



## Christ Alone, the Hidden God, and Lutheran Exclusivism

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In his review of *Lutherans and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism*, Jerry Robbins noted that in the arguments set forth in most of the chapters, “there is no conscious, systematic development of the particularly Lutheran foundation.”<sup>1</sup> That assessment is consistent with the observation that the theological dimensions of religious pluralism have received little attention in Lutheran circles, even in statements and documents from Lutheran-Jewish dialogues. Rather, such statements typically approach religious pluralism from the perspective of historical development, the common human condition of all religious people, or shared ethical concern, without taking up the theological roots of exclusivism. The Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in 1977, while noting that “a biblical and theological understanding of other religions and their missionary impact is not yet sufficiently developed in our churches,” also reported that an LWF pilot project on the subject distributed to American Lutheran seminaries had received almost no response, in part because the matter seemed to have “less than top priority within our theological schools.”<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the issues of religious pluralism continue to press on the Lutheran church no less than on others. Not only do Lutherans engage the same pluralistic culture others do, but it is the Lutheran heritage which underlies the Protestant emphasis on the necessity of faith, grace, and Scripture. In particular, Lutherans share in the heritage of the doctrine of *solus Christus*, tying salvation exclusively to Jesus Christ. That would seem, on the face of things, to exclude any Lutheran affirmation of the possibility that God’s saving grace extends beyond the church. I will attempt here to formulate, on a particularly Lutheran foundation, an understanding which at least opens the door to such an affirmation.

<sup>1</sup>*Word & World* 10/2 (1990) 198.

<sup>2</sup>*From Dar es Salaam to Budapest*, LWF Report 17/18 (Stuttgart: Kreuz and Geneva: LWF, 1984) 246-47.

### I. DEFENSE OF THE CLASSICAL *SOLUS CHRISTUS*

In an essay appearing in late 1988, Carl Braaten defends the doctrine of *solus Christus* in response to Karl Barth’s theology of religions and what Braaten calls “the new pluralistic theology of religions.”<sup>3</sup> Braaten discerns in Barth’s later writings a broadening in the understanding of revelation relative to Barth’s earlier emphasis on the centrality of Christ. He criticizes this broadening in Barth, as well as in the formulations of Paul Knitter, John Hick, James Gustafson, and others as inadequate testimony to the salvific event of Jesus Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection. A review of Braaten’s discussion of these positions will introduce the issues to be considered in the relationship of the doctrine of salvation through

Christ alone to religious pluralism.

### 1. *The Third Circle of Witnesses*

Karl Barth's leading role in drafting the Barmen Declaration of 1934, with its dogmatic insistence on the sufficiency and exclusivity of Jesus Christ as "the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death,"<sup>4</sup> has dominated the common understanding of his Christology, according to Braaten. Even as late as the 1960s, Barth, when faced with a chorus of reproaches leveled at the alleged narrow, obscurantist, isolationist intolerance of Christianity, could be heard cautioning against the temptation "either to suppress the statement [of *solus Christus*] altogether or to render it so innocuous that it no longer says what it purports to say."<sup>5</sup>

But Braaten focuses on another side of Barth, an assertion which "explodes the usual caricatures"<sup>6</sup> of Barth's theology, namely that there are "other words [than the one Word of God in Jesus Christ] which are quite notable in their way" and that not "every word spoken outside the circle of the Bible and the Church is a word of false prophecy and therefore valueless, empty and corrupt."<sup>7</sup> Here Barth acknowledges a "third circle of witnesses..., apart from and not dependent on the Bible or the Church."<sup>8</sup> In this view, Braaten sees a particular version of the idea of a *logos spermatikos*, which requires the community to "listen to these alien witnesses to the truth, search for material agreement, and let them illumine, accentuate, and explain (without replacing or rivaling) the biblical and Christian witness."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, not on the basis of a natural theology, but explicitly on Christological grounds, "Barth counts on the capacity of Jesus Christ to create human witnesses wherever

<sup>3</sup>Carl E. Braaten, "Salvation Through Christ Alone," *Lutheran Forum* 22/4 (1988) 10. At the time Braaten's article appeared, a group of seminary faculty and clergy in southern California were beginning an interfaith study aimed at understanding how the categorical other is represented in some of the modern defining statements of each participating tradition. The study was supported by the national program office of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Inc., under the project title, "Religious Pluralism and Theological Education." The present author served as NCCJ staff for the project and presented an earlier form of this article for discussion as part of the project in November, 1988.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 8, quoting *Creeds of the Church*, ed. John Leith, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983) 520.

<sup>5</sup>Braaten, "Christ Alone," 9; quoting *Church Dogmatics* 4/3/1:90; *Church Dogmatics* hereafter *CD*.

<sup>6</sup>Braaten, "Christ Alone," 9.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.; quoting *CD* 4/3/1:97.

<sup>8</sup>Braaten, "Christ Alone," 9.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 10.

he pleases, even against their knowledge and will, and certainly beyond the limits of the Bible and the Church."<sup>10</sup>

Barth's reasoning follows this syllogistic path:

- (a) God is known only where God's word exists.
  - (b) God is known outside Christianity.
- Hence,
- (c) God's word exists outside Christianity.

(d) Jesus Christ is the one word of God.  
(e) Jesus Christ is God's word of salvation.  
Hence,  
(f) God's one word is the word of salvation.

(c) God's word exists outside Christianity.  
(f) God's one word is the word of salvation.  
Hence,  
(g) Salvation exists outside Christianity.

Or, as Braaten quotes Barth, "what was and is possible for [Christ] in the narrow sphere is well within [Christ's] powers in the wider."<sup>11</sup>

Braaten's response to Barth applies the doctrine of general and special revelation and the classic Lutheran distinction between law and gospel. Christ is not the only word of God for Lutherans, as he is for Barth. This means Barth's syllogism breaks down at premise (d), yielding a false conclusion at (f), which in turn falsifies (g). Following Paul Althaus, Braaten instead asserts, "Outside of Christ there is indeed a self-manifestation of God, and therefore knowledge of God, but it does not lead to salvation, or union between God and [humanity]."<sup>12</sup> Within the realm of creation, God is witnessed, but it is a witness to God's law. That law can serve good and holy purposes within the created order, but in the realm of redemption it serves only to indict and condemn people as disobedient and sinful. Thereby, it drives them to the cross, where they encounter the word of gospel which is reconciliation with the God of justice. It is on the cross that we find *solus Christus*, and hence only in Christ that we find salvation. God's word is known outside of Christ, but it is only God's word of law. Outside of Christ there is no word of gospel; hence, no salvation.

## 2. *Another Gospel without Christ*

Barth's approach to the issue has at least the virtue that it comes from a Christian, even christological, framework. The case is quite another for those Braaten characterizes as the "new pluralistic theologians of religion." Under the rubrics of "Christocentrism," "Christofascism," and "Christodolatry," this school finds in the assertion of Christ's normative character an arrogant bigotry responsible for sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism. Such a parochial notion, they say, must give way to a new theocentrism. This, says Braaten, "happens to be in direct

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. Paul Van Buren, in personal correspondence (December 3, 1988), emphasizes the christological dependence of Barth's "third circle of witnesses," noting that little is added on this point in *CD IV/3* "that is not fully there in *CD I/1* and *I/2*." I appreciate his underscoring of this point.

<sup>11</sup>Braaten, *Christ Alone*, 10; quoting *CD 4/3/1:118*.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 11; quoting *Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 18 (1941) 143.

contradiction with the apostolic kerygma documented in the New Testament and all non-heretical forms of Christianity known to date." The most he can find in their proposal is "a shallow Jesus-ology, at best a revival of the liberal Protestant picture of Jesus as a moral example and model of middle-class piety."<sup>13</sup> "The problem with the so-called new pluralism in theology," says

Braaten, “is that it knows too much about God apart from Christ... The theocentric pluralists have a hidden norm other than Christ in their talk about the One God underlying all the religions of the world, and in so doing they are beating the drum for ‘another gospel.’”<sup>14</sup>

Rather than seeing Christ as “constitutive of the world’s salvation,” they grant only that Christ is “expressive of divine salvation equally available in the plurality of religions.”<sup>15</sup> And a particularly nasty and difficult expression, at that. “The once-and-for-all Christ of classical Christianity is the breeding ground of intolerance, imperialism, supremacism.”<sup>16</sup> But Paul Knitter is right, says Braaten, when he notes that Lutherans in clinging to the *solus Christus* “are dealing with the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article (of faith) on which the church stands or falls.”<sup>17</sup> Apart from Christ there simply is no salvation; “we define salvation on the model of what God has accomplished for the world and humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, and only there.”<sup>18</sup> For those who stand outside the Christian circle Braaten offers a word of hope and prayer, but no assurance. Citing Gustaf Wingren, he says, “We can pray what we cannot assert.”<sup>19</sup>

Braaten’s objections both to the Christlessness of the pluralistic theologians of religion and to the Christomonism of Barth’s third circle of witnesses are familiar to readers of his *History and Hermeneutics*.<sup>20</sup> There Braaten asserted that the central fallacy in modern theology is to reduce the question of salvation to modes and means of revelation. Here he discerns two aspects of the same fallacy in the two systems he analyzes. Barth fails to distinguish between revelation and salvation by requiring that Christ be the word behind any revelation which is known outside the church, and the pluralistic theologians fail by positing that every revelation is salvific, whether it is of Christ or not.

## II. THE WORD: EFFECTIVE AND EXPRESSIVE

Braaten’s assessment with regard to the relationship of soteriology and epistemology—salvation and the knowledge of salvation—is well taken. There is need for clarity about what saves, how we know what saves, and how we know other things about God. The difficulty lies in drawing the proper conclusions from the dual role which Jesus Christ plays, being, in Braaten’s terms, both constitutive of the world’s salvation and expressive of God’s will to save. Braaten grants that we define salvation according to the model we know in Christ, and good models—even

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 11. The earnestness of Braaten’s insistence on this point nearly obscures the ironic contradiction between the bourgeois characterization of this Jesus-ology and the proletarian principles it has been developed to serve.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 11; quoting *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985) 104.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.; quoting *Credo, The Christian View of Faith and Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1981) 183.

<sup>20</sup>*New Directions in Theology Today*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

outside of a strict Platonism—at once constitute an instance of the reality they model and an expression of the essence of that reality which they share with other similar instances. Even if

Braaten is right that the pluralistic theologians err in denying the constitutive dimension, it is equally erroneous to deny the expressive dimension. Christ is, first and foremost, the Word of God, and Lutheran theology knows that word to be both effective (constitutive) and expressive.

When added to the physical elements of a sacrament, the word is effective: “It is not the water that produces these effects, but the Word of God connected with the water.... For without the Word of God the water is merely water and no Baptism. But when connected with the Word of God it is a Baptism.”<sup>21</sup> In forgiving sin, in working faith, in drawing people to God, in fact in everything God does—for God does nothing “without the hearing of God’s Word”<sup>22</sup>—the word is at work effectively in the world.

Luther and the confessional documents of the Lutheran church also speak of God’s work in the world in terms of masks. All that exists is a mask of God, for God works all in all. If we are to know God, we must discern God in the masks of God.<sup>23</sup> Each of these is an expression of God; they are not God in themselves. Jesus Christ, to be sure, is the normative expression of God’s word of grace and salvation; but “God’s word is not the same as ‘God himself,’” and “God has not limited himself to his word but retains his freedom over everything....God does many things that he does not show us through his word. He also wills many things his word does not show us.”<sup>24</sup>

### III. GOD: HIDDEN AND REVEALED

Luther came to this consideration of the revealed and the hidden God, the *deus revelatus* and the *deus absconditus*, through his wrestling with the question of predestination. Since God works all in all and it is God through the Spirit who works saving faith in those who believe, it must be a part of God’s will not to work saving faith in those who do not believe.<sup>25</sup> Luther can go so far as to say that God “does not will the death of the sinner—in his Word, that is. But he does will it by that inscrutable will.”<sup>26</sup> Here arises the specter of a dual will in God, one aspect of which is not committed to the word and hence is neither effected nor expressed in Jesus Christ. As Brian Gerrish says, “we have to admit the antithesis between God as revealed and preached, on the one hand, and God as hidden and unknown, on the other—indeed, as Luther puts it still more sharply, between the Word of God and God himself.”<sup>27</sup>

This hidden aspect is usually identified with judgment and rejection. It is “the

<sup>21</sup>Small Catechism IV/3.10. Martin Luther, *Small Catechism (The Book of Concord)*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959] 349.10).

<sup>22</sup>Formula of Concord, Epitome, II, Antithesis 6 (*The Book of Concord*, 471.13).

<sup>23</sup>Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 107-111.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>25</sup>The aspect of hiddenness we take up here has been called “hiddenness II” by Brian Gerrish and described as “the hiddenness of God outside his revelation” (B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982] 134). This distinguishes it from “the hiddenness of God in his revelation” (“hiddenness I”), which comprises the paradox inherent in the theology of the cross, the mystery by which God is revealed to humanity only in the hiddenness of the cross and of suffering.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 136.

concealed and dreadful will of God,’ which freely disposes grace or freely withholds it,”<sup>28</sup> and it

cannot offer the same comfort as the Word. “Outside of Christ the hiddenness of God always means one thing: faith cannot rest in the God who is hidden beyond his revelation....The God who hides himself outside of Christ...does not move me to trust.”<sup>29</sup> Still, while not effective in working faith, this aspect of God’s will is effective; it is “another willing and working of God which stands with his willing and working of salvation.”<sup>30</sup> So we have identified an element within Lutheran theology which is both effective of God’s will and unexpressed in God’s word.

Nor is it peripheral. While Gerrish grants that “hiddenness II is not the most prominent line in Luther’s thoughts on the *deus absconditus*,” he also asserts that “hiddenness belongs essentially to the conception of God that we inherit.”<sup>31</sup> To be sure, this hiddenness is that from which the Christian flees in faith, clinging to the revealed word. But we do not “simply turn from the hidden God, and then forget all about him. The forbidding figure waits on the edge of faith and, for this reason, determines (in some measure) the content of faith....The luminous object of faith is set against a dark, threatening background.”<sup>32</sup>

More significantly, it is for faith’s benefit that the pure vision of Godself is withheld and hidden: “faith fully becomes faith only when confronted by temptation through its knowledge of the hidden God.”<sup>33</sup> Were we assured that God’s whole will and self-expression is contained in Jesus Christ, the reason which apprehends Christ would gain control of God.<sup>34</sup> Assurance that rejection is in principle impossible would remove the need for faith and lead people not to Christ but to the altar of complacency and self-satisfaction. Before the hidden will of God, known to exist but unknown to our reason, we are humbled of our pride, stripped of the assurance of reason which accrues even to the knowledge of Christ, and thrown back on the gracious promise of God which alone is worthy of faith.<sup>35</sup>

Far from undermining the gospel of Jesus Christ, this *absconditus* aspect of God is in fact requisite to the nature of faith and the ultimate defeat of human pride. Far from being a peripheral or secondary doctrine within Lutheran thought, it is a necessary presupposition forming the backdrop against which the entire drama of grace and faith must be played out.

As vital an element as hiddenness is within that drama, however, this cannot jeopardize the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ. From the beginning, the *absconditus* has been present to faith, whether acknowledged or not. To acknowledge it is not to invent it, nor does acknowledging it as present today change the effectiveness or trustworthiness of Christ yesterday. While Jesus Christ is, then, fully effective as the Word of God who saves the world, Christ clearly is not an exhaustive expression of God or of God’s will. “The image of God does not, after all, fully coincide with

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 138.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>30</sup>Althaus, *Theology*, 275.

<sup>31</sup>Gerrish, *Protestantism*, 146-47.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 138.

<sup>33</sup>Althaus, *Theology*, 283.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 285.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 283-84.

the picture of Jesus.”<sup>36</sup> And this is necessarily so. For God’s saving word in Christ to be effective, it cannot be fully expressive. Conversely, its character as less than fully expressive

cannot incapacitate its effectiveness.

Braaten's critique of both Barth and the pluralistic theologians of religion depends on his assumption that salvation and the knowledge of salvation—the effectiveness and the expression of God's word—are co-extensive. "Outside of Christ and apart from the preaching of the gospel, there are no known historical alternatives which may be theologically accepted as divinely authorized means of salvation."<sup>37</sup> Braaten implies that God's saving will not only is put into effect in the word which is Christ, but is also fully expressed there. But Luther's own conception of the *deus absconditus* falsifies this conclusion. That is, the effectiveness is full, but the expression of God's will is not; the word is adequate, but it is not exhaustive. If we then abandon the claim that the expression of God's saving will is exhausted by Jesus Christ, while retaining the efficacy of God's will to save as expressed in Christ, we give the Christian as much assurance as has ever been possible concerning salvation while not excluding the possibility that God's word—even God's word of salvation—can be known other than in Christ.

#### IV. THE POSSIBILITY OF PLURALISM

When Braaten counters Barth's Christocentric "third circle of witnesses" with the observation that God can be known apart from Christ, it may seem that he exhausts the contribution of the *deus absconditus* to the discussion. That contribution is characterized by Braaten as the image of God as only a righteous judge, untempered by the mercy of the gospel. But in fact he is expanding the concept of *deus revelatus* beyond what he sees in Barth to include the distinction between the word constituting the special revelation of the gospel and the word of general revelation. The former he would say is exhausted by Christ, while the latter, serving to lead people toward God but not to give them knowledge of salvation, is not restricted to Christ. All this remains within the realm of the *deus revelatus*, however; whether by general or special revelation, the God seen here is known.<sup>38</sup>

There remains, however, an aspect of God's will which is unexpressed, and it is there that God's saving will—as well as God's will to condemn—can touch those outside the Christian faith. If Barth's mistake is to presuppose that every word of God is Christ, Braaten's is to presuppose that every saving word of God is Christ. Such, at the very least, *need* not be the case.

To the "so-called new pluralism in theology" Braaten objects that "it knows too much about God apart from Christ."<sup>39</sup> But Braaten himself seems to know a

<sup>36</sup>Gerrish, *Protestantism*, 138.

<sup>37</sup>Braaten, "Christ Alone," 12.

<sup>38</sup>In Gerrish's formulations, too, a degree of confusion is introduced at this point. He observes that "the hidden God stands for the 'God' of everyday experience apart from Christ—the force behind the mysterious universe as we encounter it" (*Protestantism*, 138), and connects this to his "hiddenness II," which we are considering. But this aspect of God's majesty is closer dynamically to "hiddenness I." Gerrish quotes Luther: "God so governs this physical world in outward affairs that, if you regard and follow the judgment of human reason, you are compelled to say either that there is no God or that God is unjust" (139). What is this but the providence and justice of God *sub contrariis*, just as the cross is the glory of God *sub contrariis*? Gerrish allows that on "a kind of scale" this approaches "the paradoxes of hiddenness I" (140); he would be clearer to recognize it as a corollary of that hiddenness and distinguish it from the hiddenness which does not lead people to God, but drives them to flee.

<sup>39</sup>Braaten, "Christ Alone," 11.

good deal about God apart from Christ: apart from Christ, God offers no salvation; apart from Christ, God's word is only judgment, or at best parable; apart from Christ, there can be no adequate expression of God's will to save. All this speaks of what God can and cannot do apart from Christ. But from what we know in Christ, according to Luther, there necessarily follows a hidden will of God which is not expressed in Christ and which cannot be expressed in Christ. Without it, faith in Christ is no faith. This is the particularly Lutheran foundation on which might be constructed an understanding of God in which salvation is not exclusively bound to Christian faith in Jesus Christ.

## V. THE NECESSITY OF UNCERTAINTY AND THE CERTAINTY OF FAITH

To lodge the possibility of a plurality in God's saving ways within the *deus absconditus* offers all the danger and all the advantage of standing firmly on assertions which are not falsifiable. Luther already knew the dangers of this when he made his first point about the hidden God: "We should not concern ourselves at all with God insofar as he has hidden himself."<sup>40</sup> This is not something to be concerned about over-much, especially among neophytes in the faith.

But the reality of the hidden God is plain enough, and the importance of the doctrine is enhanced when we translate Luther's insight from his sixteenth-century milieu to our own. Luther's world was hardly pluralistic, secularism being yet a gleam in the Enlightenment's eye, and the Jewish faith being the only contender on the European scene—and not a politically serious one at that. When Luther cautioned his parishioners and students against probing the hidden God, little was at stake concerning what might be missed. It was enough that it constitute the "dark background" which would induce proper humility in receiving grace. The adequacy of Christ as God's word of salvation was enough for Luther's time and culture; no further probing was in order.

Today, however, it is not only a proliferation of religions which has generated pluralism, but also the nature of knowledge as we understand it. David Tracy has convincingly demonstrated the inevitability of pluralism once the modern approach to language and history has been given its place.<sup>41</sup> From this perspective, the radical disjunction between human knowing and the reality of God is emphasized, and the hiddenness of God becomes a central issue.<sup>42</sup> To confess that Christ is the effective saving Word of God is one thing, but to articulate how one knows that—discussing the adequacy, exhaustiveness, exclusivity, accuracy, or trustworthiness of Christ as the expression of God's will to save—moves to a substantially different terrain from that which Luther knew. The nuance and detail of these epistemological issues extend well beyond the point to be made here. But it seems clear enough that the ambiguity which accompanies pluralism renders categories of *revelatus* and *absconditus* considerably more relative than they might have been for Luther. To speak of that which is hidden in God's will might well be to speak of

<sup>40</sup>Althaus, *Theology*, 280.

<sup>41</sup>David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>42</sup>Gerrish points out, for example, that for Luther, "the problem [of hiddenness II] is noetic, not ontic—in our understanding, not in God's being" (*Protestantism*, 136). This makes questions of epistemology especially pertinent to the doctrine of the *deus absconditus*.



that which cannot be known once a particular first step in knowing has been taken: each hermeneutical choice in the process of establishing the meaning of God's word entails necessarily the exclusion of other potential paths of knowing. It may be down one of these paths that the *absconditus* lies for contemporary believers. If so, for those who choose (or find) their hermeneutics differently than I, the path of my *absconditus* may lie open and inviting, while what is *revelatus* for me lies hidden to them.

In such a formulation, we stand all the more surely with Luther in clinging in faith to that which we know to be our salvation. For Christians, Christ will necessarily continue to be the normative expression of God's will to save, and Christ will necessarily be the only terms in which we can speak of God's effective word of salvation. It cannot be otherwise, if faith be faith. And a Christian will witness to none other than Christ, singing with Luther, "Jesus Christ it is...and God but him is none."<sup>43</sup>

This is not, says Braaten, quoting John Hick, "purely a personal confession lacking universal validity and truth," analogous to the hyperbole of love.<sup>44</sup> That it is a personal confession cannot be denied, nor would Braaten seek to do so; but that it lacks or does not lack universal validity and truth is a judgment beyond human knowing. I *believe* it to bear universal validity insofar as I believe that *any* who comes to share the confession will share the salvation. I *believe* it to be universally true insofar as I believe that it is capable of expressing God's will adequately to *all* who would choose the hermeneutics it implies. But to state that it is, objectively and unambiguously, the exclusively valid universal truth about God and God's will—and this, I gather, is what Braaten would want to state—would contravene Luther's own understanding of Jesus Christ and the hidden God, let alone that it begs the very questions which such dogmatic assertions today are intended to quell.

Rather, to take up a central theme of the Reformation struggles, Christ is God's effective word of salvation *pro me*, for me, and Christ is the normative expression of God's will to save, for me.<sup>45</sup> Christ is and must be the norm of any elaboration of my understanding of God which might derive from another's witness. Christ is and must be the subject of my God-talk to others. But Christ is not and cannot be the exclusive and exhaustive expression of God's will and word.

The Lutheran confession, then, can remain wholly Christocentric in its formulation and understanding, holding firmly in faith to the adequacy of God's word of salvation in Jesus Christ and witnessing without apology to its faith. But the Lutheran confession will also recognize, from within, the necessity of a theocentric humility before the hidden God who in freedom has given God's Christ *pro me*, and who in freedom can work out God's will to save when and where and how God wills. In that humility, with Christ as the norm, I may hear in another's witness to her own faith, something of my God at work in the world in a way I could only have imagined. And one day all such divisions and veils, together with their problems and paradoxes, shall be swept away in the "light of glory" which comes from the unmasked God of all.

<sup>43</sup>Althaus, *Theology*, 281.

<sup>44</sup>Braaten, "Christ Alone," 10.

<sup>45</sup>This formula was used with slightly different nuance in the eucharistic controversies of the sixteenth century. It is not unrelated, however, to recognize in the personal address of God's word in the sacrament a necessarily limited horizon of reference, beyond which lies that hiddenness discussed here.