

CHAPTER FIVE: Luther's Understanding of Larvae Dei as Evidenced in the Secondary Sources by Rev. Dr. Anthony Steinbronn

Thesis 1: *In this life, God does not deal with us face-to-face but covered; therefore, we cannot be without veils in this life* (Luther, Galatians, 50).

Since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, humankind cannot see God, in His naked majesty, and live. Therefore, there can be no unmediated relationship between God and human beings. God “must wear a MASK in all of His dealings with humankind.”¹

Thesis 2: *For it is certain that a human being cannot find God through his or her own wisdom* (LW 3:108).

Human reason “knows that God is; but it does not know WHO God is”² and what God thinks of us. Human beings, through the use of their reason, is able to arrive at a GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD as a person reflects and contemplates upon His created world and orders. Luther, however, rejects such an inferential method which attempts to find God in the scholastic manner by means of reason and speculation.³

The reason for Luther's condemnation is that reason, without the Word of God, leads only to false religion and idolatry. Reason cannot help but miss Him and ascribe divine attributes to idols and to concretize Him according to the WISHES and DESIRES OF HUMANKIND. Yet God's name, Luther maintained, is hidden in these very idols for “whoever mocks an idol also blasphemes the name of God hidden in every idol.”⁴ Luther was convinced that the Moabites prayed to the real God under the false name of Baal Peor; however, in their false belief, they did not know that they were worshiping demons.

In summary, there is a great difference between knowing there is a God and knowing who God is. “Nature knows the first, because it is written in all hearts. The latter is taught solely by the Holy Spirit.”⁵

Thesis 3: *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* (Luther, The Bondage of the Will, 170).

In The Bondage of the Will, Luther has made the well-known distinction between the Hidden and Revealed God. God, in His naked majesty, is hidden and inaccessible to human beings. We cannot find or see Him as He is. But He has condescended to take the form of the Word, born in Bethlehem. In His incarnation, the hidden God becomes the revealed God. Thus, “the problem of the impassable gulf between God and us has been solved by God's own bridging.”⁶

¹ “The Biblical principle holds good, that man cannot see God, in His naked transcendence, and live. God, therefore, must wear as it were a MASK or VEIL in all His dealings with men, to shield them from the unapproachable light of His majesty.” Philip Watson, *Let God Be God*, 78.

² Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 16.

³ “He condemns the inferential method in scores of passages, where he warns against trying to find God in the scholastic manner by means of REASON and SPECULATION. He regards it as a vain endeavor to comprehend God in His majesty and describes it as a THEOLOGY OF GLORY to which he opposes his own THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS (Watson 1950:78).

⁴ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 48.

⁵ Bornkamm 1969:54.

⁶ Eugene Klug, *From Lutheran to Chemnitz on Scripture and the Word*, 31.

In contrast to the superficial knowledge of reason God reveals to us, through His Son's incarnation, an INSIDE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.⁷ This knowledge is derived from Scripture and shows "what God thinks of us and what His intentions are toward us."⁸ These words of Scripture are "'the veils' or 'coverings' through which God, in His grace, comes to us, speaks to us, and reveals Himself to us."⁹

Thesis 4: *Let us go to the Child lying in the lap of His mother Mary and to the sacrificial victim suspended on the cross; there we shall really behold God, and there we shall look into His very heart* (LW 3:276-277).

"The greatest and most wonderful of these 'masks' is Christ, Who came into man's own nature, in the likeness of the sinful flesh, yet without sin, and was 'made of a woman, made under the law.'"¹⁰ In Christ, we are confronted with God Himself for Christ is God incarnate and clothed with man's nature. His incarnation is a "veil" in which the God of majesty confronts us. On the other hand, His incarnation is a "mirror" or "glass" in which He is to be seen. The glass suggests MANIFESTATION whereas the VEIL suggests concealment.¹¹

Luther's entire theology can be said to stand or fall with His incarnation. "His humanity is the place to which God summons us"¹² and is the concrete, earthly reality through which God reveals Himself by veiling Himself in it. "We can only lay hold on Him in His divinity when He clothes it in His earthly, human, and bodily form."¹³ Thus, a true knowledge of God can be found only in the crucified Christ.

Those individuals who attempt to ascend into heaven through human speculation and reason will not find God, as they suppose, but the devil instead. Luther warns us to leave the hidden God alone and, instead, cling to that God who is clothed in His promises and who is present in Christ; for He is not a vagabond and wandering God but has definitely limited and bound Himself to Christ alone. Therefore it is only in Christ born and crucified that God meets man as His gracious and merciful God. Nowhere except in Christ can He be found or seen, for Christ alone is true God and true man.

Thesis 5: *God does not manifest Himself except through His works and the Word* (LW 1:11; 24:67).

This is the fundamental principle, says Luther, in the whole matter of God's self-revelation.¹⁴ God does not manifest Himself, except through His works and Word, because the meaning of these is understood in some measure. In His goodness, God adjusts Himself to our human situation and reveals Himself in a form in which we can comprehend.¹⁵

Because our sinful nature is unable to bear the sight of God as He is, God has chosen to take hold of external means so that we may be able to lay hold of Him. God Himself, in Christ, is personally present under the visible sign. In a similar way, "the Word and Sacraments are signs of revelation under

⁷ Althaus 1966:17-18.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Klug 1981:30.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Watson 1950:103.

¹² Althaus 1966: 22.

¹³ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 271.

¹⁴ Klug 1981:31.

¹⁵ "Prior to eternity, God does not encounter man in naked majesty but adjusts Himself to the human situation, that is, He covers Himself with a mask, revealing Himself in

whose veil God is present.”¹⁶ Where the visible sign is, “there God is truly present wrapped up in the garment of the sign.”¹⁷

“In the New Testament we have as a visible sign, the Son of God, in the lap of Mary His mother, and who suffered and died for us. In addition we have other additional forms, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the spoken Word itself.”¹⁸ These concrete forms of the Holy Spirit are God’s way to us and a rejection of every way from human beings to God.

Thesis 6: *It is the custom of Holy Scripture to add signs to promises. Thus in Baptism and in the Lord’s Supper there is not only the Word of promise but also a sign or work* (LW 3:29).

“In support of this contention Luther looked for the various signs that attended God’s words and promises to the patriarchs. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, like the elements in the Christian sacraments, had no power in itself; but God, ‘clothed a creature’ with His Word to give it power.”¹⁹ After the fall, Adam and Eve had the sacrifices and other signs of grace to console and assure them. Yet not every visible or external thing reveals God. It must consist of something visible to us AND the Word must mark it as the visible element. “By virtue of God’s own will expressed in the Word, the sign is distinguished from all other visible realities as the place of God’s gracious presence among us.”²⁰

Thesis 7: *But you must adhere to and follow this sure and infallible rule: God in His divine wisdom arranges to manifest Himself to human beings by some definite and visible form which can be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, in short, is within the scope of the five senses. So near to us does the Divine majesty place itself* (LW 3:109).

God’s purpose for providing these definite and visible forms is so that people would: (1) always have manifest, tangible signs toward which they might look and be saved; (2) be reminded by the outward sign, and believe with greater assurance, that God is kind and merciful; (3) be kept from degenerating into erratic and vagabond spirits; (4) be drawn outwardly through the Word and inwardly through the Holy Spirit; and (5) be prepared to meet and recognize Him when He comes again in glory.

Thesis 8: *When God reveals Himself in some sign, no matter what its nature, one must take hold of Him in it. But Satan continually strives to remove the true signs from our sight and set up false signs* (LW 3:108)

Thesis 9: *To cast aside the external Word and Baptism is surely the true mark and sign of all false and heterodox spirits* (LW 24:69).

“Where the incarnated Christ is the way to the Father, there you are always depending upon the bodily and outward signs of revelation.”²¹ But “where one considers himself above the bodily sign, there one has another way to God than by Deus incarnates.”²² Heretics are all alike in that they spurn the human instruments that God uses and the means of His divine self-disclosure.²³

¹⁶ Prenter 1953:259.

¹⁷ Ibid., 260.

¹⁸ Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, 318.

¹⁹ Jasoslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, 106.

²⁰ Prenter 1953:263.

²¹ Prenter 1953:272.

²² Ibid., 272-273.

²³ Pelikan 1959:105.

For Luther, to reject Christ's clear word concerning Baptism and the Lord's Supper is to participate in the same sin as Eve and Adam. Instead of relying on the Word, they trusted in their reason and senses and like all fanatical spirits, departed from the faith and discussed HOW these things can be so. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are no mere ritual acts of memorial performed by human beings but they are the very works of God. Where there is Baptism in the Triune name, there the divine Majesty Himself is present and is, in fact, Himself the baptizer. Likewise, in the Eucharist Christ Himself is present as Host, who distributes His body and blood through the hands of the minister to His people.

Thesis 10: *As God comes to us in these concrete forms, He deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly* (LW 40:146).

As God speaks through the external Word, He speaks His truth in our hearts so we receive it both externally and internally and believe it.²⁴ God does not give His Spirit until the external Word has preceded. The "Enthusiasts" seek to reverse this divine order as they wait for the "immediate illumination of the Holy Spirit" and disdain the external Word. They reveal, in their rejection of the Word, their true nature. Just as Adam and Eve were led by the devil to spiritualize and imagine, so it is a sign of enthusiasm to reject the external Word.²⁵ Luther also viewed the papacy as nothing but "sheer enthusiasm" for the pope boasts that all laws are written in the shrine of his heart.²⁶ Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil (Tappert 1959:313).

Thesis 11: *Wherever the Word is heard, where Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and absolution are administered, there you must determine and conclude with certainty: "This is surely God's house; here heaven has been opened* (LW 5:244).

For Luther, there is only one definition of the Church, namely, those who believe in Christ and hear His Word. This Church gathers around certain marks: "there God's Word is preached and believed purely and ardently; there children are accepted into the kingdom of God through Baptism; there hearts assailed by sin and temptation find solace and strength in Holy Communion; there sinners unburden their conscience in confession; there ministers are commissioned in orderly fashion for preaching the Word, for administering the Sacraments, and for other pastoral ministrations; there a prayerful Christian people are opposed and persecuted for the sake of Christ; and there they must bear the cross of their Master" (Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, 145).

Thesis 12: *Faith and promise are correlative* (LW 8:110).

For Luther "Christianity represented a very simple relationship: on the one hand, God's promise; on the other hand, man's faith."²⁷ "Where faith is mentioned there must always be a promise on which to lay hold; and where we speak of a promise, faith is always demanded."²⁸

²⁴ "God's Word, however, is never merely an external word, spoken by human lips and heard with human ears. On the contrary, at the same time that this word is spoken, God speaks His truth in our hearts so that men receive it not only externally but also internally and believe it." Althaus 1966:36.

²⁵ Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, 312.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

²⁷ Bornkamm, *Luther's Word of Thought*, 136-137.

²⁸ Prenter 1953:139.