



Luther on the Hidden God

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AFTER RECOUNTING THE STRANGE AND AWFUL EVENTS IN WHICH GOD USED THE Gentile Cyrus as his instrument of destruction, Isaiah blurted out in wonder and fear: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself"! (Isa 45:15). How can it happen that a God who says, "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I the Lord do all these things," is in the next breath called upon as the "God of Israel, the Savior" (Isa 45:7, 15)? It is the same deep and ugly ditch between fear and love that Luther's explanations of the ten commandments leap: "We are to fear and love God...." But how, especially when God's work in the world is so puzzling or revolting? The answer concerns what theologians have called God's hiddenness and revelation.

Let it first be said Luther doesn't think of God's hiddenness as one attribute of God's being among others. It is not as if he suggests that God is love, God is omnipotent, God is good, and then adds that God is also hidden. That would make "hiddenness" merely an adjective modifying the noun "God." If Luther did use hiddenness in that way it would simply reiterate the obvious fact that God is invisible. Any child who closes her eyes to pray knows that much. It is not so much that God cannot be seen that concerns Luther, but that God actually and actively *hides*.

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Hiding is an activity of God, a verb whose subject is God. That is why it is a “fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31). When God can’t be found it is because God does not want to be found and quite literally hides from would-be seekers. Such a God is living, personal, and fearful because this God is in control of the verb “to hide.” God also does something to us by hiding. It is not the case that God benignly rests in heaven with a substance of some high and spiritual sort ultimately unreachable by human minds, and there waits for us to make some effort at knowing him by analogy or speculation. God hides in this world. While God is an “all the way” God who gives himself fully in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the three persons also hide so as not to be found where God will not rule creation by sheer mercy, that is, when people are not hearing in the world, but speculating out of this world.

Why would God do this? Why does anyone hide? One hides initially, of course, so as not to be found. Yet, even in the game of hide-and-seek a child initially hides so as not to be found in one place, only later to reveal herself in the safe goal, with a cry, “Here I am!” The game would have no point if remaining forever unfound were its goal. God’s game of hide-and-seek is not far different, though the “game” is a matter of life and death. God hides so as not to be found where people seek him, and reveals himself where he is not sought. In the safe goal, so to speak, God can declare a new sort of victory over hapless seekers for meaning, certitude, affirmation, fame, success, and whatever else humans have determined to be of worth to themselves while breaking the first commandment.

I. NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE THEOLOGY

Luther was an apophatic (negative) theologian of a different sort, one who was not simply identifying the limits of human reason, analogy, or the natural knowledge of God. Rather, he understood that by hiding God negates the sinner’s own self in order to make it cataphatic (positive) in a new way. No wonder Luther was interested in the mystics and in the great theologians of the negative way. Yet Luther did not understand the negation only as a moment in one’s use of analogy to “unsay” what cannot rightly be said of an infinite being. Instead, the negation is always the act of God applying the cross to our very persons in this world. Luther once made an assertion that goes to the root of philosophy’s speculation about God’s being:

In his dialogue concerning being, Plato disputes about God and declares that God is nothing and yet is everything. Eck followed Plato, and other theologians also said that the affirmative definition is uncertain but the negative definition is absolute. Nobody has understood this.¹

He willingly went toe to toe with Plato, no less, and warned that even Plato (the

¹*Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, Helmut T. Lehmann, vols. 1-30 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-); vols. 31-55 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957-86) 54:35. Hereafter *LW*.

grandfather of negative theology) did not understand what could and could not be said about God. Plato could think about *being*, but could not anticipate *history* where something really new would happen. God hides and comes first in creation, then in the incarnate Son, and then in the proclamation of the word in the power of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the ungodly and the freeing of the world from its bondage and decay. The mind's speculation *about* being must end in negation (God hides), but the proclamation of God's word *creates new* being (God says, "Here I am, for you" in the proclamation of his word). So Luther continued by suggesting a new "rule" for theology: "These theologians have wished to apprehend God through speculations and have paid no attention to the Word. I recommend that speculation be laid aside, and I should like to have this rule adhered to after my death."² The rule that Luther proposes be "adhered to after my death" is the one I wish to follow here. The effort to identify why and where God hides is the effort to keep theology from ending in mystical silence before an incomprehensible God. Instead, we need more words for the life of the world. Where are these words?

II. WHY GOD HIDES

The question of God's hiding was never purely academic for Luther. It is experienced as opposition, anger, and abandonment that cannot psychologically be distinguished from evil. The response of fear to this experience often reinforces a set of false teachings. When pastors simply adopt the principle that suffering or death has nothing to do with God's will they suggest a kind of modern Manichaeism to hearers: the good God of Jesus Christ is the force behind good things and bad things are attributable to some other force or fate—even if that fate goes unnamed. When God is preached as "gracious" despite experience to the contrary, hearers construct their own theology in the vacuum of faith: wrath, suffering, and even evil has its source in an old god who has been superseded by Jesus Christ. Thus, they stumble from one wickedness to another and enter into a modern Marcionism. Such people suggest that they prefer Jesus to the "God of the Old Testament," because that God bumbled creation, commanded that peoples be killed, and exercised wrath. Attempts to get God off the hook of our suffering and death commonly end with a theory of the misuse of the human free will as the cause of our suffering and the reason for the presence of evil. Once the free will becomes the root of our problems the solution is not to seek God in his words, but to correct the choices of the will, but the gouty foot laughs at our doctoring. Luther knew, however, that God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not doctoring human wills that have succumbed to the world's charms.

In order to understand why God hides and where the hiding places are we must begin in the garden of Eden, for the first hiding in the Bible is surely not God's. In fact, far from hiding, God is found at the beginning of scripture speaking

²Ibid.

the world into existence, and filling the garden with his work and word. Nevertheless, hiding comes quickly upon the scene. We catch Adam and Eve first trying to hide from God behind fig leaves, and then from each other: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons” (Gen 3:7). Then, deep in the garden, they sought to hide from God: “They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8). Adam and Eve were deluded by the serpent into thinking God was jealously hiding something of his own outside the garden, and as an ironic consequence they had to hide themselves from God in the garden. That is, they sought God not where God wanted to be found, where his word promised his blessing, but where God’s word of promise was not. They sought God outside his words.

III. GOD’S FIRST HIDING PLACE

This first game of hide-and-seek was, of course, deadly. It began a new life for Adam and Eve of sweat, pain, and death, and began a new life also (to speak foolishly) for God. Perhaps we could say the options God had were to abscond from the created world or go undercover in it. God must go incognito from this point on in order to rectify a relationship with humans who suspect God is hiding something of himself. This suspicion, Luther believed, was an enthusiasm that is unable to be “satisfied with the divinity that had been revealed and in the knowledge of which they were blessed, but they wanted to penetrate to the depth of the divinity.”³ Sin creates a kind of monovision, monomaniacal in nature, that cannot rest with what the ears hear in faith, but insists on seeing God unclothed, naked, outside his word of promise, and above his works of creation. Monovision is the condition where people no longer know God or themselves, running as they are on pure will power, and running pell-mell out of the world. When this happens God becomes what humans project (in a reversal of Feuerbach and Freud) in order to stop humans from projecting it. God hides in order *not to be found* where humans want to find God. But God also hides *in order to be found* where God wills to be found. Such is the game that must be played with such seekers after God: “All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations, and he did this through other external words.”⁴

We might then say, in that ironic way of Christian teaching, *O felix culpa*—that happy fault that brought God to us in the world with everything of his own. God spares nothing of himself in overcoming original sin. The Father first gave himself for us in creation of heaven and earth so that all creatures benefit us. But, as Luther noted at the end of his *Confession concerning Christ’s Supper*, “This gift has

³LW 5:42.

⁴*Smalcald Articles* III.viii.5, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 312.

become obscured and useless through Adam's fall."⁵ The reason that the Father must hide behind "masks" of creation, or the *larva Dei*, is that God refuses to abandon the world or its sinners.⁶

Any hiding of God, as in this first place, has two moments. That is, the moment of God's unwillingness to be found where humans seek, and then God's desire precisely to be found in the appropriate *larva*, "while they were yet sinners." Hiding is the law and gospel in God's activity with us. Thus for those who use creation as their telescope to peer out of the world and into God's naked majesty, the created masks only inspire fear and dread. A person trembles before the fallen leaf. God cannot be pinpointed in the cosmos. The ultimate mask of creation is that the real is right and the right is real. God works all in all; he uses Cyrus as a pawn, Job as a plaything, and his disposition toward "me" seems at best impenetrable. If God is in the world, so we think, God appears to be the worker of suffering and evil. When the Father hides in this way it leads (un)natural enthusiasts to several unbearable positions: God saves some and damns others, God allows or creates evil, God inflicts suffering or can do nothing but commiserate, the human will is bound, fate is inexorable, etc.

In short, God hides in the world behind the question, "Why?" Why did God allow this to happen? At such moments a person cannot distinguish neatly, as a theologian might like, between God and the devil. God actually hides himself *in* our speculation. Thus, behind this question God hides in naked majesty, because there is one thing that God cannot do, even in response to sinful humans, and that is to cease being the Father who creates the world. At the same time humans, despite their efforts to the contrary, cannot cease being human, so that in one way or another they will give God God's due as creatures. In his most important discussion of this place and reason for God's hiding, Luther described God as "not preached," hiding outside words:

[W]e have to argue in one way about God or the will of God as preached, revealed, offered, and worshiped, and in another way about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not offered, not worshiped. To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours.⁷

The reason that God hides where he is not preached is precisely that God is the Creator Spirit by whom we receive the Father's reconciling work through the Son. So, the Son refuses to be found without being begotten by the Father and raised from the dead, the Father without sending the Son to the cross and raising the Son from the dead, and the Holy Spirit without glorifying the Father and the Son by teaching us to understand the deed of Christ as precisely "for us and for our sake." To seek God behind this giving of himself in words preached is to seek some

⁵LW 37:366.

⁶*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. to date (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 40/I:174-175: "*Ideo universa creatura est eius larva.*"

⁷LW 33:139.

God behind Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, economic and immanent, outside the world, who might allow us to bypass the revelation of our own nature as sinners and creatures. Though there is no such God for us, the delusion does not let us hear the truth. God hides beyond every speculation in order not to be found outside the preached word who is Jesus Christ incarnate. The result is to find God in wrath, and thus to find our end in the feeling of death where there is nothing more that we can do. In that place God seems absent, hostile, and always demands something more.

IV. GOD HIDES A SECOND TIME

The hiding behind the masks of creation itself, we recall, is a response to our first attempt to hide from God. Thus God is hiding there not only so that original sin's enthusiasm will not attempt to leave the world and enter majesty itself. God also hides in order to hold humans in preparation for the time and place when they are driven to find God where God *would* be found, in mercy not wrath. God makes of the masks of creation also a grace that makes room specifically for faith. Luther observed, "He uses our effort as a mask under which He blesses us and dispenses His gifts, so that there is a place for faith." The masks become "for believers," *the place for faith*, just as they are for unbelievers the occasion for blasphemy: "Unbelief makes a judge and enemy out of a God and the Father....Faith makes a God and Father out of an enemy and judge."⁸

Of course the question remains how it is that in the same mask of creation one finds the place for faith and the other the place for blasphemy? The answer is not by embracing nature more fully or by increasing our effort so that we make something more out of our work than we have mustered before. The answer is the arrival in created flesh of the second person of the Trinity, who alone can silence the despairing question, "Why?" God's hiding and so his self-giving is not exhausted in the giving of the Father in creation: "Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts."⁹

Until recently, when Luther had mentioned God hiding it was considered an anti-Trinitarian modalism, a Manichaeism, or some other embarrassment. But then with the rediscovery of Luther's writings and the theology of the cross in them, one hiding place became something of the rage: God both reveals and hides in the cross of Christ. God hiding in the cross is the central matter, it is true, and gives to us the specific dialectic of God hiding and revealing himself under the "sign of his opposite," in suffering and death. However, too often what was lost was the notion that this was done in order that life and righteousness be offered to the ungodly in proclamation. Toward the end of his life, when Luther was lecturing on

⁸LW 9:96-97.

⁹LW 37:366.

Genesis, he addressed the strange reaction to his teaching in the *Bondage of the Will* that God's will is unthwartable:

I hear that here and there among the nobles and persons of importance vicious statements are being spread abroad concerning predestination or God's foreknowledge. For this is what they say: "If I am predestined, I shall be saved, whether I do good or evil. If I am not predestined, I shall be condemned regardless of my works."¹⁰

As if this false bravado before death were not bad enough, Luther recognized that the real problem with this confusion was the rejection of Jesus Christ who comes to us in the manger as our new life while ending the old in faith. He refers this whole matter to the second way in which God hides:

[F]or this is how he set forth His will and counsel: "I will reveal My foreknowledge and predestination to you in an extraordinary manner, but not by this way of reason and carnal wisdom, as you imagine. This is how I will do so: From an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless, I will remain the same God. I will be made flesh, or send my Son. He shall die for your sins and shall rise again from the dead. And in this way I will fulfill your desire, in order that you may be able to know whether you are predestined or not. Behold, this is My Son; listen to him (cf. Matt. 17:5). 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."¹¹

This is God's second hiding, and it too has the double effect. Those who hear God's unthwartable will in Christ for them no longer are merely in the room of faith, or have a place for faith, but are fixed in faith, and are certain that the work of Christ is for them. They no longer speculate about God's will in general because they have it in particular. This was the whole purpose of Luther noting that God outside Christ, outside the word, is an impenetrable power who holds our lives in his hands and is hiding his will from us. He does not want to be found outside Christ. He wants to be found in Christ, but must "hide" a second time in order to fly below our radar which is set for what we take to be "spiritual" things above. He comes where we did not expect him, under the sign of his opposite, in suffering, death, opposition to the law, ungodliness, and shame. There the Father attacks the power of evil that has usurped his world, and finds the way to give himself to us in words a second time. God wants to be found in the words of promise in Christ that give new life. Otherwise God will rule his world by destroying those who seek him unclothed in words.

The whole discussion of the predestinating Father is only the means by which one comes to the predestinating Son whose promises are unthwartable when preached to you. That is why Luther concludes his review of the *Bondage of the Will* by saying:

¹⁰LW 5:42.

¹¹LW 5:44-45.

I have written that everything is absolute and unavoidable; but at the same time I have added that one must look at the revealed God, as we sing in the hymn: *Er heist Jesu Christ, der HERR Zebaoth, und ist kein ander Gott*, “Jesus Christ is the lord of hosts, and there is no other God” ...but they will pass over all these places and take only those that deal with the hidden God.¹²

And as he emphatically argued earlier, “If you have Him, then you also have the hidden God together with Him who has been revealed.”¹³ God hides where his unthwartable will destroys sin in order to come to us with an unthwartable will of mercy on account of Christ.

V. GOD’S FINAL HIDING PLACE

How is it that some “see” this hidden God and others do not? This requires what J. Louis Martyn once called bifocal vision, i.e., seeing through two lenses, old and new, at the same time in order to understand how God could be revealed and concealed in the same historical act; how Christ could be fully human and divine; how the cross is also the way of victory over death, etc.¹⁴ How does one cease having monovision and begin bifocal vision? How is it that one can come to the Christ who is hidden a second time in order to come to the Father who is hidden a first time, which in turn is to overcome the hiding of the human before God? This requires a third hiding by God:

But because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others, increase and extend it.¹⁵

The Spirit does this work as with all of God’s work, hiddenly. Inwardly and outwardly, inwardly by working faith, outwardly through means to which the imparted faith is attached. Thus, the Holy Spirit is no add-on person of the Trinity for Luther. The Holy Spirit is the person in whom God comes finally and completely so as to accomplish the goal of all the hiding, to bring you to faith in Christ in a world reconciled to God. Finally the Holy Spirit comes to you in the external means of the gospel, baptism, and communion, where creation’s masks hold specific promises of Jesus Christ. God is of course present everywhere in creation, but not everywhere as a word, and not nearly everywhere as a word of promise. Of course, as we have come to learn, there is always a hiding and being found even here. God hides in the preacher, in the bread, wine, and water, in order to be found there in Christ alone reconciling the world to himself. Luther observed that God

¹²Ibid., 50.

¹³Ibid., 48.

¹⁴J. Louis Martyn, “From Paul to Flannery O’Connor with the Power of Grace,” in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 279-297.

¹⁵LW 37:366.

hides nowhere more deeply than in the preaching office: “It seems so frail over against the fury of the world, since the persons administering the office are fugitives, that is, feeble and insignificant people.”¹⁶ There, when people are fixed in faith and certain of God’s promise, they are also fixed in the world as creatures whose work is to exercise the dominion Adam and Eve evaded. When an enthusiast is ended, the Creator Spirit makes a new creature who worships God in the world and lives from God’s word.

Only from being fixed in the place of faith (dead and raised) does one even dare to speak ultimately of the “alien and proper work” of God (Isa 28:21) as Luther did:

God’s “alien” works are these: to judge, to condemn, and to punish those who are impenitent and do not believe....He does not want us to follow the example of the Manichaeans and imagine that there are several gods: one, the source of all good; the other, the source of all evil. God wants us to regard the evils that we experience as coming to us with His permission....Moses’ meaning, therefore is, “May Thy work become evident: that is, restore us, who were chastened, to life; justify those who were plagued by sin, and so show us Thy ‘natural’ work, life and righteousness.”¹⁷

Of course Luther could never speak this way without being the worst of demons unless he were right about God giving himself wholly and completely, though hiddenly, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—holding nothing back. This was God’s way of working with people who insisted on hiding from Him in the first place. Without Jesus Christ, God would rightly be reviled for evil. In that case we should try to run out of this world and find some better god. But our mistake was to run to what we imagined was a god while God was coming to the world to end evil. In Christ and through the Holy Spirit evil is brought to an end by death, even that which causes the death in us. Therefore, when we run to Christ because the Spirit shows him to us, we can finally say with all due praise, “Truly you are a God who hides himself,” and thereby rejoice in the life that the Father has given to sinners. Our game with God is nearly over. After all, the Father’s natural work is “life and righteousness,” and he would like to get back to it as soon as possible, thank you. ☩

¹⁶LW 19:84.

¹⁷LW 13:135-136.