

CHAPTER TWO: God's Word and Work **by Rev. Dr. Anthony Steinbronn**

The Will of His Good Pleasure

His Incarnation Reveals the Father's Heart

For Luther, as people reflect on Christ's incarnation, they are able to look into the very heart of God. As we gaze upon the Child lying in Mary's lap or upon the sacrificial victim suspended on the cross, we behold the very heart and will of the Father. There "we shall see that He is compassionate and does not desire the death of the sinner, but that the sinner should turn from his way and live" (LW 3:276-277).

The Son of God came into the flesh for the sole purpose of drawing all people "unto Himself and in order that we might acquire hope in His mercy and not be afraid of Him" (LW 4:66). We see that He is not angry with the sinner but that He wills to show mercy through His Son.

His Coming Reveals the Hidden God

He is an invisible God and you will not make Him visible. It was the sin of Adam and Eve, when they were not satisfied with the Godhead that had been revealed, to seek to penetrate the depth of His divinity and ascertain WHY God had forbidden them to eat of the fruit of the tree. As a result of their sin, God sought to counteract this curiosity by setting forth His will in promising a Savior. In this Promised Seed, the Hidden God would become the Revealed God.

From an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless, I will remain the same God. I will be made flesh or I will send My Son...so 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 (LW 5:45).

In His incarnation, God Himself would be present yet hidden and concealed. In Christ, God is found and outside of the Person born of Mary He is not to be found. Therefore, he who encounters this flesh encounters God. It is the purpose of His concealment that He can be seen, touched, and apprehended without the beholder being consumed by His majesty. If one is to meet God, he must come to Christ. His incarnation is the only view of the Divinity permitted and possible in this life.

Thus, if you want to encounter God, you must first see Him under a MASK. If you hold to His humanity, then His Divinity will become manifest; for this was how Staupitz delivered Luther from his speculations as a monk by pointing him to the WOUNDS OF CHRIST and HIS BLOOD shed on the cross. There is no other way of ascending into heaven except by clinging to Jesus (John 14:1-6).

Jacob's Ladder: the Mystery of His Incarnation

It is the dream of Jacob, when he sees a ladder set upon the earth with its top reaching into heaven and angels descending and ascending, that reveals the mystery of the Incarnation in which the same Person is BOTH true God and true man. As the angels descend they adore the Child at His mother's breasts and on the cross. As they ascend, they behold the Son of God from all eternity. If they look down, they see God subject to demons and to every creature. If they lift up their eyes, they see the incomprehensible majesty of God above them.

Thus the ladder is the wonderful union of His divinity with our flesh. His flesh must be true flesh born from a flesh outstandingly sinful and contaminated by sin. As one of many examples, Luther recalls the story of Tamar becoming pregnant by Judah through the shameful act of incest.¹ And yet, if He is to be the Savior of the world and not just of the Jewish people, Gentile seed must be mixed with that of Abraham so that He would be born of and for all people. Therefore His father's side was Israelite but His mother's side was "Gentiles, Moabites, Assyrians, Egyptians, and Canaanites" (LW 7:15).

At the same time, His flesh was purified and sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is descended from the accursed, lost and condemned seed and flesh; nevertheless, It is without sin and corruption. According to His human nature, Christ has the same flesh that we have; but in His conception the Holy Spirit came and overshadowed and purified the mass which He received from the virgin that He might be united with the divine nature (LW 7:36).

In summary, this Promised Seed would be a human being whom people could see, touch, hear and feel. This Jesus is indeed the Right Man who was set plainly before our eyes. At the same time, He must be true God because only the Son is able to reveal God and show us the way to heaven.

God gave Jacob this dream so that he, along with future generations of believers, would know that the Son of God Himself would become such a man for us and would be born from Jacob's seed. Therefore "He revealed to Jacob himself that he would be the father of Christ and that the Son of Man would be born from his seed" (LW 5:217). He revealed all this to Jacob that he, and all who believe in Jesus, would witness the fullness of His ascent (divinity) and descent (humanity) and thereby know that their salvation is complete and certain.

Finally, this dream was given to Jacob that he might understand that His Incarnation would take place in a definite place. This very place would become the place of His earthly ministry as He preached, healed and taught. Luther even went so far as to maintain that He was crucified at this very place, slept in the sepulcher, and rose where the angels ascended and descended.

The Fishhook: He is Concealed, even to the Devil

His Incarnation was not only concealed to humankind, He also was concealed to His enemy Satan. One of the more interesting illustrations used by Luther to convey the hiddenness

¹ There Tamar was made pregnant by the most shameful act of incest, and the flesh from which Christ was to be born was poured from the loins of Judah and was propagated, carried about, and contaminated with sin right up to the conception of Christ. This is how our Lord God treats our Savior. God allows Him to be conceived in most disgraceful incest, in order that He may assume the truest flesh, just as our flesh is poured forth, conceived, and nourished in sins (LW 7:31).

of God, concealed in the man Jesus, is his use of Jesus as the Fishhook. What Luther meant was this: Jesus came into the world clothed in flesh and was cast into the water, by the Father, like a hook...the devil, after biting Him, was suddenly pulled back out of the water, thrown on dry land, and crushed by God.

This means that Christ presented to the devil His weak humanity, which covered that eternal and unconquerable majesty. Then the devil struck at the hook of His divinity, and by it all his power, as well as the power of death and hell, was overcome (LW 5:151).

In His Incarnation, the revealed God meets the devil as the hidden God. In Christ, the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily. However, the devil found Him only as a worm and no man until he swallowed Him up. After he had consumed the hook, the hook became fixed in his gills and he was destroyed.²

Jacob Wrestling with God: the Nature of Faith

Later in Jacob's life, the Lord came to him and wrestled with him until daybreak. He came in this way so that Jacob, and his descendants, would know that one day He would dwell among them in human flesh and that only by FAITH can anyone accept the revelation that He is true God and true man. It is God's way to play with us until faith shows itself; but, after the wrestling had ended, He laid down His MASK and rewarded him who clung to Him by faith.

The Will of the Sign

Old Testament Signs

God is not a vagabond, naked God but rather one who has clothed Himself with definite signs in a specific place. These definite signs are His WILL OF THE SIGN whereby He reveals Himself to us in these divine coverings. Wherever the VISIBLE SIGN is, there God is truly present wrapped up in the garment of the sign. Through them God deals with us within the range of our comprehension being both covered and revealed; outside of these signs, He is always present only in His naked majesty.

After the fall of Adam and Eve into sin God, in His mercy, enveloped Himself in a gentle breeze. He did this, first of all, so that He could reveal Himself to Adam under a cover and secondly, that in His coming in a very soft breeze He would bring a fatherly reprimand. Later, in the sacrifices, we see God's will that some outward and visible sign of His grace be placed alongside the Word so that human beings might be reminded of His mercy and would believe with greater assurance that He is kind and merciful.

It was a great comfort for Adam that, after he had lost Paradise and the tree of life, God gave him another sign of grace, namely, the sacrifices. In this sign Adam could perceive that he had not been cast off by God but that he was still the object of God's concern and regard. Thus,

² For the hook, which is the divinity of Christ, was concealed under the earthworm. The devil swallowed it with his jaws when Christ died and was buried. But it ripped his belly so that he could not retain it but had to disgorge it (LW 22:24).

in order to reinforce the promise of our salvation God had this sign of grace in mind from the very beginning of the world:

Men were to have SIGNS by means of which they might comfort themselves in their sins and gain courage through their reliance on Divine grace. It is not the worth of the work itself that is of value in the sacrifice; it is the mercy and power of the divine PROMISE, because God prescribes this form of worship and promises that it will be pleasing to Him (LW 1:250).

In the ministry of the Word, God came to His people through the instrumentality of men and angels. For example, when God confronted Adam with his sin, Luther was pleased with the suggestion that God spoke through an angel. Through his chronology of the Old Testament, Luther was always able to find a patriarch alive who could speak for God in His place. Adam confronted Cain with the sin of killing his brother as he spoke for God. Methuselah spoke to Noah to enter the ark. Abraham was called by God, through Shem, to leave Ur and go to the Promised Land. Rebecca consulted Shem or Eber when she was confused about whether or not Jacob should receive the blessing instead of Esau. Finally, Jacob was told to go to Bethel by either Isaac or Deborah. Thus, throughout the history of the patriarchs God is speaking through human beings His Word.

Later, circumcision was enjoined upon Abraham in order that it might be a sacrament through which his descendants would be made righteous if they believed the promise which the Lord attached to it. But circumcision was more, it was a SIGN TO THE NATIONS that the promised Savior would be born from this circumcised nation. In this way, God has always provided some PUBLIC SIGN whereby the nations might find the true God.

From the beginning of the world divine wisdom has so ordained and arranged things that there was always some public sign toward which all people might look, in order that the Gentiles, too, might find, worship, and pray to the true God, although not all who had that sign believed and had use of it for righteousness (LW 3:106).

Thus, prior to circumcision, the ministry of the Word and the sacrifices were signs. In our human weakness and comprehension we are in need of such signs so that we might find Him but also that we do not seek Him in some other way (which is the error of all non-Christian religions). The SIGN signifies that God is present in this way. Circumcision, like the sacrifices, was raised up as a sign to be looked at and be recognized by those sinners who were to be saved. Circumcision was more than just a unifying ritual instituted for Israel's unity and solidarity; it was a sign of eternal salvation for those who believed.

In summary, before circumcision the sacrifices and the ministry of the Word, were the visible signs of the invisible grace; but circumcision, which was instituted under Abraham, had validity up to the coming of the Blessed Seed (LW 3:111).

New Testament Signs

Since the coming of Christ, God continues to speak to us in a fatherly manner through the ministry of the Word, His sacraments and His promises of eternal grace. "Actually, our glory in the New Testament is greater for we not only have God drawing near to us; we also have Him dwelling in us bodily" (LW 3:169). It is a great gift of His mercy that He is found, not in some

faraway place, but in Baptism, in the words of the Gospel, in the use of the confession of sins and absolution, and with any brother or sister who with me confesses and believes in the Son of God. To us in the New Testament, Baptism and the Eucharist are our visible signs of His grace. “Just as the previous generation had circumcision added as a distinguishing sign, so the new generation of Christ has other distinguishing signs” (LW 3:115). Thus,

God is present in Baptism, in the Lord’s Supper, and in the use of the Keys because His own Word is present there. Therefore even though we do not see or hear Him but see and hear the minister, God Himself is nevertheless truly present, baptizes, and absolves. And in the Lord’s Supper he is present in such an extraordinary way that the Son of God gives us His body with the bread and His blood with the wine (LW 3:220).

These signs, along with the Word, are our lightbearers today and wherever these are, there we find Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. As His people worship, Christ is present in and with His gifts of grace. As His Word is preached and the sacraments are administered, Christ imparts the Word through the medium of human tongues and voices. In the pulpit He speaks through the mouth of the preacher, at the font He Himself is the Baptizer, at the altar He imparts the remission of sins through the hands of the minister. It is God alone who operates, but He operates through us.

It is true that you hear a human being when you are baptized and when you partake of the Holy Supper. But the Word which you hear is not that of a human being; it is the Word of the living God. It is He who baptizes you; it is He who absolves you to hope in His mercy...it is great ingratitude to slight these faces of God, as Scripture calls them, and meanwhile to look for other appearances and revelations (LW 3:166).

Where these signs of grace are not present or where they are despised, there is not only no grace but all sorts of errors and false forms of worship and other signs. Those who want to be saved must hold “to the form, the signs, and the coverings of the Godhead, such as His Word and His works. For in His Word and in His works He shows Himself to us” (LW 1:13).