

LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE HIDDEN GOD AND THE REVEALED GOD

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INTRODUCTION

The reformer Martin Luther did the church of Jesus Christ a great service in taking her back to the Scriptures as the final authority for life and doctrine. While he was a flawed sinner like the rest of us, he was also a ravenous student of the Word. Luther taught many crucial doctrines that have characterized Protestantism through the years, as well as some distinctive doctrines that have characterized him as a theologian. One doctrine that falls under the latter category is the distinction that Luther made between “the hidden God” and “the revealed God.” This paper will seek to examine Luther’s teaching and evaluate it, noting any profitable application that the doctrine might yield.

SOME DISTINCTIONS

In beginning this study, it is necessary to make a few distinctions. Luther used the idea of God as “hidden” in two different ways. The first way is primarily found in the *Heidelberg Disputation*. In this writing, Luther develops the idea of the Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory. The Theologian of Glory is characterized by being concerned with God in His glory and majesty, and likewise is concerned with approaching Him through great wisdom and great works.¹

On the contrary, the Theologian of the Cross is concerned with God as He is found in suffering and especially as He is found in the cross, in the form of the Man Christ Jesus. The theologian of Glory finds this way of approaching God to be foolishness. Luther says that “he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and in general, good to evil.”² But Luther says that to really know God, we must see Him as He is

¹ Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation.” In *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 43-44.

² Ibid..

hidden in Christ. He says, “He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering.”³ In Luther’s thinking, to confound the wisdom of man, God hides Himself under what is the opposite of Himself.

The other way that Luther talks of God’s hiddenness is found in his book against Erasmus and free will, *The Bondage of the Will*. In this book, Luther teaches that there is a distinction between God as He has revealed Himself in His Word, and God as He is in His infinite majesty.⁴ It is important to note that while these two ways of talking about God as hidden are related, they are also distinct. In the first case, the hiddenness of God as discussed in the *Heidelberg Disputation* is the way God reveals Himself. In *Bondage of the Will*, the hiddenness of God is God as He has *not* revealed Himself.⁵ This paper will be primarily concerned with the hiddenness of God in the second sense.

LUTHER’S TEACHING

Luther wrote *Bondage of the Will* in 1525 to respond to Erasmus’ book *On the Freedom of the Will*. Luther’s main argument is that apart from God’s grace, man is hopelessly enslaved to sin. One of the major implications of this work is that since man is enslaved to sin, it is God who first chooses to save man and not man who chooses to turn to God first. The hiddenness of God comes into play in that, in Luther’s thinking, it is God as He is hidden that He chooses some men and rejects others, while God as He is revealed offers and desires salvation for all men.

One of the most explicit teachings of the hiddenness of God is found in the context of Luther’s refutation of Erasmus. Erasmus claimed that since God does not desire the death of the

³ Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” 43-44.

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*. J. I Packer and O. R. Johnston, trans., (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2003), 169-170.

⁵ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*. Robert C. Schultz, trans., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 276-277.

wicked, then the wicked die by their own free will.⁶ Luther responds: “We must discuss God, or the will of God, preached, revealed, offered to us, and worshipped by us, in one way, and God not preached, nor revealed, nor offered to us, nor worshipped by us, in another way.”⁷ Luther says that it is true that God, as He is revealed, does not desire the death of the sinner; but God as He is not revealed *does* will the death of the sinner, and in fact wills all things that come to pass.⁸

This clearly demonstrates the essence of Luther’s distinction between “the hidden God” and “the revealed God.” There are two things that can be said about how Luther comes to this conclusion. The first is that Luther tries to prove this distinction from 2 Thess. 2:4: the man of sin exalts himself above “all that is called God or that is worshipped.” From this Luther deduces that there is a sense in which a man can exalt himself over God as He is preached and worshipped (in Luther’s thinking, “the revealed God”). But Luther says that no one can exalt himself over God as He is “in His own nature.” So there must be a distinction here between God as He is revealed, whom a man can exalt himself over, and God as He is not revealed, whom a man can not exalt himself over.⁹ But Althaus rightly states that “there is no basis for this [distinction] in the text.”¹⁰

The second thing that can be said about how Luther comes to this conclusion is that it appears he is trying to come to grips with two things he sees in Scripture. First, there is God’s apparent desire that *all* men be saved.¹¹ Second, there is an apparent choice of God that *some* are

⁶ Luther, *Bondage*, 166.

⁷ Luther, *Bondage*, 169-170.

⁸ Luther, *Bondage*, 170-171.

⁹ Luther, *Bondage*, 170.

¹⁰ Luther, *Bondage*, 277.

saved.¹² Perhaps this tension is the real reason why Luther comes to the distinction between God as hidden and revealed. His exegesis of 2 Thess. 2:4 may just have been a desire to find the Scripture speaking directly to what he saw implied throughout the Scripture.

This thinking in Luther may even be a development of Luther's meditation on the Scripture and personal efforts to understand how it is that God both elects *and* offers salvation to all. While *Bondage of the Will* was written in 1525, Luther had written on the doctrine of election at least as early as 1516 in his lectures on Romans. In his lecture notes, Luther defends an Augustinian view of unconditional election to salvation against the arguments of those who reject it. One of the arguments is that God does not choose some because He wants all men to be saved. Interestingly, Luther at this point in his thinking does not appeal to a hidden/revealed distinction to explain this, but rather he answers that the phrase "God wants all men to be saved" in 1 Timothy 2:4 (and in other places where similar things are said) pertains to the elect.¹³ Here we see in Luther one will of God regarding salvation that pertains only to the elect. While it is possible that the difference in argument is one of different contexts, it does suggest the possibility that Luther's thinking on the will of God changed over time.

The next thing that should be said about Luther's teaching on this subject is how we are to relate to God as He is hidden and God as He is revealed. Regarding God as He is hidden, Luther says, "Wherever God hides Himself, and wills to be unknown to us, there we have no

¹¹ Luther, *Bondage*, 171. "For He desires that all men should be saved, in that He comes to all by the word of salvation, and the fault is in the will which does not receive Him; as He says in Matt. 23: 'How often I would have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldst not!' (v. 37)."

¹² Luther, *Bondage*, 176. "It belongs to the same God Incarnate to weep, lament, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, though that will of Majesty purposely leaves and reprobates some to perish. Nor is it for us to ask why He does so, but to stand in awe of God, Who can do, and wills to do, such things."

¹³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia*. Edited by Hilton C. Oswald. Vol. 25 of *Luther's Works*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 375-376.

concern. Here that sentiment: ‘what is above us does not concern us,’ really holds good.”¹⁴

Luther says that as far as God as He is hidden is concerned, we have no access to Him and no [direct] relationship to Him. Since we have no access to God as He is hidden, we must look for Him where He has revealed Himself: in His Word. He says in again in *The Bondage of the Will*, “Now, God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to deal with Him. We have to do with Him as clothed and displayed in His Word, by which He presents Himself to us.”¹⁵

In fact, Luther strongly opposes trying to delve into the unknown counsel of God. In His *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther discusses this topic further. In his treatment of Genesis 17:10-11 on God’s commandment that the descendants of Abraham circumcise their sons on the eighth day, Luther comments on the fact that many people want to talk about why God commanded them to do it. His response is that it is enough that God told them to and beyond that we should not speculate.¹⁶ This train of thought seems to trigger in him an excursus into the idea of speculating upon what God has not made known.

Luther here says that if Adam had paid attention to what God said to him rather than speculating the reasons for God’s prohibition in the garden, he would not have fallen.¹⁷ Further, he identifies this kind of speculation beyond God’s revelation as the reason for the fall of Satan. Luther says, “I have no doubt that the sin of Lucifer was something like this, that he wanted to find out and know more about the unknown God than became his station, that is, about the God

¹⁴ Luther, *Bondage*, 169-170.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15-20*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. Vol. 3 of *Luther’s Works*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 138-139.

¹⁷ Luther, *Genesis: Chapters 15-20*, 138-139.

who has not been revealed and disclosed through the Word.”¹⁸ It is ironic that Luther, in speaking against speculating, is himself speculating beyond what God has said. Nevertheless, what is important is that for Luther, what is characteristic of man as a sinful creature is his desire to neglect the Word in preference for his own supposed wisdom.

Later in his lectures on Genesis, Luther speaks of how this same principle applies to many people’s thinking on predestination. He echoes *Bondage of the Will* when he repeats here, “what is above us in none of our concern.”¹⁹ He says that many people, in thinking about predestination, become obsessed with knowing God’s secret will, and start to think in a fatalistic way and neglect to lay hold of Christ because they think that it makes no difference what they do because they are either chosen or not.²⁰ Luther, speaking from God’s perspective, then gives what he believes is God’s instruction for how “you may be able to know whether you are predestined or not.”²¹ He says of Christ,

“Behold, this is My Son; listen to Him (cf. Matt. 17:5). Look at Him as He lies in the manger and on the lap of His mother, as He hangs on the cross. Observe what He does and what He says. There you will surely take hold of Me.” [...] If you listen to Him, are baptized in His name, and love His Word, then you are surely predestined and are certain of your salvation. But if you revile or despise the Word, then you are damned; for he who does not believe is condemned (Mark 16:16).”²²

Luther was devotedly Augustinian in his theology of election. But his concern was for the practical impact that questions of election and predestination have on an individual. This may

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen. Vol. 5 of *Luther’s Works*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 44.

²⁰ Luther, *Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, 43.

²¹ Luther, *Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, 45.

²² Luther, *Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, 45.

derive from his own spiritual journey, where he was constantly tormented about questions regarding his salvation. At one point he refers back to his experience in the Augustinian cloister. He says, “Staupitz²³ used to comfort me with these words: ‘Why do you torture yourself with these speculations? Look at the wounds of Christ and at the blood that was shed for you. From these predestination will shine.’”²⁴

These passages demonstrate that Luther wanted to point people away from God in His hiddenness and specifically, he wanted to point them to God’s Word. This is the most important implication of Luther’s doctrine of God as revealed. It is the fact that even though He believed and taught election and the hidden purpose of God, he was concerned that people look for God not by means of speculation and pondering what God has not made known, but by looking to what God is speaking to them through His Word and through Christ. Luther says,

I say, as I said before, that we may not debate the secret will of Divine Majesty [...]. But let man occupy Himself with God Incarnate, that is, with Jesus crucified, in whom, as Paul says (cf. Col. 2:3), are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (though hidden); for by Him man has abundant instruction both in what he should and in what he should not know.”²⁵

Luther was constantly working to get people *to the Word*, because that is where life is found, not in pondering about whether one is predestined. More than that, Luther thought that it was by coming to the Word and responding to Christ in faith that men found that they *were* predestined.

But this did not mean that Luther was not concerned about the hidden God. There were several implications of his view of the hiddenness of God that he felt should really impact the believer. One of the implications of this teaching was that men ought to trust in God for their

²³ Johann von Staupitz, the vicar of the cloister and Luther’s early spiritual mentor.

²⁴ Luther, *Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, 47.

²⁵ Luther, *Bondage*, 175-176.

salvation and not in themselves.²⁶ This is one of Luther's arguments in *Bondage of the Will*. Luther says that he is actually glad that there is no such thing as free will because then his salvation would be dependent on him.²⁷ Luther says,

But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will, and put it under the control of His, and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to His own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that He is faithful and will not lie to me, and that He is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break Him or pluck me from Him.²⁸

So Luther says that this teaching points men to trust in God and not in themselves.

Second, this teaching necessitates faith. It does this in two ways. First, because we must believe that God is good even though He doesn't appear to be good. Luther says that faith consists of believing what we cannot see.²⁹ "Now, the highest degree of faith is to believe that He is merciful, though He saves so few and damns so many [...]"³⁰ Luther teaches here that we are challenged to grow in our faith when we read in His Word that He is essentially merciful and yet we do not see Him exercise that mercy on a very high percentage of people.

Another way that this teaching necessitates faith is in understanding that God loves His children even though they experience many difficult trials. Luther repeatedly speaks often of this in the context of his teaching on the life of the patriarch Jacob, as well as in his teaching on Joseph's betrayal by his brothers.³¹ In these passages, Luther constantly stresses that God doesn't

²⁶ This is more properly an implication of Luther's view of election, but his view of election is in fact a subset of how he understands the hidden God who controls all things, so it is appropriate to list this as an implication of God's hiddenness.

²⁷ Luther, *Bondage*, 313.

²⁸ Luther, *Bondage*, 314.

²⁹ Luther, *Bondage*, 101. "[...] faith's object is things not seen."

³⁰ *Ibid.*

seem to be loving when He is constantly bringing trials into these men's lives. In the context of Jacob wrestling with God, Luther says that God often gives us a promise and then hides from us. This makes us "beg, ask, knock."³² Then we have to persevere because He does not always answer right away. We "overcome God" by our perseverance and faith, and in this way the hidden God becomes visible, by comforting us and doing what we ask.

So the hiddenness of God teaches us to trust completely in God for our salvation, and it necessitates our faith because we have to believe His Word when we can't see it to be true. The third implication is that the hiddenness of God ought to lead us to worship Him. This is directly referenced in *The Bondage of the Will*. He says that "It is enough to know that there is in God an inscrutable will; what, why, and within what limits It wills, it is wholly unlawful to inquire, or wish to know, or be concerned about, or touch upon; we may only fear and adore!"³³ Here Luther can be seen to teach that the hidden will of God is not something that should be avoided. Rather, it should be taught that it actually exists. But Luther says that "it is enough to know that there is in God an inscrutable will." He does not see it as something that should be pondered incessantly, but something that should drive us to worship. It seems that after that, Luther would be comfortable with the idea that that worship should drive us back to the Word to trust and obey Christ as we find God revealed in Him there.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

So what is to be said of Luther's doctrine of God as hidden and revealed? At least a few things. First, negatively, there is the issue of Luther finding this distinction in 2 Thess. 2:4. As

³¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31-37*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Hilton C. Oswald. Vol. 6 of *Luther's Works*. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 148, 236, 259, etc.

³² Luther, *Genesis: Chapters 31-37*, 259.

³³ Luther, *Bondage*, 171. See also p. 176, where Luther says, "Nor is it for us to ask why He [wills to reprobate some], but to stand in awe of God, Who can do, and wills to do, such things."

was discussed earlier, this interpretation does not seem to be what Paul was intending in that passage. A second critique made by Althaus is that Luther to a large part bifurcates God so that “God, according to His secret will, to a great extent disagrees with His Word offering grace to all men.”³⁴ It doesn’t help that Luther insists that God be distinguished from His Word so that God is in some sense free to be a different kind of God than He presents to us.³⁵ So while we can come with comfort to God as He wills all men to be saved through Christ, nevertheless, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is another God underneath it all that may be completely different. To give Luther credit, he states directly that the God hidden and the God revealed are “the same God,”³⁶ but in the *Bondage of the Will*, he has painted it out to be such a sharp contrast that it is a fair criticism.

On the positive side, it must be said that Luther is earnestly wrestling with one of the most difficult tensions in Scripture, and he is trying to be faithful to the text and pastorally helpful as well. Although many Lutherans would be uncomfortable with his strong Augustinianism, Luther clearly taught that God sovereignly elects some men to salvation. And yet, Luther was concerned that predestination not be pondered in a way that distracts people from their primary responsibility to come to the Word and believe on Christ. His approach was always to confess that God *does* choose and elect, but then to drive people away from unhealthy speculation and to the cross where they would find God in Christ, and with Him, predestination and election. In this, Luther serves as a helpful guide in the particular applications of the various doctrines of Scripture.

³⁴ Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 278.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Luther, *Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, 45.

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I Memorized Romans chapter 3 and quoted it to my wife with least 90% accuracy.

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