

### ***Bondage of the Will (1525)***

*The Bondage of the Will* was a response to Erasmus of Rotterdam's treatise *On the Freedom of the Will*. In *Freedom*, Erasmus wrote to draw Luther out into a debate about the central issues of the Reformer's developing theology, more than to attack him. In fact, before Erasmus wrote *Freedom*, he and Luther had been seen as compatriots in advocating against clerical tyranny and advocating for a simpler, more personal form of Christian faith.<sup>21</sup> However, after receiving pressure from the Pope and Henry VIII, Erasmus was compelled to address some aspects of Luther's theology. He rightly

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<sup>19</sup> Lull, 56; McGrath, 151

<sup>20</sup> Cf. von Loewenich, 19-22; McGrath, 149-151

<sup>21</sup> Gillespie, 135

understood that the core issue for Luther was the scope of God's grace, and by extension the scope of human agency. And also being savvy, he wanted to avoid controversial issues such as papal supremacy.<sup>22</sup> Controversy found him, nonetheless, in the form of Luther's pen. It is generally recognized that Erasmus' work was moderate in its tone and presentation. Luther's response was anything but. He was furious that Erasmus had written against him, and called it Erasmus' "great refusal" of him.<sup>23</sup> And in the heat of rhetorical and theological sword crossing with the great humanist, Luther articulated his controversial view of God's volitional freedom and His hiddenness *outside* of revelation in Christ.

Early in *Bondage*, as he addresses himself to the preface of Erasmus' work, Luther explains why we should even talking about the sovereignty of God and bondage of man's will in the first place. He notes that "a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers" and depends on God alone.<sup>24</sup> As in *Heidelberg*, the importance of humility on the part of the human recipient is key to acquiring grace. A proper understanding of human inability to reach out to God induces the gospel humility Luther endorses. Second, and more importantly for our discussion, he outlines the role and nature of faith. All that must be believed must be hidden, so that there will be room for faith.<sup>25</sup> Alluding to *hiddenness I*, he writes that God "conceals His eternal mercy beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness."<sup>26</sup> Again, as in *Heidelberg*, faith for Luther can only properly be faith if it sees its object (Christ, God) hidden beneath its opposite (humility, weakness). In this way there is no room for boasting, and grace is seen to be fully gracious and divinely given. And it is ultimately by faith that we can embrace Scripture's teaching about God's mysterious providence and human weakness.

Yet, it is also in writing about how faith grasps its object hidden under its opposite, that Luther first approaches the mystery of God's hiddenness *outside* of His revelation. Immediately after he writes about God's hiddenness *in* revelation, Luther

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 137

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 138

<sup>24</sup> Luther, Martin. *Bondage of the Will*. Trans. J.I. Packer & O.R. Johnston. (1957) Grand Rapids: Revell. Print. 100

<sup>25</sup> Luther, 101

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

says that it is the “highest degree of faith to believe God is merciful, though He saves so few and damns so many.”<sup>27</sup> It is genuine faith to confess that God is gracious, when it seems so apparent that in fact the opposite is the case, that His grace is meagerly applied to the majority of humankind. Luther is admitting, very frankly, that God has purposes at work that are a) mysterious, and b) and perhaps distinct from His gracious self-revelation in Christ. Yet, the impossibility of reconciling God’s mercy and the multitude of non-Christians is for Luther, the occasion for faith to work. He states, “If I could by any means understand how this same God, who makes such a show of wrath and unrighteousness, can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith.”<sup>28</sup> Faith, as we noted earlier, is central not only to seeing God hidden in the cross, but also recognizing God where He is fully concealed, as well.

Up to this point, Luther only hinted at God’s hiddenness *outside* of revelation, now he lifts the lid on it. In a discussion on whether God wills the death of a sinner, Luther says that we must speak of God in two ways when we read passages like this. We must make a distinction between *God preached* and *God hidden*, that is, between the Word of God and *God Himself*.<sup>29</sup> We are only responsible to proclaim what God has revealed to us in Scripture, that He indeed does not will the death of a sinner. But in fact, He *does* will it by His inscrutable and free will, a will not bounded *even by His Word*.<sup>30</sup> God Himself, in His unfathomable will, is hidden and inaccessible to us. Earlier in the discussion, Luther even warns us, “God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone...we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to deal with Him.”<sup>31</sup>

If Luther had stopped here we would have enough to sort through. He has proposed that: a) God in Himself is hidden from us outside of His revelation, as evidenced by his unfathomable will, and b) God’s own Word does not circumscribe His will.<sup>32</sup> But Luther goes further. He seems to posit a real tension within the will of the Godhead Himself. He writes, “[i]t belongs to the same God Incarnate to weep, lament,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 170

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Luther affirms this again later, writing, “*God is He whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule...His will itself is the rule for all things.* See: Luther, 209

and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, though that will of Majesty purposely leaves and reprobates some to perish.”<sup>33</sup> Jesus longs for the lost, but God condemns them.

What should be *our* response to this apparent tension within the Godhead Himself? We do not ask *why*, but simply stand in awe and with reverence that God works this way.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, if we cannot ask *why*, it still seems plausible to ask *how*. How is it the case that God presents Himself as gracious and accessible in Christ, but in His hidden will He is mysterious and untethered to His revelation in Christ? Is the merciful Christ of *hiddenness I* a mask that conceals the true, incomprehensible God (*hiddenness II*)? Or is the God hidden *outside* of His revelation the masked God, the one who drives us to faith in the Christ concealed in the cross?

Luther makes few overtures toward trying to reconcile this tension. While he recognizes the problem, it does not seem to be one that he thinks is debilitating to his theology. However, there are three main lines of response He gives, which function pastorally more than philosophically.

First, we should be simply moved to adore and worship God *because* of His mysterious ways. We comprehend *that* He is incomprehensible, and this moves us to “adore ...the true Majesty in its awful, wondrous, incomprehensible judgments, and to say: Thy will be done.”<sup>35</sup>

Second, he condemns the questioning of God’s hidden work and purposes as a form of idolatry. The effort to peer into these things is evidence of a self-righteous disposition. Luther asks of the questioners, “Why is God not charged with being unjust when He *justifies the ungodly* with all of their demerit, but when He damns the undeserving, this is deemed intolerable?”<sup>36</sup> The same people who lament God’s reprobation do not decry His election.

Finally, Luther concedes mystery, and indicates that in fact a resolution will be satisfyingly given – in the *eschaton*. In the age to come, what seems contrary to the light of grace, namely that God would damn those who can do nothing but sin and increase guilt, will be made clear by the light of glory. God will in fact be seen to be a God

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 176

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 176-177

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 216

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 234

“whose justice is most righteous and evident.”<sup>37</sup> However, the key that will give final access to seeing this mystery explained is faith. We must simply *believe* that God is just in spite of the way things appear.<sup>38</sup>

In *Bondage of the Will*, Luther’s doctrine of the hiddenness God expanded in scope. *Hiddenness I* is hardly addressed at all, at least explicitly. Now, when Luther speaks of God’s hiddenness, He describes God as utterly concealed behind His revelation, in the mystery of His will (*hiddenness II*). We know *that* He is hidden there, but do not have access behind the curtain of His hiddenness. Moreover, we are told that God is the one with free will, not man. And His will is unbounded, even to His revelation of Himself in the cross of Christ. However, this is not Luther’s last word about this.

### ***Commentary on Genesis (1535-1545)***

The text of Luther’s *Commentary on Genesis* is disputed, mainly because it is a transcription of lectures he gave over the course of the last ten years of his life. He did not personally set pen to paper with the work on Genesis, instead trusting it to a scribe whom he did not edit as he did with other commentaries, e.g. Galatians. Further, some historians believe that the text has been corrupted by Phillipists to reflect Melancthon’s theology, putting it in the mouth of a then dead Luther to counter opponents. That the Law should be preached to believers as well as unbelievers, and primarily because of a commitment to an Aristotelian, substantialist ontology, is the chief example offered of textual distortions.<sup>39</sup> However, for the purposes of this paper, these concerns do not affect our reading of Genesis, since we are focusing on God’s hiddenness, and we are looking comparatively at *several* of Luther’s works.

In *Genesis*, Luther does not back away from His theology of either the gracious God hidden/revealed in the cross (*hiddenness I*) or in the inscrutable, concealed will of God (*hiddenness II*). Yet, *Genesis* is not a polemical work. And so he does refine his discussion of each kind of *hiddenness*, seasoned by years of ministry experience. In *Genesis* he gives more pastoral direction as to the *use* of these doctrines in the Christian

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 317

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Nestingen, James. “Luther in Front of the Text: The Genesis Commentary.” *Word & World*. 14/2 (1994) Print. 187

life, as well as relating the two by the function of faith. For example, when he discusses *hiddenness II*, it is almost always to direct his readers to the Christ of *hiddenness I*.

Commenting on Genesis 26:9, he says that where God has not chosen to reveal Himself, we have “no faith, no Word, no knowledge...and you will not make Him visible” and should simply turn away from ignorant conjecture.<sup>40</sup> And why should we conjecture, if the answers God has given us are placed clearly and accessibly in Christ? Earlier in the *Commentary* he states,

“I follow this general rule: to avoid as much as possible any questions that carry us to the throne of the Supreme Majesty. It is better and safer to stay at the manger of Christ the Man. For there is great danger in involving oneself in the mazes of the Divine Being.”<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, he even seems afraid that later theologians will consider him to be too heavily invested in *hiddenness II*. He references future (mis)readings of *Bondage* by emphatically stating, “I have written that everything is absolute and unavoidable; but at the same time I have added that one must look at the revealed God.”<sup>42</sup> He goes on to make the point that later readers of the treatise should “be satisfied with what is revealed through the calling and the ministry of the Word,” and should not “inquire into the predestination of the hidden God.”<sup>43</sup>

However, in what is surely the most important clarification in his theology of *hiddenness (I & II)* in *Genesis*, Luther claims that though we cannot know the hidden God (*hiddenness II*) by peering into the inscrutable will of God, we have Him nonetheless *through Christ*. Again, commenting on Genesis 26:9 he writes:

“Accept the present promise and predestination, and do not inquire too curiously about the secret counsels of God. If you believe in the revealed God and accept His Word, He will also *gradually reveal the hidden God*; for He who sees Me also sees the Father (John 14:9).<sup>44</sup>

And so that we do not misunderstand what he means, a few pages later he writes, “[i]f you have Him (i.e. Christ), *then you have the hidden God together with Him who has*

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<sup>40</sup> LW 5:44

<sup>41</sup> LW 2:45

<sup>42</sup> LW 5:50

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> LW 5:46

*been revealed.*”<sup>45</sup> While it is unfortunate that Luther did not explain how it is that we “have the hidden God” through the revealed God, or how it is that the hidden God is “gradually revealed,” (e.g. Will we have insight into why God elects and reprobates?) these are still amazingly helpful statements. Most importantly, in Luther’s mind *hiddenness I* and *hiddenness II* are vitally linked, and not in *real* tension. The God of *hiddenness II* is not different than the Christ revealed in *hiddenness I*, since the latter links us to the former. The God of *hiddenness II* is *not* known to us as portentous at all, but as our Christ, our Savior. To the extent that Luther does explain our access to the knowledge of the *hidden God*, he lays it at the feet of faith – “accept the promise,” “believe in the revealed God.” Faith, as always, is the key that unlocks the mysteries and struggles of Christian existence.

Before we move on from *Genesis*, it should also be mentioned that in his commentary Luther draws particular attention to the role of suffering and God’s purposes in it. Commenting on Genesis 32:31-32, Luther comes back to a favorite image, the *posterioria Dei*, when talking about personal anguish. He writes, “God leads down to hell and brings back. Now you see His back parts, and God seems to be shunning you, but sometime later you will see His front parts and His face.”<sup>46</sup> God is good but not safe, in other words. He is willing to not only allow us torment and suffering as Christians, but even to lead us into it. And why is God willing to do such a thing? Luther answers us: “It is a proof of grace and God’s goodwill, when [Christians] are disciplined by the cross and afflictions.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, God disciplines us by inflicting on us hardships, including the *Anfechtungen* of doubts as to His providence and good will toward us. This is a “game” God plays with His children, *because* of His love for them. But it is a game played for the purpose of the saints’ holiness.<sup>48</sup> As Luther understands it, God’s economy of redemption is upside down (though still glorious). It is through suffering that we come to know His peace, just as Christ in His suffering accomplished blessing on behalf of His elect.

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<sup>45</sup> LW 5:48

<sup>46</sup> LW 6:151

<sup>47</sup> LW 6:355

<sup>48</sup> LW 8:4-5

So, in *Genesis* we see Luther cover old ground but in fresh ways. We are reminded to not focus on *hiddenness II*, because God has revealed Himself sufficiently and truly in *hiddenness I*. Further, suffering in the Christian life is often brought on the saints by God Himself, consistent as it were with His “method” of revealing Himself in His opposite to achieve the goal of godliness in those who suffer. But most importantly, *Genesis* shows the mature Luther coupling *hiddenness I* and *hiddenness II*. It is through the cross that we somehow begin to know the hidden God, and the vehicle for knowing them both is *faith*.

### III. Conclusion: One God – Twice Hidden

We must acknowledge the tension that exists in Luther’s thought when he couples together *hiddenness I* and *hiddenness II* in the work of God. Our understanding of God as knowable and gracious in Christ is strained by His freedom and inscrutability in the hiddenness of His eternal will. The question remains, “Is the *cross* God’s final word on anything? And if so, how?” Unfortunately, Luther does not make explicit in his key works *how* they are complimentary, or at least how *hiddenness II* is related to God’s hidden/revealed work in Christ’s passion. He simply affirms it and points us to a future resolution in glory.

As mentioned earlier, this is an unsatisfying approach to many readers of Luther, even sympathetic ones.<sup>49</sup> By and large they have discounted or excused *hiddenness II* in Luther as an unfortunate bit of theology that eclipses the grander teaching of *hiddenness I*. One interesting (and I think helpful), effort of appropriating *hiddenness II* into *pastoral theology* comes from B.A. Gerrish. He does not think that *hiddenness I* and *II* can be synthesized rationally, at least by him. But he believes that, most importantly, there is a range of common human experience behind the notion of *hiddenness II* that allows it to be explained on a subjective level. It is in our “anxiety of finitude and insignificance, modern man experiences the hiddenness of God.”<sup>50</sup> Our experience of living in an unpredictable and uncertain world certifies for us our tenuous condition. Gerrish does not go as far as to say that this experience is *itself* a revelation of God, but that this

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<sup>49</sup> see pages 1-2

<sup>50</sup> Gerrish, 291-292

common experience parallels what we read and know of God in *hiddenness II*. And instead of confirming to us the vanity of life, our *thrownness* in the world orients what we perceive of *hiddenness II*, and *drives* us to the Jesus of *hiddenness I*. In a very Lutheran fashion, Gerrish employs this Law/Gospel dialectic to explain how God shepherds us in and through our experiences to Christ crucified.<sup>51</sup>

As far as Gerrish takes us, I think we can go further, even beyond our experience in recognizing the relationship of *hiddenness I* and *II*. Part of the problem in Luther's articulation of *hiddenness II*, especially in *Bondage*, is the polemical shape of his theologizing. While it is only speculative (Luther's stated anti-mode of doing theology!), Luther might have been more measured in His language (e.g. Christ weeping for the lost who the Hidden God destroys) if he had not been writing for purposes of shining *heat* as well as light. McGrath clearly thinks Luther has painted himself into a corner theologically, but that his bombast also got him into trouble.<sup>52</sup> I think McGrath is right about the latter. For example, when Luther says, in *Bondage* that God "has not set bounds to Himself by His Word, but has kept Himself free over all things," the point he is making is clear (God is totally free *as God* to act), but overstated. Had Luther simply said *no more* than God is free, and not bound by *our expectations* of what He should have done, that would have been moderate and safer. Luther is not intending to teach that God *in fact* is capricious and unreliable in His workings, only that we cannot fix God in the categories of our reason, even reason applied to Scripture. This more moderate stance is basically the tack he takes in *Genesis*, by conceding that this mystery will ultimately only be resolved in the eschaton, and is partly known now *through* Christ.

And for Luther, it is with Christ where we must *begin* (not just end), when seeking to comprehend *hiddenness II*. He taught in *Genesis* that if we have the revealed Christ we have the hidden Christ, and I believe this highlights our method for wrestling with Luther's theology here, as well. We start with Christ in the cross, and move to *hiddenness II*. Why? Because when we start with *hiddenness I*, then we are starting by exercising *faith*. Faith is the instrument by which we have grasped our God and Savior out of the tragic torture and murder of a rabbi. We have come to know God in His

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<sup>51</sup> This explanation also seems to parallel Luther's own conversion experience, but Gerrish does not try and make this connection.

<sup>52</sup> McGrath, 166-167

opposite through the cross. Since we have made this move in coming to know God in the first place, we are prepared to keep moving by faith to know the hidden God as well (as much as He can be known this side of the new heavens and earth). In a sense, there is a *pattern* with God's dealings that gives us assurance as we consider the *hidden God*. And what does faith help us to grasp in the hidden God? That He is the *same God* revealed in the cross. Only faith as God's chiefly appointed mode of knowledge grants us this. God operating in the mystery of His hidden will is not somehow different in *His nature*, but we do not have full access to the range of His moving and being in *hiddenness II*. We may not get full purchase on the hidden God (*hiddenness II*), but we do have Him and do know Him through the lens of the cross.

In the same vein, while it is not immediately apparent how God's reprobating actions and mysterious activity hidden behind His revelation are coordinated with Christ's passion, it does not mean that this relationship is precluded. Faith compels us to confess that just as the cross is foolishness to the world (i.e. not salvation for those who believe), we trust that God's inscrutable will is not distinct from Christ's work, only not presently discernible in Him. By faith we know that *Hiddenness II*, rationally speaking, is no more contrary to God's purposes in Jesus, than actually executing Jesus was. Only *now* we see that Christ's humiliation has saving purposes for those who believe. Furthermore, since we see that since God has established Christ's punishment as the vindication of sinners, then it seems credible that God's punishment of some sinners (regardless of the eternal mechanics of divine providence) will result in the vindication of Christ – a vindication of God's wisdom, and final condemnation fallen humanity's foolishness.

Finally, bringing Gerrish back into the discussion, even the anguish for the Christian of not yet being able to *satisfyingly* understand God's eternal and hidden purposes has a function now. A jeweler will use a black cloth and place gems on it to highlight their brilliance and luster. *Hiddenness II* functions as this black cloth for those in Christ. The mercies of God in Christ shines even brighter against the backdrop of the dark potential of being alienated and cast off from the hidden God. For the Christian, the *Anfechtungen* brought on by uncertainty as to God's purposes (*Anfechtungen* initiated by God Himself) operates as a stimulant to robust faith; faith holding onto and knowing

Christ as the safe harbor of salvation in spite of the way things presently seem. It is not beyond God at all to have the very articles of faith, be the crisis points for moving us deeper into trust and hope in Christ Himself. *And how could it be otherwise?* This was the experience of *Christ Himself on the cross*. God's Chosen One was destined to take upon Himself the agony of a man forsaken by God, unable to reconcile what God revealed and what God was doing to Him on the cross. Jesus Himself experienced the hidden God, in ways we only approximate in our own sufferings. And now in Christ, and through our sufferings we know Him as well, hidden and revealed, but safely in cleft of His Son.

*Crux sola est nostra theologia!*

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