

THE MASKS OF GOD:

The Significance of *Larvae Dei* in Luther's Theology

Introduction

Luther's understanding of God's revelation is the key to his theology. By viewing God's creation, a person can know about God and His almighty power and goodness, but only a theologian of glory seeks to know God in this way. Why? Because this knowledge of God is incomplete, leading only to idolatry as Paul records in Romans 1.

A true and proper knowledge of God is derived solely in a theology of the cross. In His Son alone, who reveals the Father's heart and will, do we see and know God correctly. This knowledge of God is revealed to us through those MASKS ordained of God: (1) the Word of God; (2) His incarnation; (3) Baptism; and (4) the Lord's Supper.

For Luther, the true church seeks to know and comprehend God where, and in the forms by which, He has chosen to reveal Himself. On the other hand, the false church seeks to know and experience God outside of these masks.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one introduces the concept of *Larvae Dei* in the writings of Dr. Martin Luther. As a result of humankind's sin, God must wear a MASK in all of His dealings with human beings. Therefore, the Holy Spirit's ministry is thoroughly external and completely available to our senses. However, not every visible or external things reveals

the heart of God. Luther believed that only in Christ, and in the forms instituted by Him, does God reveal Himself to us. They are the places where He reveals Himself and where He Himself is present. God could work without externals, and His created orders of church, home, and government, but it is His will to limit His power as He works through His means of grace and through His creatures.

Chapter two explores two fundamental ways that God seeks to make Himself known in the lives of people: the WILL OF HIS GOOD PLEASURE and the WILL OF THE SIGN. As we gaze upon the child on His mother's lap or upon the sacrificial victim suspended on the cross, we are able to see and experience the WILL OF HIS GOOD PLEASURE as we see that God is not angry with sinners but WILLS to show mercy through His Son. Ever since the promise of His coming was given to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, God has placed certain visible signs, the WILL OF THE SIGN, alongside His Word and promises. Those who want to be saved must hold to those MASKS OF GOD in which He reveals Himself to us.

Chapter three examines the origin of the true and false churches that began with the sacrifices of Cain and Abel. The true church believes and lives by the promise that God is gracious and has given us salvation in His Son whereas the false church refuses to believe in these promises.

Chapter four examines how this true Church, as it lives by faith in the promises of God, does not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the Lord's

mouth. Consequently God offers promises to His people but, at the same time, He tests and exercises them in faith. In doing so, God seeks to teach human beings that they are to live more by the Word than by physical bread. If bread is lacking, a strange god is not to be called upon but, instead, the heart is to be strengthened by faith in the Word. Thus, through the CROSS, God seeks to form the believer according to His plan and purpose; in these trials, it is His desire that we fix our eyes only upon His Son (along with the Word and Sacraments) and to remember that the cross is given that we might be humbled and learn to wait upon the Lord for His gracious appearing.

Chapter five presents several theses from the writings of Martin Luther. This format is used in order to state briefly the main thoughts of Luther AND to include material from secondary sources that deal extensively with Luther's use of *Larvae Dei*.

Chapter six provides the BIG PICTURE of God's activity in the world as we see that there is no place in life which is not effected by His influence and will. The contemporary person might ask: "where is God?" Luther would reply that God is here among us ALL THE TIME and can be clearly seen, and experienced, in HIS MASKS to those who possess faith, acquired through the Word and the Spirit's activity.

CHAPTER ONE: Luther's Use of *Larvae Dei*

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.¹ 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.² 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.

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).

¹ 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).

² 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).

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.³ It is in these forms that the Holy Spirit is clearly exhibited to our eyes.

³ 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

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.⁴

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, 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.

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).

⁴ 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).

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.⁵

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

⁵ 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).

and SIGNS and to tell God how He must deal with them.⁶ 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 and the Gospel and inwardly through the Holy Spirit. OUTWARDLY He deals with us through the oral Word of the Gospel and through materials 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

⁶ 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).

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.

CHAPTER TWO: God's Word and Work

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.⁷ 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).

⁷ 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).

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 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.⁸

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.

⁸ 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).

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, 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).

CHAPTER THREE: The True and the False Church

The Origin of the Two Churches

From the very beginning, the Creator ordained that humankind be busy with His Word and with the forms of worship established by Him. “On the Sabbath day Adam would have taught his children; through public preaching he would have bestowed honor on God with the praises which He deserved; and through reflection on the works of God he would incited Himself and others to expressions of thanks” (LW 3:82).

It was God’s design that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil be Adam’s altar and pulpit. The tree was to be the designated place where Adam, and his household, would come to worship God. “Here he was to yield to God the obedience he owed, give recognition to the Word and will of God, give thanks to God, and call upon God for aid against temptation” (LW 3:95). Thus, God’s command regarding the tree was to be “an outward form of worship and an outward work of obedience toward God” (LW 3:109).

This tree was NOT deadly by nature but became so only by the Word of God and humankind's disobedience.

It was God's intention that this command should provide human beings with an opportunity for obedience and outward worship, and that this tree would be a sort of sign by which human beings would give evidence that he or she was obeying God (LW 3:154).

However, as a result of Adam's sin, unspiritual man is filled with FEAR so that, at the rustling of a leaf, he quickly hides from a punishing God. In loving response to humankind's sin God, in His grace and goodness, enveloped Himself in a gentle breeze so that He might reveal Himself to Adam under a cover. It was a great comfort to them that, after they had lost Paradise and the tree of life, God gave them another sign of grace, namely, the sacrifices. In this sign they could know that they had not been cast off by God but that they were still the object of His concern and regard.

At that time, humankind began to CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD. Shem, Seth, and Enos exhorted their descendants to wait for their redemption and to believe that promise concerning the woman's Seed. As evidenced in the patriarchs, the TRUE CHURCH trusts in God's mercy and hopes in the promised Christ; for ALL AGES HAD THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BLESSED SEED.

The doctrine of the Gospel has been in the world ever since our first parents fell, and by various signs God confirmed this promise to the fathers. The earlier times knew nothing of the rainbow, circumcision, and other things that were ordained later on. BUT ALL AGES HAD THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BLESSED SEED (LW 2:163-164).

Alongside the Gospel, the sacrifices provided an outward and visible sign of His grace. This sign reminded human beings of His mercy and kindness and provided the proper form of worship in which He could be found. Thus “Abel and Cain had been accustomed by their father to sacrifice, which at that time was the proper form for the worship of God; and they continued to offer sacrifices. In the same manner Shem had meetings, sermons, forms of worship, sacrifices, and other ceremonies, which continued in existence up to the time of Abraham” (LW 2:197).

It is with the sacrifices of Abel and Cain that we begin to differentiate between the true and false church. Cain appears to be saintly but he is ungodly and does not believe the divine promise concerning the Blessed Seed. Abel, on the other hand, is godly and believes solely in the mercy of Christ. “Abel did not rely on his own worthiness, his sacrifices or his work, but on the PLAIN PROMISE which had been given about the woman’s Seed” (LW 1:259). In Cain’s contempt for and rejection of God’s Word, he left the true church to form a special church without God’s command and promises.

Tragically,

when two sons had been born to Adam, two kinds of people took their origin from them. Cain left his father, established a special church without God’s command and held the true church in contempt. The same thing happens...among the sons of Noah. From Ham, as from an ungodly and wicked source, the false and lying church takes its origin (LW 2:210).

It is Ham’s descendants, especially his grandson Nimrod, who seek to build a name for themselves and persecute the true church spiritually, by means of false doctrine and

ungodly forms of worship; and physically, by means of the sword and tyranny. Yet God has always counteracted the false church with a people who would cling to His Word and the forms of worship instituted by Him so that they would “be the guardian of religion, and of sound doctrine, in the world lest everything degenerate into ungodliness and there be no knowledge of God among humankind” (LW 2:228-229).

Later on, when Abraham was nearly swallowed up by the false church of Nimrod and its Babylonian religion, God called him out of idolatry through the ministry of Shem and directed him to separate from the ungodly race and seek a new dwelling place. Abraham is seized through the Word and formed into a new being; of himself, Abraham is nothing but an idolater but through God’s mercy, “he is freed from sin, death, and damnation through Christ, the Blessed Seed” (LW 2:247).

Later still, when Jacob was near his death and as he was blessing his sons, he foresaw that his descendants would continue to form two churches. The TRUE CHURCH would be saved because of faith in the promise concerning the Savior who was to descend from his flesh. The FALSE CHURCH would consist of carnal Israelites⁹ who would boast that they were the seed of Abraham but have neither His Word nor the signs ordained by Him. Instead of taking hold of Him in the sign, everyone devised his own way of worshiping God and followed it to his own certain destruction.

⁹ As they lost the Word, and the signs of grace which had been given by God, they would begin to run after the desires of their hearts and became carnal Israelites. They forgot His commandments and ceremonies and, after despising the tabernacle and temple, they brought their sacrifices under trees and groves and even sacrificed their own children (LW 1:249).

Therefore shut from your heart and eyes the outward appearance, and see what God has commanded; do this, and you will not go wrong, even if in outward appearance it is small, ordinary, and insignificant (LW 3:216).

There is nothing more precious in the world than the Church where His voice is heard and where God is worshiped with true forms of worship, that is, with FAITH, INVOCATION, PATIENCE and OBEDIENCE. Therefore the TRUE CHURCH is made up of those who have the PROMISE AND BELIEVE IT. The FALSE CHURCH rejects the promises of God and concerns itself with things that He has not commanded nor promised.

The House of God and the Gate of Heaven

Wherever the Word is heard, THERE IS THE CHURCH, for it is God's Word that establishes the Church. The Church is not confined to a place or persons, but it will be and exist wherever the Word is. Therefore, wherever the Word and the visible signs are, there the Church is established.

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. But just as the Word is not bound to any place, so the Church is not bound to any place...for wherever God speaks, where Jacob's ladder is, where the angels ascend and descend, there the Church is, there the Kingdom of heaven is opened (LW 5:244).

There is no reason, warns Luther, for a person to run here and there to find the Church but one need only to go to that place where the Word and sacraments are. "Direct

your steps to the place where the Word resounds and the sacraments are administered, and there write the title THE GATE OF GOD....Throughout the world the house of God, and the gate of heaven, is wherever there is the pure teaching of the Word together with the sacraments” (LW 5:247).

As we gather at these external places to hear a sermon delivered through a human voice and gather at temples built of stones and wood to receive the sacraments, we must always remember that here is the HOUSE OF GOD and the GATE OF HEAVEN; for God Himself is speaking.

I hear a human being’s voice. I see human gestures. The bread and the wine in the Supper are physical things. At ordination the hands of carnal men are imposed. In Baptism water is water. For the flesh judges in no other way concerning all these matters. BUT if you look at that addition with spiritual eyes, namely, at WHOSE WORD IT IS that is spoken and heard there, not indeed the word of a man...but the Word of God, then you will understand that it is the HOUSE OF GOD and the GATE OF HEAVEN (LW 5:248).

The Bed is Too Narrow

The great danger for the church is our sleeping eyes and dulls ears whereby we slight these FACES OF GOD. This is what happened to the carnal descendants of Abraham who despised the visible signs of their generation and devised their own way. Yet, in this Church, nothing should be heard or seen except what God does for it is error to rely on one’s thinking alone apart from, and without, the Word of God.

Moreover, wherever the Word is, there Satan is active and seeks to spread false teaching by corrupting the Word of God in such a way that human beings doubt the goodness of God. Under the appearance of God's servant Satan, through heretical teaching and practices, seeks to rob humankind of God as he fabricates a new god who exists nowhere and to institute forms of worship in which the works are retained but emptied of their MEANING and PROMISE concerning the Gospel and the Blessed Seed.

Therefore it is essential that the Church remain firm in its adherence to pure and true doctrine. It is God's will that human beings restrain their curiosity and remain within the definite bounds which He has placed before us. Human beings are not to search for something special but are to be content with the revealed Word as handed down through the Son of God and the apostles. If we want to have and be His Church, His people must not be polluted and commingled with any Satanic doctrine. THE BED IS TOO NARROW, observed Luther, for Christ and Satan to remain together. Consequently, one of the two falls out and the short cloak cannot cover them both.

Christ Alone is the Ladder and the Way

In His goodness, God satisfied our desire to know and see Him by showing us a VISIBLE SIGN. In the incarnate Son, God could be touched and seen. It was for this very reason that, "when Scripture spoke about God as if He were a human being and attributes to Him all human qualities, He was FORETELLING the mystery of His future

incarnation and was providing a “definite pattern for recognizing and taking hold of Him” (LW 4:133).

Unspiritual human beings, those who are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit but who are led and guided by unregenerate reason, cannot see that the crucified Christ is God. To make things even more difficult for humankind, Satan seeks to fight against the mystery of the Ladder as sets into motion ALL SORTS of HERESIES in order that humankind might be diverted from the true knowledge of Christ.

The chief attack of Satan, and of all heresies, is to deny His incarnation, rob human beings of God and His Word, and to fabricate a new god. This is the way that the devil goes to work: (1) one form of attack is to not allow Him to be God but just a man; (2) another form of attack is to say that He is true God but did not have the human nature; (3) and a third form is to acknowledge that He is both true God and true man but that what He did was not sufficient to save us. Each of these three endeavors seek to destroy Christ.

In His incarnation, with the eyes of faith, believers are able to see that HEAVEN IS OPEN and that God the Father is speaking to us through His Son. “When you are baptized, partake of the Holy Communion, receive the absolution, or listen to a sermon, heaven is open, and we hear the voice of the Heavenly Father; all these works descend upon us from the open heaven above us” (LW 22:202). Therefore where His Word is preached and made known in its purity and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s

Supper are administered in accordance with His institution, there HEAVEN IS OPEN and can never be shut.

The Efficacy and Power of the Visible Signs

The efficacy and power of the visible signs is found in His blood. “It is all the beautiful red blood of Christ, so that everything we have through the Holy Spirit in the Word, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, absolution, consolation, and whatever pertains to the remission of sins and eternal life has been gained through the power of the blood of Christ” (LW 8:258).

Larvae Dei and the Harlot at the Gate

Human beings cannot ascend to God therefore God, in His mercy, ordained to put before us an image of Himself so that He can be grasped. In these signs, He deals with us within the range of our comprehension so that we are able to meet a God whom we can bear. These are the common and public appearances for all Christians; and, in these MASKS OF GOD, God Himself is present. “Those who believe the promise and make use of these signs become the people of God and are saved” (LW 3:110). These signs are also given so that those who do not believe in Him might be attracted to Him and obtain salvation to those who make use of them in faith.

In contrast to these fatherly appearances of God, the HARLOT AT THE GATE looks for more attractive externals¹⁰ which appeal to reason and the human eye. Satan ignites many new lights, all of whom presume to show the people the right way to heaven. These false lights¹¹ began with Marcion and have continued in the labors of all false apostles and prophets. Yet, despite the presence of these false lights, God has given humankind the LARVAE DEI as His agents to direct us to the Light. “We shall be safe from these dangers if we follow that visible form (the Son of God) or those signs (Baptism, Eucharist, and the spoken Word) which God Himself has set before us” (LW 3:108-109).

The Marks of the Church

“Thank God,” exclaimed Luther in the *Smalcald Articles*, “a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (Tappert 315). Its holiness does not consist in surplices, tonsures, albs, or other ceremonies which have been invented over and above the holy Scriptures but it consists of the Word of God and true faith (Tappert 180).

¹⁰ Christ must be sought where He has manifested Himself and wants to be known, as in the Word, in Baptism, and in the Supper; there He is certainly found, for the Word cannot deceive us. But it generally happens that reason disregards those signs and turns aside to the harlot at the gate (LW 3:108).

¹¹ Satan ignites many new lights, all of whom boldly presume to show the people the right way to heaven; each one claims to be the light and each false light attracts people to himself, asking them to follow him (LW 22:67).

Luther was accused of Johann Eck, and others, of radical individualism in his attack and reform of the Church. This, however, was not so. Luther urged reform on the basis of WHO and WHAT THE CHURCH REALLY IS, namely, “where the Word is, there is faith; and where faith is, there is the true Church” (LW 39:xii). The Church is a holy Christian people, both a hidden community and a visible fellowship gathered around the MARKS OF THE CHURCH. Those who are evangelical, in contrast to the false church of Rome, are “the true, ancient church, one body and one communion of saints with the holy, universal Christian Church” (LW 41:199).

Luther stressed that the certain mark of a Christian congregation is wherever the pure Gospel is being preached (LW 39:305). If the Gospel is present, THERE MUST BE CHRISTIANS. Thus, the true marks whereby a person can find a Christian Church are: (1) the Word of God; (2) Baptism; (3) the Lord’s Supper; (4) Confession and Absolution; (5) called ministers of the Gospel; (6) prayer and worship; and (7) the sacred cross. (LW 41:148).

In his treatise *Against Hanswurst*, Luther is very concerned with the question where the church is and who it is. It is the evangelical Lutheran church which is the true, ancient church because its essence is the same. Both the EVANGELICAL and the ANCIENT, APOSTOLIC CHURCH possess the same essence as evidenced in: (1) Baptism; (2) Lord’s Supper; (3) Confession and Absolution; (4) the preaching office; (5) the Apostles’ Creed; (6) Lord’s Prayer; (7) temporal authority is honored and respected;

(8) marriage is honored and praised; (9) Christian suffering; and (10) the cross is borne as believers pray for one another.

In contrast the Roman Catholic Church is a false church because it did not possess the same essence as the ancient and true Church of the apostles. Instead, it had become an apostate whore that had abandoned the true marks of the Church and replaced them with these false marks: (1) new baptisms; (2) indulgences; (3) holy water and salts; (4) pilgrimages; (5) brotherhoods; (6) innovations in the Lord's Supper; (7) new skeleton keys of sin and murder; (8) a different gospel; (9) the substitution of a bodily head for Christ; (10) the worship of the saints; and (11) their attempts to rule the temporal kingdoms.

The key distinction between the two churches can be understood in this way: the true, ancient, apostolic and evangelical church is BUILT UPON GRACE whereas the false church is BUILT UPON WORKS (LW 41:213).

CHAPTER FOUR: The True and the False Church

Man Does Not Live By Bread Alone

The cause of Old Testament Israel's rejection as God's people was her refusal to be led and governed by God. Israel wanted to live, not by faith in the promises of God, but by what was actually present. On the other hand, God wanted her to be faithful and to rely on His promises. "Thus they seek what is plainly contrary to the will and

government of God, and if at this time they do not get what they seek, they look for another god” (LW 8:200).

The Jews tempted God. When God did not immediately supply them with everything according to their liking and prescription, they quickly ran after strange gods...seeking such gods as Ashtaroth and Baal, to give them help on the spot and forthwith, without faith in a promise, so that they could feel the help and take hold of it with their hands (LW 8:201).

In order to deal with our sinful tendencies, God offers promises to His people; “but at the same time He also tests and exercises them in faith and teaches that they should live more by the Word than by bread” (LW 8:201).

One must be careful to hold fast to the fact that God makes promises and defers the things promised, and that He tries us with a scarcity of available things in order to instruct us in faith in the promise and in order that this faith may be strengthened and may learn to believe God not only in prosperous times, when things are available, but also in adversity, when things are lacking (LW 8:201).

If bread is lacking, a strange god is not to be called upon but, instead, the heart should be strengthened by faith in the Word (LW 8:204). In all things, God wants His threats to be feared and His promises to be believed and waited for. But this is impossible without faith!

Faith must believe and fear things that are invisible, just as Noah fears that punishment of the flood, which he does not see, and hopes for a liberation, which is not in sight. We believe in Christ the Lord, whom we do not see, and we believe that He will come on the Last Day and raise us from the dead and glorify us, as Philippians 3:20-21 says, but that He will inflict punishments on the ungodly, who do not know God

and do not obey the Gospel. Thus the GODLY fear the threats and trust the promises. But the ungodly do not fear, do not believe, do not hope, and do not care about God (LW 8:202).

Adam's Why and Abraham's Faith

Simply defined, "original sin is to become a god" (LW 3:139). In his asking why, Adam placed himself in the place of God as Creator when he searched into the reason for God's command and prohibition concerning the tree. "God wanted us to follow His Word and command, not to inquire with inordinate diligence into the reasons for His commands. When Adam and Eve do this, they perish; for they put themselves in the place of God the Creator and forget that they are creatures" (LW 3:139).

Adam was not satisfied with God's command and, instead, sought to learn the reason WHY God ordered him to keep away. No longer was Adam concerned about carrying out God's commandment as one of His creatures but, instead, passed judgment upon God Himself. Therefore, it became ruinous for Adam to think about THE WHY and it caused him great harm (LW 4:144).

In contrast, Abraham obeyed God's command without hesitation. When God commanded him to be circumcised or when God commanded him to offer up Isaac, Abraham OBEYS at once; "he does not debate with himself why God has given this command but goes immediately to the designated place" (LW 3:282). Abraham considered WHO IT WAS WHO WAS SPEAKING and he simply "cuts the throat of this baneful why and tears it out of his heart by the roots" (LW 3:173). He understood that it

is God's will that his curiosity be restrained and that it remain within the definite bounds placed upon him by God in His Word.

He takes his reason captive and finds satisfaction in the one fact that He who gives the command is just, good, and wise; therefore He cannot command anything but what is just, good and wise, no matter what the opinion of reason is, and no matter if reason does not understand (LW 3:173).

After Abraham had received the command, he sees nothing else than God's command. He mortifies the head of the serpent (which is reason and man's will) and acts on what God has commanded him to do. As evidence in the faith of Abraham, OUTWARD OBEDIENCE follows upon INWARD OBEDIENCE. Abraham heard and believed the Word; then he became a righteous doer of works by following Christ.

But we refuse even to maintain that Abraham was justified because he forsook everything when he went out from Ur of the Chaldeans. He had already been justified when he believed the promise of God that was revealed through the holy patriarchs. If he had not been righteous, he would have never have obeyed God when He called. Therefore he heard the Word and believed the Word; and later on, after he had been justified thereby, he also became a righteous doer of works by wandering about and following Christ, who had called him (LW 2:269-270).

God's Game: the Cross and His Way of Governing His People

The Life of Jacob

The life of Jacob is pleasing in God's sight because he has the Word, faith, and the Spirit which dwells within him. Hence, God must care for His own who have their eyes fixed on His Word. Even though they are tormented and troubled by devils and men yet

God numbers all their actions and thoughts and cares for them in all of their adversities (LW 6:74-75).

Jacob, by his faith, was able to conquer God just as the Canaanite woman was able to cling to Christ when Jesus opposed her (Matthew 15:21-28). After the wrestling had ended, Christ laid aside His mask and spoke life-giving words to Jacob (Genesis 32:22-30). He revealed Himself as the One who rewards those who persistently seek Him and cling to Him in faith (LW 6:139-140). He is the Man who exercises Jacob until his faith shows itself; as evidence of his faith, Jacob's name is changed by God Himself.

Yet the believer's conquering of God is not in such a way that He is subjected to us but that His wrath, and judgment, are conquered by us through "praying, seeking, and knocking" (LW 6:141). He no longer is an angry judge, as He seemed to be, but He becomes a most loving Father, and therefore, your faith has saved you. In this test, and in the changing of Jacob's name, Jesus sought not to destroy Jacob but to confirm and strengthen him in the promise.

Thus, Jacob is a wanderer all of his life yet he is a patriarch and a saint. In his sojourn he suffers much, especially with the incest of Reuben, the defilement of Dinah (Genesis 34), the death of Rachel (Genesis 35), and the enslavement of Joseph (Genesis 37). Yet God allowed these things to happen so that faith might be exercised and that Jacob would learn to **DEPEND ON HIS WORD** and **PROMISES ALONE** despite the visible things perceptible to the senses.

For the things which are discerned by the eyes are deceiving and transient, but the things which are promised and not seen are sure and steadfast. But delay and postponement are to be awaited in faith and borne with equanimity, for the invisible things will appear at the right time (LW 6:305).

Therefore in the darkness of the cross we must cling to the Word of God alone.

Yet this knowledge of God does not come without practice and experience. It is only through practice and experience that we understand that these struggles are indications of His great love and goodness and not of His wrath and anger. These things are done by God so that we might learn what is the good, acceptable and perfect will of God and be equipped to comfort others in their trials.

The worst kind of punishment that God can bring upon a people is not to punish them. In contrast the most blessed kind of life is when God does not close His eyes to our faults but immediately seeks to correct us with his rods and crosses (LW 6:327).

Therefore we must learn to live with our eyes shut and to trust simply in His promises even though He pretends to be sleeping, exercising no care for us.

The Life of Joseph

Joseph overcomes evil by faith as he takes hold of the Word spoken by his father and clings to it. As a result, he does not allow Satan to rob him of his promise. The Holy Spirit was present with Joseph so that the Word planted in his heart would become an immovable rock against the devil.

For Joseph had the entire Psalter in his heart. In actuality and in effect he does everything taught in the Psalms about faith, patience, and waiting. He waits, and he sustains himself with the divine promises which he heard from his father. He does not despair; nor does he murmur against God (LW 7:56).

Joseph, through his faith, conquered all. FIRST the devil assailed him on the left with all sorts of troubles while he was in exile away from his parents and family. Next he sought to assail him on the right with the allurements of the flesh such as lust and pleasure. This is especially the more difficult trial because of Joseph's youth. He felt all of these temptations in the flesh but he was able to overcome these temptations because he had the Word of God in his heart.

Joseph was well taught by his father, his mother Rachel, and his nurse Deborah. Luther especially speaks of Deborah who was like a grandmother to Joseph and who still had a fresh memory of the patriarchs such as Noah, Shem, and Eber. Isaac too was still alive and he also carefully impressed the Word upon Joseph as he recounted the histories of the patriarchs. Joseph also was an eyewitness to the crosses and joys of his father Jacob. It is with this teaching, and the Lord's presence, that Joseph was kept in the faith while he served in exile.

...that Wisdom, that is, God's Son, did not leave the righteous man when he was sold but went down with him into the pit and prison. Joseph had Him as a Teacher who gave the increase, so that he kept the Word which he had heard firmly fixed in his heart. He had the punishment of the Flood before his eyes, the burning of the Sodomites, and other disasters, then also the various liberations of godly men recounted by his father. From this

source the fear of God, faith, hope, and other virtues grew and were strengthened in him, so that his heart could not be made to totter by any commotions (LW 7:125).

Joseph is the model of the perfect man and was the most precious treasure. Yet this treasure was unknown to the world and hidden from it. Though all seems hopeless for Joseph and that he is alone in his trials and afflictions, yet Christ, the Bishop of souls, sees Joseph and cares for him.

The life of Joseph is an excellent illustration of the manner in which God governs His saints. When He works, He turns His face away at first and seems to be the devil, not God. This is to see HIS BACK as Moses records in Exodus 33:20, 23. “You must not see My works and counsels with which I am fashioning and refashioning you according to My good pleasure” (LW 7:104). Joseph beheld His back and WAITED until God should reveal and show forth His salvation.

Thus the Christian life is one of LEARNING FAITH and HOPE in the Lord. In trials we learn patience, faith and hope because our life is hidden with God. If Joseph did not have His Word with him; “if the Holy Spirit and God’s Son had not gone down with him into the pit and had not sustained him with the Word which he had learned, he would not have been able to bear the assaults of Satan” (LW 7:128). Joseph learned that a man does not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the Lord’s mouth.

Therefore it is not due to human help and consolation that he conquers and endures against Satan, the world, and the flesh. Nor does he live in any other life than that which is in the Word of God. For he simply clings to the promises and is prepared to endure even greater evils. Although

according to the flesh and also according to the spirit he desires to be freed, nevertheless, because he sees that it is God's will, he rests content with God's good pleasure and mortifies the flesh when it cries out and murmurs saying: "The Lord's will be done!" (LW 7:128).

The purpose of the cross is so that God can crucify, mortify, and reduce the old man to nothing. In the cross, He seeks to form you according to His plan. Because Joseph waited on the Lord, he became a savior of the world. God uses all of Egypt to restore Joseph and deliver him from his imprisonment. Pharaoh and the entire nation are moved by God to serve His purpose and to deliver Joseph from his cross (LW 7:136).

The life of Joseph shows to us that FAITH MUST PRECEDE and then the WAITING MUST FOLLOW. We must learn that God hides Himself under the form of the worst devil so that, to those who wait, He will come and save them. Thus, the life of a Christian should teach him "that the goodness, mercy and power of God cannot be grasped by speculation but must be understood on the basis of experience" (LW 7:175) and confident reliance on the Word of God.

Just endure and wait for the Lord; be content with His Word and cling to His promises. This is how God exercises, exalts and plays with His saints. It is out of His great love for us that He works in our lives in this manner. Due to original sin, the rod of discipline is necessary. It is paternal love that demands blows and stripes be administered in order that children may be improved.

Therefore in Baptism we receive not only the forgiveness of sins BUT also the purging away of sin. Forgiveness is free due to the merits of Christ yet this forgiveness is

followed by distress, tribulation and mortification. Like a physician, God proceeds with purging, burning and cutting, even though this is not done without pain. God accomplishes all this in us for OUR OWN GOOD lest we snore through life and perish in our sins. Thus, the cross and trials become the medicines with which God purges away sin.

For this is the difference between the children of God and unbelievers. The latter offer resistance and refuse to endure the discipline of the Lord. But for the godly this discipline is necessary because of the flesh, which is corrupt and is full of sins, smugness, contempt of God, wrath and lusts. It is because of these that they do not pray, do not believe, do not hope, do not love, and do not trouble themselves about God (LW 8:9-10).

In these trials, it is His desire that we fix our eyes only upon His Word and sacraments and remember that the cross is given so that we might be humbled and learn to wait for His gracious appearing. This wonderful government of God presents us with a paradox, that is, He keeps His promises but “in such a way that everything seems contradictory and far different from the Word” (LW 8:79). We are His people, loved by Him, and yet daily He confronts us with the cross and trials so that I am doubtful, perplexed and filled with despair. Nevertheless, He has mercy on us and we have His sure promises.

CHAPTER FIVE: Luther’s Understanding of *Larvae Dei* as Evidenced in the Secondary Sources

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.”¹²

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”¹³ 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.¹⁴

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

¹² “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.

¹³ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 16.

¹⁴ “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).

for “whoever mocks an idol also blasphemes the name of God hidden in every idol.”¹⁵

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 worshipping 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.”¹⁶

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.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 48.

¹⁶ Bornkamm 1969:54.

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ This knowledge is derived from Scripture and shows "what God thinks of us and what His intentions are toward us."¹⁹ 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."²⁰

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.'"²¹ 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.²²

Luther's entire theology can be said to stand or fall with His incarnation. "His humanity is the place to which God summons us"²³ and is the concrete, earthly reality through which God reveals Himself by veiling Himself in it. "We can only lay hold on

¹⁸ Althaus 1966:17-18.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰ Klug 1981:30.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Watson 1950:103.

²³ Althaus 1966: 22.

Him in His divinity when He clothes it in His earthly, human, and bodily form.”²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶

²⁴ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, 271.

²⁵ Klug 1981:31.

²⁶ “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 concretized, humanized, and incarnate form” (Kadai, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 240).

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 whose veil God is present.”²⁷ Where the visible sign is, “there God is truly present wrapped up in the garment of the sign.”²⁸ “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.”²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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

²⁷ Prenter 1953:259.

²⁸ Ibid., 260.

²⁹ Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, 318.

³⁰ Jasoslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, 106.

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.”³¹

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.”³² But “where one considers himself above the bodily sign, there one has another way to God than by Deus

³¹ Prenter 1953:263.

³² Printer 1953:272.

incarnates.”³³ Heretics are all alike in that they spurn the human instruments that God uses and the means of His divine self-disclosure.³⁴

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.³⁵ 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

³³ Ibid., 272-273.

³⁴ Pelikan 1959:105.

³⁵ “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.

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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

³⁶ Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, 312.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

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.”³⁸ “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.”³⁹

CHAPTER SIX: Luther Searches the Scriptures for Answers to the Big Questions

How Do I Find a Gracious God?

According to medieval teaching, the only secure way of obtaining eternal life lay in the help provided by the Church: sacraments, pilgrimages, indulgences, the intercession of the saints, with the way *par excellence* to heaven being monasticism. At his reception into the Augustinian order when the prior asked him what he sought to find in the monastic way of life, Luther replied: “God’s grace and your mercy.”⁴⁰ Along with thousands of others, Luther became a monk to save his soul and to find a gracious God.

I was a good monk, and kept strictly to my order, so that I could say that if the monastic life could get a man to heaven, I should have entered: all my companions who knew me would bear witness to that (Gordon Rupp, *Luther’s Progress to the Diet of Worms 1521*, 26).

³⁸ Bornkamm, *Luther’s Word of Thought*, 136-137.

³⁹ Prenter 1953:139.

⁴⁰ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 26.

But monasticism did not bring Luther the peace and salvation he sought. While at the monastery, he felt himself the most wretched man on earth due to his troubled conscience. Instead of finding and experiencing a gracious God, Luther believed that he was to do good works until Christ was rendered gracious to him through them. Yet, after all of his labors, “who knows whether such things are pleasing to God?”⁴¹

His doubts and fears were heightened by his knowledge of Christ for the most popular image of Christ in medieval art and literature was the “Christ of the Rainbow.” In this depiction of Christ, a “lily extends from His right ear, signifying the redeemed, who are below being ushered by the angels into paradise. From His left ear protrudes a sword, symbolizing the doom of the damned, whom the devils drag by the hair from the tombs and cast into the flames of hell.”⁴² From this image, along with other teachings about Christ, Luther knew only Christ as a stern judge from whom he wanted to flee, yet was unable to escape. Thus, instead of running to Christ for forgiveness and mercy, Luther would seek out the immediate gods of Mary and the saints. Later on, Luther would realize and confess that all of this was idolatry and false worship.⁴³

It was only through the proper knowledge of Christ, based upon Scripture, that Luther found a gracious God. In His incarnation, Luther beheld a gracious and merciful

⁴¹ Gordon Rupp, *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms 1521*, 27.

⁴² Bainton 1950:22.

⁴³ “I always walked around in a dream and real idolatry, for I did not believe in Christ but believed Him to be nothing else than a stern and terrible judge, as one paints Him sitting on a rainbow. For this reason I sought other intercessors, Mary and the saints, and my own good deeds and merits of faith.” Schwiebert 1950:155.

God who possesses a kind, fatherly heart. Luther came to know, through the Gospel, that God was no longer angry with him but had shown him grace, and granted him forgiveness of sins, through faith in His Son.

Are You the Only One that Knows Anything? Except for You is All the Church in Error?

In his debate with Johann Eck at Leipzig, while they were debating the topic of penance, Eck persisted in challenging Luther with this query, “are you the only one that knows anything? Except for you is all the Church in error?”⁴⁴ Yet at Leipzig, Luther could boldly claim with certainty that “a simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed more than a pope or council without it.”⁴⁵

Luther’s certainty was based upon the reliable and clear words of Scripture. The Scriptures are certain and clear because they were revealed through the Holy Spirit (LW 41:58). However, it was the observation of Luther that the church fathers often obscured the clear Word of God and introduced thoughts and teachings contrary to the Word (LW 32:175, 215). Thus, Luther preferred “to drink from the source, rather than from the rivulets...I want to have the Scripture in the purity of its powers, undefiled by any man, even if he is a saint, and not spiced with anything earthly (LW 32:223).

For Luther, every article of faith must come from Scripture alone and not from the opinions and interpretations of human beings who can and do err (LW 39:230, 237). As

⁴⁴ Bainton 1950:91.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 90.

with Augustine, Luther would believe no teacher unless the teaching was proved by Scripture, even if it claimed heavenly or saintly origin. The task of a Christian is to examine what the Scriptures say for “no one speaks better than he who understands; but who understands the things of God better than God Himself” (LW 32:244). The Christian is to see whether what is taught in the Church is taught according to the Word of God.

For Luther, the sinner’s troubled conscience must have a certain and reliable Word of God if he or she is to find peace. Later, at the Diet of Worms, Luther would boldly and confidently declare: “unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God” (Bainton 1950:144).

Thus, Christians are to clothe themselves with the holy garments, namely, the sacred Scriptures (LW 32:139). In matters of faith and life, the Christian must be captive to the Word and become drunk by the Holy Spirit (LW 39:307; 41:370). Moreover, every believer has the power to judge doctrine (LW 39:307; 41:370), and every congregation who has the Gospel has the right, power and duty to judge doctrine as His body.

It was with this certainty and resolve that the Lutherans gathered at Augsburg to give their defense of the evangelical faith. As evidenced by their detractors, the possessors of Scripture are the true Church for

when our confession was examined before the emperor and the whole empire at Augsburg in 1530, some princes of the other side asked their theologians if they could disprove it with Scripture. They answered, “No, one could not disprove it with Scripture, but with the fathers and councils.” Thereupon some of the noblemen smilingly said: “Our theologians defend us excellently – they say the other side has Scripture in their favor, but we do not have Scripture in our favor.” Out of such an admission and testimony of our opponents we gather that we cannot be heretics because we have, believe, and confess Scripture (LW 41:362).

Father, If Jesus Exists, How Come He Never Lives Here?

The unbelief of a generation is currently being expressed through the lyrics of songwriter *Sting* in his popular song *All This Time*. In the song, Sting relates that only the river which flows into the sea is constant and eternally present. The church steeple in the distant horizon serves only as the dwelling place of birds due to its antiquated and irrelevant message. As he surveys daily life events, he is unable to see God or experience His presence. Thus, his question to his parish priest, “Father, if Jesus exists, how come He never lives here?”

Luther’s use of *Larvae Dei* provides us with a framework for responding to Sting’s cynical question of unbelief and despair. As a result of humankind’s sinful nature human beings cannot see God, in His naked transcendence, and survive. Therefore God must wear a mask in all of His dealings with humankind. Wherever the visible sign is, there God is truly present wrapped up in the garment of the sign. In the earthly medium of His incarnation, the Word, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, God is clothed and MEETS US

through these external means. They are the places where He reveals Himself and where He is present. Yet His presence and activity can be seen and apprehended only BY FAITH. Therein lies the challenge for Sting and his generation. It is only by faith, acquired through the Word, that a person can cut through the coverings of flesh and blood and see God's daily activity and presence in the world.

Thus, in response to Sting and his unveiled seeking of God, those who truly want to see and know Him must hold to the form, the signs, and the coverings of the Godhead. In His Word and works, He shows Himself to the questioning sinner with the hope that the sinner might find life and forgiveness in Him. It is solely through the Spirit's work and activity that a true and saving knowledge of God can be known and achieved in this life. When we get to heaven, concludes Luther, we shall see God differently but here we see Him enveloped in an image, namely, in His Word and sacraments. These are, and will remain, HIS MASKS until the Day of His return.

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