

## **CHAPTER ONE: Luther's Use of Larvae Dei by Rev. Dr. Anthony Steinbronn**

### **The Masks of God**

“Man shall not see Me and live” (Exodus 33:20). As a result of humankind’s sinful nature human beings cannot see God, in His naked transcendence, and survive. Therefore since the fall of humankind into sin through the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God’s will, there can be no unmediated relationship between God and humankind. God must wear a MASK in all of His dealings with human beings.

Perhaps God appeared to Adam without a covering, but after the Fall into sin He appeared in a gentle breeze as though enveloped in a covering. Similarly He was enveloped later on in the tabernacle by the mercy seat and in the desert by cloud and fire. Moses, therefore, calls these objects “faces of God,” through which God manifested Himself (LW 1:11).

Luther held that this nature of ours has become so misshapen through sin that it cannot recognize God nor comprehend His nature without a covering. Therefore God, in His grace and mercy, envelops Himself in HIS WORKS and seeks to reveal Himself to humankind in certain forms.

For it is certain that a human being cannot find God through his own wisdom...we shall be safe from these dangers if we follow THAT visible form or those signs which God Himself has set before us. In the New Testament we have as a visible form the Son of God on the lap of His mother Mary. He suffered and died for us, as the Creed teaches. Besides, we have other visible forms: Baptism, the Eucharist, and the spoken Word itself. Therefore we cannot complain of having been forsaken...Satan strives hard to lead us away from the forms prescribed by God. 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 3:108-109).

Since it is impossible to know God in His uncovered essence it would be most unwise, warned Luther, to argue about God and the divine nature without the Word or any covering.<sup>1</sup> Those who seek to reach God apart from these coverings exert to ascend into heaven without ladders, that is, without the only true Ladder who is Jesus Christ.

It is the first stage of error, laments Luther, when human beings disregard God as He enveloped Himself and seek to scrutinize the unveiled God. For example, Adam’s sin was that he speculated as to WHY God had commanded him not to eat from the tree.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, advises Luther, we must restrain our curiosity and speculation and cling to His Word alone and let no one add the fatal little word WHY to God’s commands.

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<sup>1</sup> This nature of ours has become so misshapen through sin, so depraved and utterly corrupted, that it cannot recognize God or comprehend His nature without a covering. It is for this reason that those coverings are necessary (LW 1:11).

<sup>2</sup> If Adam had followed this rule, he would not have fallen into sin. But because he turns from the COMMAND which the Lord had given him and heeds Satan, who discusses the reason WHY God has forbidden him to eat from this tree, he is hurled headlong into sin and death (LW 3:138-139).

For Luther, this “unveiled” seeking after God is the practice of all heretics and contains the substance of their heretical formulas. In their attempt to know and understand God apart from His incarnation, the Word and His sacraments, they embrace a perishing way of life. This is what happened to Arius when he argued his position apart from the Word of God and, instead, relied on his own thinking alone.

Let no one, therefore, contemplate the unveiled Divinity, but let him flee from these contemplations as from hell and the veritable temptations of Satan. Let it be the concern of each of us to abide by the SIGNS by which God has revealed Himself to us, namely, His Son, born of the virgin Mary and lying in His manger among the cattle; the Word; Baptism; the Lord’s Supper; and absolution. In these images we see and meet a God whom we can bear, ONE WHO COMFORTS US, lifts us up into HOPE, and SAVES US (LW 2:48).

Those who make use of these forms and coverings in FAITH does not believe in vain, and does not stray from God, but surely hears and finds Him. Consequently, “whoever desires to be saved and to be safe...let him simply hold to the FORM, the SIGNS, and the COVERINGS of the Godhead, such as His Word and His works. For in His WORD and WORKS He shows Himself to us” (LW 1:13).

### **The Concrete Spirit**

God does not manifest Himself, except through HIS WORKS and the WORD, is the basic principle of Luther in terms of His understanding of God’s self-revelation. As a result of a person’s sinful nature, the Holy Spirit cannot dwell among us otherwise than in physical things yet it is only through the Holy Spirit that a true knowledge of God can be known.

But you must adhere to and follow this SURE and INFALLIBLE SIGN: God in His divine wisdom arranges to manifest Himself to human beings by some definite and visible form which can be seen by the eyes and touched with the hands, in short, is within the scope of the five senses (LW 3:109).

The Holy Spirit’s ministry is thoroughly external and completely available to our senses. God could have saved the human race in another way but it is HIS WILL to save fallen humankind through EXTERNAL MEANS and to REVEAL HIMSELF to us IN THIS WAY.<sup>3</sup> It is in these forms that the Holy Spirit is clearly exhibited to our eyes. Since the Holy Spirit works nothing without externals, it is the responsibility of every human being to apprehend Him WHERE and IN WHAT MANNER He has chosen to make Himself known.<sup>4</sup>

God regularly does EVERYTHING through the ministry of human beings therefore nobody will obtain salvation through so-called spiritual speculations, without external things. Attention MUST BE PAID to the Word, and Baptism must be sought. The Eucharist MUST BE received,

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<sup>3</sup> By His almighty power God could save the human race without Christ, without Baptism, and without the Word of the Gospel. He could have illuminated men’s hearts inwardly through the Holy Spirit and forgiven their sins without the ministry of the Word and of ministers. But it was not HIS WILL to do so (LW 6:128).

<sup>4</sup> Therefore let us learn that God must be apprehended, not without our reason but as He has revealed Himself and has condescended to speak and deal with us in human fashion (LW 4:144).

and absolution MUST BE required. All these are indeed externals, but they are included in the Word. Hence the HOLY SPIRIT WORKS nothing without them (LW 3:274-275).

Therefore not every visible or external thing reveals the heart and will of God. Luther believed that only in Christ, and in the forms instituted by Him, does God reveal Himself to human beings. They are the God-given MEANS of knowing God; they are the places where He reveals Himself and where He is present. In His goodness, God chose to reveal Himself in these physical, concrete and tangible forms. Luther offers four reasons why God COMES TO US through His concrete Spirit.

First, since the beginning of the world, divine wisdom has so ordained and arranged things that there is always some PUBLIC SIGN toward which ALL PEOPLE might look in order that they might find, worship, and pray to the TRUE GOD and BE SAVED.

For we have need of marks and signs of this kind, in order that they may lead us to the knowledge of God, since human reason is unable to find God unless such signs instituted by God lead us by the hand, so to speak. And nothing is more dangerous than if one devises HIS OWN WAY to God and relies on his own speculations (LW 3:107).

Second, these outward and visible signs have been placed alongside the Word so that human beings, “reminded by the OUTWARD SIGN and work or Sacrament, would believe with greater assurance that God is kind and merciful” (LW 1:248). By means of these visible signs of grace, God shows us that HE IS WITH US, takes care of us, and is favorably inclined toward us.<sup>5</sup>

Third, He presents Himself to us in these visible forms in order that we might be kept from degenerating into the erratic and vagabond spirits who boast of visions and revelations and follow them. Since WE CANNOT ASCEND to Him, He has chosen to COME TO US and reveal Himself within the range of our comprehension so that He can be found and known. The true God is not a wandering God but has limited Himself to a certain place and certain external forms. As God has provided reliable, concrete marks of His presence, so it is the mark of all FALSE SPIRITS to cast aside the external WORD and SIGNS and to tell God how He must deal with them.<sup>6</sup> As a result, they place God and His externals in heaven and devise their own externals yet these fluttering spirits lead, not to God, but to Satan and their eternal destruction.

Fourth, as God comes to us in these concrete forms, He deals with us in a twofold manner, first OUTWARDLY, then INWARDLY. He draws us outwardly through Christ’s Word

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<sup>5</sup> I have always displayed Myself to the eyes and ears of human beings in such a way that they could become aware of My presence in the sacrifices, in circumcision, in burning incense, in the cloud, in the Red Sea, in the manna, in the brazen serpent, in the tabernacle of Moses, in the temple of Solomon, and in the cloud. And it was My delight to display and reveal Myself in this manner to the children of men (LW 1:248). In the same way the very Word, Baptism, and the Eucharist are our LIGHTBEARERS today, toward which we look as dependable tokens of the sun of grace. We can state with certainty that where the Eucharist, Baptism, and the Word are, there are Christ, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life (LW 1:249).

<sup>6</sup> They disdain to hear from Him how they are to find Him; but they presume to teach, and to prescribe to, Him how He should deal with them. But God will not submit to this; for He is not the man to be ordered about and to institute something particular for each individual or to issue a new Gospel, a new Baptism, message, or revelation for your sake. Once and for all He has ordained and proclaimed this concerning Christ: HERE IS THE MAN WHOM YOU MUST HEAR IF YOU WANT TO COME TO ME AND BE SAVED. I SERVE NOTICE ON YOU THAT I WILL GIVE YOU NO OTHER SIGN. THEREFORE MARK WELL THAT YOU MUST EITHER ACCEPT HIM OR BE LOST (LW 24:69).

and the Gospel and inwardly through the Holy Spirit. OUTWARDLY He deals with us through the oral Word of the Gospel and through material signs; INWARDLY, He deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. Thus, THE INWARD EXPERIENCE follows and is effected by the OUTWARD. God has determined to give the inward experience to no one EXCEPT through the outward, external means. For He wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the OUTWARD WORD and SIGN instituted by Him. Observe carefully, advises Luther, THIS ORDER for everything depends on it (LW 40:146).

Thus, in order that God might be known and comprehended, the Spirit of Christ meets us in simple, earthly and concrete ways. These concrete forms of the Holy Spirit are God's way to us and are a rejection of every way from man to God. There are the COMMON EPIPHANIES or appearances for all people. When God comes to us, He does not hide Himself in a corner but appears publicly before us all. When we get to heaven we shall see God differently but here we see Him enveloped in His Word and sacraments. These are, and will remain, His MASKS until the Day of Judgment.

### **God's Ordered Power**

Luther, in his explanation as to why God limits Himself through external means, speaks of HIS ORDERED POWER. God could save and work without externals and order, but it is His will to limit His power as He works among us. He does this so that, as He works through His created orders of church, home and government, His creatures have opportunity to share in His work. In these three orders, God seeks to govern His world for humankind's good and to reveal, in a daily fashion, His care toward all of humankind.

The first order established by God was the CHURCH and, by its primacy, God desired human beings to know that they were created for immortality and eternal life with God. In order to obtain eternal life and one's salvation, since the fall of humankind into sin, God willed to reveal Himself through the ordered power of His Word and the various signs placed alongside the Word.

After the Church was established, God brought the ordered power of the HOME into existence when Eve was created and given to Adam as his companion. Even though God is able to make a human being out of clay, God wills to make use of the union of male and female to bestow the blessing of life. In the management of the household, father and mother are the instruments through which God seeks to form citizens for the state but, most importantly, for the kingdom of Christ and heaven.

Finally, it was not until the entry of sin into the world that CIVIL GOVERNMENT, God's third ordered power, was established. God, in His wisdom, foresaw that there would be a great abundance of evil people in the world and that an outward remedy would be required to hold sin in check. In this order, God wills to share His power with human beings and grants them power over life and death in order that the essentials of life might be preserved and ensured.

In these three orders, it is God's will that we perceive a fatherly face as others patiently rule over us. Through His ordered powers, He desires to be graciously seen and known as He works all things through His creatures and accomplishes His purposes and will in the world.

Finally, behind all of this is the work and activity of angels. The lower office of the angels is to govern God's creation as they fight for the safety and welfare of the world and as they control the world's empires. Their higher office consists in signing praise to God and to be instruments of blessing to His Church. Our best friends in life are angels, suggests Luther, but we don't know it.