



Review Essay

Luther's Outlaw God, by Steven D. Paulson. 3 vols. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018–21.

Volume 1: *Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (2018)

Volume 2: *Hidden in the Cross* (2019)

Volume 3: *Sacraments and God's Attack on the Promise* (2021)

Editor's Note: The publication of this work in three volumes is a major accomplishment, and I felt that it deserved more attention than a simple book review. So three Lutheran scholars were invited to read this trilogy and make their own responses. After this, Steve Paulson was invited to draft his own response to the three reviewers.

Review

TIM SALESKA

First, I'd like to thank Mark Granquist for inviting me to review the three volumes of *Luther's Outlaw God* (*LOG*), even though I am not a medieval or Reformation scholar, nor do I have more than a nodding familiarity with Erasmus, whose specter haunts every corner of Paulson's work. In spite of my nervousness over a lack of expertise, when I began to read, I was soon comforted by the realization that Paulson didn't intend *LOG* to be only an examination of theological arguments accessible to experts. Through the greater part of the three volumes, I heard Paulson *preaching* to me, and preaching a sermon I need to hear—can't hear enough, in fact. To read *LOG* as a sermon to me is a blessing that has me in Paulson's debt.

I teach the Old Testament, and I am also the dean of Ministerial Formation at my seminary. This means that I am interested both in becoming a more competent reader of Scripture and in forming our students to faithfully serve their Lord in the places to which they will be called. *LOG* provides vital counsel for both interests.

Paulson develops his arguments around the dichotomy that he says is basic in all theology: the difference between God unpreached and God preached, God who hides so as not to be found and God who hides so as to be found (2.7; 3.342 et al.). That is to say, the dichotomy between *law* and *gospel*, which, as Paulson says, “refer primarily not to the way you and I feel about God, but to God himself” (1.24).

That last quote suggests that theology’s basic dichotomy is not a theoretical concept or an abstract theological proposition. It describes reality, and it cuts through real people—all of us—like a butcher cutting the fat from the steak, like a farmer sifting chaff from wheat. Everything—literally *everything*—depends upon on which side of the divide you rest.

A constant theme of Paulson’s sermon is, *You will have God either this way or that way, but not both*. There is no middle ground on which to stand. The relentless dichotomizing in which Paulson engages us throughout *LOG*—allowing us no middle ground—is a hard doctrine to swallow. We live in a world of grays. We see wiggle room in almost every area of our lives. Even in the biggest questions having to do with our salvation and eternal destiny, we see room to maneuver. We see possibility. The burden of Paulson’s sermon is to disabuse us of this notion. God is a God of *necessity*, not *possibility*. Again, Paulson dichotomizes; he does not homogenize.

Through the 1,066 pages of *LOG*, Paulson preaches the basic dichotomy deep into our souls. In order to get at our hard hearts, he takes us through some of Luther’s major writings: *Bondage of the Will* (principally), *The Heidelberg Disputation*, *The Large Catechism*, *Confession Concerning the Lord’s Supper*, *Lectures on Genesis*, and many others. Through the course of my reading, Paulson gave me many perspective-altering experiences. In this review, I will discuss a couple.

First, Paulson taught me that the answers we give to life’s biggest questions depend upon on which side of the dividing line we stand. “Who is God?” “What does it mean that God is omnipotent?” “Do we have free will?” “What does it mean to be human?” “What is the human creature’s relationship to God?” “Where does evil come from?” “What is the purpose of suffering?” “Where is a merciful God to be found?” “Am I saved or damned?” “Is God for me or against me?” “How can I be certain?” Each of these questions has two diametrically opposed answers, depending on where you stand.

One of the best features of Paulson’s sermon is that the answers he and Luther give to these questions come from their reading of the Scriptures. Always with theology’s basic dichotomy in mind, Paulson takes us through text after text—Old Testament narratives, prophecy, wisdom, the gospels, and the epistles. The interpretive insights that Paulson gives to famous and problematic texts alike are captivating and were more than enough to keep me reading.

For example, anyone who has taught a Bible class on Genesis knows that many of the questions people have about God, his omnipotence, free will, the origin of evil, the relationship between law and gospel, and so on come home to roost in the first three chapters of the Bible. Paulson's discussion of Genesis 1–3 weaves its way through all three volumes of *LOG* and opposes conventional interpretations, which argue for the free will of Adam and Eve in terms of law and free choice (cf. 1.213–19, 238–40; 2.157–78; 3.349–53).

Paulson's sermon on this text reaches its climax in volume 3, where he writes:

It seems strange to us, but these two trees and dual worships were not in the least “legal” in form . . . nor was a neutral free will, hiding inside Adam, asked to choose between opposites of good or evil. To the contrary, *God was making love to them there*. Adam and Eve were created intoxicated with love for God, and God provided a way to express that love. . . . Inward worship was thus naturally expressed outwardly; the Creator was not hidden above, or beyond these trees, but giving himself in them. The two arbor worships were not given as tests to the creatures, but were ways for Adam and Eve to listen to their Creator and so receive his love verbally and certainly. . . . So, Luther observed that God gave Adam and Eve the tree of life much in the way he currently gives his chosen sheep the pulpit, baptismal fountain, and altar (3.350–51, emphasis mine).

Such a startling reading is possible only for those who have been grasped by God preached, God who hides so as to be found, God who has wrapped himself in a promise and given himself completely to us in that promise.

And this brings me to the *second* and probably biggest lesson that I learned. If where you stand in that basic dichotomy is a matter of having God for you or against you—a matter, quite literally, of life or death—how do you get from one side to the other? How can I be saved?

Paulson spends the bulk of his time teaching us the two-part answer: First, *you can't do it yourself*. As Paul says, “By the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). This truth sounds straightforward, but in reality, we are all bound to fight against it and seek a saving word in law. Paulson demonstrates the futility of this search in his dogged analysis of theologians and philosophers from Erasmus to Karl Barth, all of whom seek a non-accusatory (saving) law (3.45 et al.). Paulson's description of Karl Barth summarizes the temptation that entices us all: “Barth's conclusion, however, is more alike than different from previous types of medieval scholasticism. God is not above the law; he is not beneath the law; he is the law” (3.124). But Paulson shows us just how wrong this is. *God is not the law*. If you want one sentence summarizing *LOG*, this would be my pick.

God is not the law. This means that I will not find a friendly God in law. What I will always find is threat, accusation, displeasure, uncertainty, and a God who remains silent as to how he feels about me.

Second, this means that God himself must rescue me, and this he does quite outside of the law by making a *promise*. Paulson is at his best in the way he distinguishes a command and a promise and proclaims that literally everything depends upon whether you have God's promise or not (cf. 2.178–84). What is the difference between David and Saul or Peter and Judas? One received a promise, and one did not (1.140–60).

If this is true—if it is God's promise, outside of law, that gives me life and hope—where do I find such a promise? Where does God speak to me and not remain forever silent? Paulson's answer is simple, but all the more wonderful for that: God puts his promises in “wrappers” of created things: baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, the lips of a preacher (3.165–75 et al.). Paulson marvels at this: “How strange that everything having to do with humanity's highest knowledge (the doctrine of God), depends upon whether a person has a preacher or not. . . . Yet this difference in God is the difference between life and death, being known and knowing, a theology of the cross or glory, between eternal life or eternal damnation” (1.53).

God decided to put the lowly preacher at the center of everything. The most important person in my life is my *preacher*. How can this be? Through three volumes, Paulson teaches me why. And in teaching me, he has changed me, and has influenced my teaching and preaching in refreshing ways. For any preacher of the gospel, the power of Paulson's preaching is reason enough to take up *LOG* and take its penetrating truths to heart.

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Review

ADAM MORTON

That God is hidden from human eyes is known to everyone, not least those who insist he therefore must not exist. In this sense, the teaching on the hidden God is news to nobody. What is most striking about Luther's approach to this theological commonplace is not his insistence that God hides (*Deus absconditus*), but his specification of how God gives and shows himself, becoming truly and completely revealed (*Deus revelatus*). Thus, a basic distinction is made, as in *The Bondage of the Will*, where Luther famously states, “We 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.”¹ This distinction is Steven Paulson’s premise in his three-volume investigation of divine hiddenness in Luther. According to Paulson, Luther’s distinction carries one further basic implication, on which the project and Luther’s whole theology rests: God is not the law, either in his hidden majesty or in his word. God is an outlaw, which sets him at odds with the noblest aspirations of sinners everywhere.

Most often in recent scholarship, hiddenness in Luther has been considered of two “types,” as the unapproachable majesty of the predestinating God who works all in all, and as God’s hiding under the form of his opposite (*sub contrario*) in the cross. While some version of the latter has become a staple of modern theologies (Lutheran or non-), the former is avoided by nearly all, famously repellent to Karl Barth, and seen even in Luther’s own lifetime as perhaps his most troubling idiosyncrasy. Paulson rejects this interpretation of Luther, following his teacher Gerhard Forde, and offers a substantial revision. God’s hiding does not take place in two distinct types, but in a simple movement, which is liturgical in its force. First, God hides outside his word so as not to be found at all but to remain free over all things. In this way, humans are to have nothing to do with him. Second, God hides within his word, precisely so as to be found, heard, and grasped. Thus, God’s own activity implies the structure of Christian worship: a procession away from the silence of the “naked” God to where God has clothed and placed himself in mercy (in Paulson’s characteristic phrasing from volume 3, “God in a bun”), which is the gospel and the sacraments.

Within this movement, Paulson further describes not two but three concrete locations of God’s hiding, which correspond to the persons of the Trinity and in terms of which the whole of our salvation may be mapped out. The Father gives himself in all the things of creation, as in the tree of life in Eden, but we have rejected him there. On account of this, the Son gives himself incarnate to work our reconciliation to the Father in his cross and resurrection, but we have rejected him there as well. Finally, the Spirit gives himself to work faith in us by the preached absolution, and so at last bestows the Son and the Father too. These locations are the basis of *Luther’s Outlaw God’s* three-volume structure, which is further grounded in Luther’s discussion of the three “lights” of nature, grace, and glory which conclude his address to Erasmus.

The thrust of Paulson’s argument, and its core for preaching, concerns the relationship of hiddenness to the law and the concept of free will. In his telling, the broad consensus of theology (as of the sinful human heart) is that God’s hiding is for the sake of the law, conceived as God’s own essential goodness. God hidden is abstract and ideal, an imagined perfection. This hiding supposedly gives room for a free will to operate, for humans to attempt to correspond to God through the law,

¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–), 33:139.

and so not only to justify themselves but to justify God, if only in their imaginations, by holding him blameless for the terrors witnessed in the world. Thus, for example, hiddenness may be applied to God's activity to say that he mysteriously "permits" children to die of infectious diseases rather than actively kills them by these means, or that if he kills them, he must have a very good if entirely secret reason for this appalling behavior. The hidden premise and fixed star of such logic is that God is the law, and that the only conceivable good is conformity (God's and ours) to that law. Luther's doctrine radically opposes this conception of hiddenness and the law.

Those who have previously encountered Paulson will not be surprised by the scope of his discussion, which ranges freely from antiquity to the postmodern, and from exegetical grit to philosophical abstraction. While the series finds its center and resting point in the debate with Erasmus, its lively engagement with Luther's later biblical writings is notable and especially welcome. The teaching about hiddenness is not at all confined to a few texts but interlaced through the last twenty years of Luther's career and so is inextricable from his mature theology. Paulson has therefore made a potent argument that contemporary attempts to appropriate Luther without this teaching are dealing with an entirely different doctrine of God and so produce theologies fundamentally at odds with Luther's own. More than that, he has argued (in something of a reversal of Tolstoy's judgment about unhappy families) that such theologies are strikingly alike in their opposition to Luther (or rather, to Luther's outlaw God), never deviating from their normally unspoken identification of God with the law.

Though the conversation partners and twists on the theme are many, that inner, legal sameness connects them. Luther's predecessors, who shaped the traditions in which he was steeped and through which he emerged, are thus frequently put in conversation with his successors, especially those whose responses to Luther have shaped the modern tradition. Plato, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, Aquinas, and the Rhine mystics inhabit largely the same theological territory as Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Rudolf Otto, Karl Barth, Erich Przywara, and Eberhard Jüngel. Some of Paulson's most effective chapters pair these figures, so that Pseudo-Dionysius and Jacques Derrida seek God together in wise silence, or Erasmus and Robert Jenson contend for God's essential moral agency. The line between confessing Christians and opponents of Christianity is likewise blurred almost to indistinction, as when the root of "Rahner's rule," the putative identity of economic and immanent Trinities, is traced back to Ludwig Feuerbach's view of God as the projection of human desires.

In this, Paulson's argumentation is never isolated from the intellectual currents surrounding us, and operates not at all like a mere conservative protest against a modern or postmodern world gone morally and metaphysically haywire. Nor does Paulson fall into the trap (so characteristic of repositioning theologies, even highly sophisticated ones such as Radical Orthodoxy) of identifying

a golden age to which we might return. Luther's own discovery was painfully hard-won, and is taught by God only through the same personal trials. In this respect, the recommended style of theology is daring and forward-looking, not because of a hypothetical openness to the future, but through the certainty of the divine promises given through preachers. A peculiar effect of this inversion is that modernity begins to feel strangely scholastic and confined; rather than an emergence from self-imposed immaturity, it is revealed as small and defensive, turned inward and demanding that God (whether acknowledged as such or not) honor this same turning.

There are aspects of the three books which may test the patience of some. The first volume moves rather briskly at around 250 pages, but the second and third come in near 400 each. Within these thousand pages, rabbit trails and gnostic remarks abound. For example, late in the third volume two footnotes point to Sergei Bulgakov, tantalizing but not explaining enough to provide much sense as to Paulson's concern. If anything, one might have expected certain excursions to be somewhat longer (one gets the sense that Paulson has something filed away to say on these points, but either cut or is reserving it). At the same time, there are matters which, for all but the most engaged readers, will feel positively drilled into the ground. The rehearsals of Luther's voyage through various forms of mystical theology and false "theologies of the cross" in the second volume are sound and historically well informed, but also somewhat repetitive and rarely exciting. Surprisingly for a book subtitled "Hidden in the Cross," there is little christological meat in that volume; the bold conversations about God, materiality, bodies, and the incarnation take place mostly in the third. Some topics are not addressed at much length, though they might have been expected. Bits of an atonement theology can be inferred from Paulson's trilogy, but the whole is spelled out only in the most minimal form. Precisely where this picture does and does not comport with Forde's well-known (and controversial) efforts is an exercise for a very careful reader.

As a whole, *Luther's Outlaw God* easily represents the most thorough articulation to date of Luther's doctrine of the hidden God and should be counted as a major work on the doctrine of God in its own right. Paulson himself would be disappointed, however, if the work only received scholarly attention. Its aim is not theology as such, but preaching and, so, true Christian worship. There are ample resources here for patient pastors (said patience can be amplified by a willingness to skip around a bit) to improve their preaching and pastoral care by focused attention on the most needful thing: the delivery through human lips of a truly divine, complete, and utterly lawless absolution.

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Review

JOHN W. HOYUM

Lutherans have always been puzzled about what to do with Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* (1525). They have hesitated concerning this book, despite the fact that Luther himself commends it unto posterity alongside his *Small Catechism* (1529). Instead, Luther's interpreters have frequently focused their attention on his other writings, thus avoiding the main issue of the will, its captivity, and God's hiddenness.² Perhaps a truly catholic Lutheranism waits to be mined from the reformer's early writings.³ The portrait of Luther that emerges is one of a "radical Augustinian" who has supplemented Christian Platonism with an apocalyptic imagination,⁴ a maximalist Christology,⁵ and perhaps a patristic doctrine of *theosis*.⁶ Christ's real presence in the Eucharist must then be Luther's principal teaching, with its speculative possibilities finding fulfillment in modern ecumenism's dream of Christendom reunited.⁷ Others have passed over human bondage and divine hiddenness by seeking out Luther's catholic Trinitarianism⁸ or the implicit nominalism of his late-career return to the scholastic method.⁹ The Indonesian screen with which Karl Barth concealed his copy of Luther's writings is as fitting an image as any for how Luther studies has coped with Luther's teaching on election and divine hiddenness.

Steven Paulson's trilogy, *Luther's Outlaw God*, gives an account of the reformer's theology that refuses to merely cope with Luther where he is most dangerous. Paulson's triptych embraces *The Bondage of the Will* and its threatening assertion that God hides outside his word so that creatures find him only in the promise of the gospel delivered by one sinner to another. Three kinds of hiddenness emerge across Paulson's three volumes. In volume 1 he tackles predestination, the problem of evil, and God's hiddenness outside the promise. Usually, predestination and evil are "monsters" of theology that are best avoided or explained away, like in

² Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 33:294. See Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, ed. Steven D. Paulson, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

³ David S. Yeago, "The Catholic Luther," in *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 13–34.

⁴ See Paul R. Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 153–162.

⁵ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken: Fates of Theology from Luther through Leibniz* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 4.

⁶ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

⁷ See Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997–99), 2:211–69.

⁸ See Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018).

⁹ See Dennis Bielfeldt, Mickey L. Mattox, and Paul R. Hinlicky, *The Substance of the Faith: Luther's Doctrinal Theology for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

speculative theodicy or the reconstruction of deity according to a rule of empathy. Instead, Paulson understands that theology itself is one of the main problems when it comes to hiddenness: fiat cannot render God less threatening, as if human cleverness could remove the offense of divine sovereignty over life and death. Paulson refuses the temptation to litigate God's responsibility for evil according to the law. Lutheran theology terminates not in speculation, participation, or imitation, but in preaching and hearing--the true source of faith and certainty (Rom 10:17).

God actively hides outside his word, but the divine majesty, in itself, is no safe harbor for sinners either. Instead, God must become graspable, which is the very logic of the incarnation. The second volume of Paulson's work approximates a reflection on the second article of the Apostles' Creed and thus on christological matters of dogmatics. In this sense, God also hides himself in the flesh of Christ--not, in this case, to contradict his promise but in order to make the promise that the gospel delivers. The usual direction of travel in classical Christology is from the incarnation to some version of deification. But Paulson discloses Luther's crucial, Pauline revision of the patristic teaching that what is not assumed is not healed: Christ not only assumes humanity at Christmas, but throughout his ministry he also assumes human sin. Christ's theft of human transgression culminates at the cross, where the law discovers that all sin is gathered into the body of Christ. At Good Friday, the law reaches the end of its appointed task.

What happens at the cross is not the reconciliation of God's wrath with mercy, but the real conflict of judgment and promise waged at Calvary in the body of Christ crucified. Law and gospel are not disclosed by their combat to be compatible dimensions of God's character. Nor is the gospel a reparative supplement for the law's failure to make people righteous. Instead, Paulson makes the case that the true character of God is not the law, but mercy. However, this is not, for Paulson, a generalizable doctrine that serves theology in the pursuit of knowledge or self-understanding. Rather, theology serves preaching by inciting sinners into delivering this promise of God's mercy to others after it has first been heard. Only in this way does the preached God overcome the unpreached God. A sinner possesses the hidden God without remainder--but only in the word which delivers from death to life, and nowhere else. Examined in volume 3, this is the third kind of hiddenness, in which God attaches himself to the external word, the water of baptism, and the bread and wine of the Supper.

It would be wrong to say that Paulson's trilogy requires an "esoteric" reading strategy. Even so, his work operates on multiple levels all at once, and in close coordination. One might read *Luther's Outlaw God* as an attempt to build a three-volume dogmatics out of a close and sustained reading of *The Bondage of the Will*. It serves admirably if this is what the reader is after. Yet Paulson is not just concerned with Luther's infamous text of 1525, but also executes close and ingenious interpretation of relevant sections of other writings, such as the *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535) and the *Lectures on Genesis* (1535-1545). Paulson is at work unveiling how hiddenness and promise operate across Luther's writings. Luther's dangerous account of God's hiddenness is not a momentary indulgence of

proto-Nietzschean nihilism, but a consistent and indispensable feature of Luther's evangelical theology.

On another level, *Luther's Outlaw God* is also a manual for pastoral care and preaching. It is an exemplary artifact of catechetical dogmatics, designed to make readers flee God's hiding and seek him in the word—the only place where he is truly found. Paulson unlocks Luther's use of a range of texts, and provides insightful readings of crucial passages of the Old Testament in particular. As a series of encounters with the biblical text, Paulson's scriptural interpretation is unique in that it avoids mystical, speculative, and figural reading strategies that end in contemplation rather than proclamation. Scripture is God's infallible and inerrant word because it reliably performs its content upon its readers and hearers. Humans become passive before the Bible when it gives what it says, and so reductive historical-critical approaches can do little but dismember the texts as mere artifacts of human history or experience. Paulson's catechetical approach to Scripture shows how Luther helps us move past both precritical and modernist hermeneutics.

Paulson's trilogy is also, finally, an exercise in philosophical theology. It remaps the relation of Lutheran theology to the metaphysical question by clarifying Luther's rejection of both Thomism's analogy and nominalism's fundamentally legalistic ontology. Having failed to integrate Luther's rejection of the law's eternality, modern Lutherans under the influence of Kant and Hegel fare little better, left conjugating the logic of either human perception or human history. But Paulson's contribution is also timely, given how the synthesis of Christianity and Platonism has preoccupied so many recent Protestant attempts to refute Roman Catholic polemics about the origins of modernity. A vision of pristine, original Protestant Thomism runs aground precisely when it comes to Luther, who understood that the analogical architecture of participation is the highest form of a legal scheme in which humans ascend into the divine life through the exercise of what vestiges of freedom they still possess. But on such matters, we are still catching up to Luther.

Luther's Outlaw God should be read as several different things at once: as Luther interpretation, as systematic theology, as exegetical prolegomena for proclamation, and as philosophical theology. It is useful for a variety of readers, while also charting a course for new lines of inquiry in Luther scholarship and systematic theology. The great strength of Paulson's contribution is that he refuses the usual avoidance strategy of Luther's interpreters when it comes to the distinction of law and gospel and the troubling question of God's hiddenness. Even better than this, Paulson indicates how God's election by means of the promise constitutes Luther's deepest insight about God's justification of sinners on account of Christ. However dangerous Luther's outlaw God might at first appear, wrestling with him for a while is worth it—you might even escape with a blessing.

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Response

STEVEN D. PAULSON

Nothing could be more pleasing than to respond to three scholars who happen to represent the new generation in theology. Theology these days seems like the vanishing science, but all is not lost in this divine work, as they demonstrate. In fact, much is to be expected from a fresh approach to Luther in our own day and time. Just as it happened for Karl Barth, so it can happen for us, that Luther's *Lectures on Romans* opened a completely new and free use of Scripture. But as all the reviewers noted, Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, along with his masterpieces on Genesis and Galatians (among others), can presently open new lines of Luther scholarship—and regenerate theology to become worthwhile again. In fact, it is our contention that Luther's theology is not now declining; it has never really been tried—especially among Lutherans. For this reason, Pastor Morton noted that *Luther's Outlaw God* does not only recall Luther's history but looks forward to what Luther studies can become.

Professor Saleska is also correct, that the three volumes together are a (long) sermon to the readers—much like Luther's own *Bondage of the Will* was for Erasmus. I remember being taught as a college student that Luther's great work *The Bondage of the Will* demonstrated the classic debate form: Luther's "No" to Erasmus's "Yes." Supposedly this was no trivial debate; it argued for the central, but hidden, truth of human free will. The reader had to determine by points which debater had won. It will not surprise anyone that I was taught that while Luther was aggressive, the prize belonged to Erasmus, who won on points. Human will must be free; there is no other choice. But Luther was not debating Erasmus—he was preaching to him. Luther knew that the central doctrines of the church were at stake (free will and eternal law), but Erasmus had gotten stuck in the worst misery of humankind and needed someone to pull him out of endless uncertainty.

All the reviewers recognized that theology is for proclamation, not speculation. This theology follows along a thin red line that is populated by the very best evangelical teachers—including my teacher Gerhard Forde. God really does have majesty, and that majesty can even be sought, but it is no safe harbor for any explorer. It also means, as Pastor Hoyum notes, that Christ's incarnation not only assumes humanity but, more importantly, assumes sin! All Christian teachings are at stake in this realization, especially that there are not merely two kinds of hiddenness for God (as Pastor Morton notes), but three ways that God hides. God hides as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each in surprisingly different ways. Luther's teaching on God's hiddenness opens up all these great catechisms of the church: Trinity, Christology, cross—along with the chief doctrine of justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law.

I am also appreciative that all reviewers noted how this proclamation theology catechizes. We teach through central Bible texts—or exegesis. The subject

matter of *Luther's Outlaw God* is how God hides, and why. While this definitely concerns the doctrine of God proper, it does so through the gritty details of the most offensive Bible texts. For years people have been trying to figure out whether Luther's *Bondage of the Will* was really anthropology or theology—about human free will or divine necessity. The answer is both, of course. In dealing with free will, Luther confined Erasmus to Scripture. Erasmus disliked that limitation but said he would comply (though often he failed), but overall, they ended up fighting over the right thing in many details of scriptural exegesis. Moreover, all the reviewers noted that the key biblical texts (even in the New Testament, such as Galatians, Romans, and Mark) are primarily about Old Testament stories: Jacob and Esau, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Rebekah and Isaac. These encompass the wildest events of God's hiding both outside his word, in majestic, hidden power, and inside his word, as "God in a bun." The near homicide of Moses, the betrayal of Judas, David's trial, Adam's fall, Jonah's double rebellion, God wrestling with Jacob/Israel, the near sacrifice of Isaac, and the beautiful absolution by Joseph became the stuff of Luther's hidden God, and so the bulk of these *Outlaw God* volumes.

All theology is exegesis, and exegesis is done either by the law alone or with the divine distinction of law and gospel. I was happy to note that our Old Testament expert, Professor Saleska, noted that all these stories boil down to the first three chapters of Genesis. There we find the crucial matter of what God is doing before, in, and after the law is abrogated. It is not just the various stages of sin, as Augustine taught Christians their theology, but is the specific Adam's relation to the law that matters. Likewise, God's relation to the law is laid out there and gives us an outlaw God—wonderfully and fearfully. When this is ignored, theology repeats its failed and desperate search for a non-accusatory law. No wonder the great teachers like Luther and Augustine end their lives in the book of Genesis.

Pastor Morton is also correct to say that the most surprising thing about Luther's way of interpreting the words "God, you hide yourself!" (Isa 45:15) is not how little we know about God but just how much we *do* know, and how certain that knowledge is. God refuses to be found where he does not want to be found; however, it is more amazing to know how abundantly God bestows himself (wrapped in very strange things) with spectacular promises. It is precisely this abundance, this assurance, and the down-to-earth wrappers or "masks" of God's bestowal that make Luther so controversial and so lively. As Pastor Hoyum notes, it is not pedestrian Luther, but dangerous Luther, that is worth knowing. Strangely, people do not want forgiveness when they get it. They don't want a divine gift. They do not want the gospel's certainty. Why not? Because it ruins their dreams of justification through the law—especially the dream that I can eventually love the cross! If I could do that, faith is within my grasp.

Three volumes of this are no doubt repetitious (and perhaps also take people down some rabbit holes to see how badly Luther has been understood). Yet, all reviewers noted that the simplicity of Luther's teaching gets very exciting when he dives deeply into Scripture. There are three ways or places God hides: by the

Father in creation, the Son in the cross, and the Holy Spirit in baptism. These all keep taking us back to the central, simple matter for Luther: you will have God one way or another—either as unpreached (and so unknown) or preached and trusted in absolute certainty. One could just say that—and stop. But, as Professor Saleska noted, there is no in-between when dealing with the true God. There is no gray area in faith. This leads to one simple but troubling assertion: God is not the law. It is amazing how many paths we use to deny this. It is true that God speaks the law into existence, and that divine law is even eternal. Pastor Hoyum noted, correctly, that the law is not eternal, since it ends. But Luther is precise about this language in his *Greater Galatians Lectures*: the law *is eternal!* However, the law's end happens when it no longer speaks—when it goes silent. The long discussion of Luther and mysticism, especially in the second volume, attests to the fact that theologians have long sought divine silence but did not learn to seek the *law's* silence. Luther and Melancthon, along with their best students, always knew the truth: the law always accuses.

As all my reviewers noted, this affects every doctrine, including the so-called “atonement” theories that continue as flashpoints. I might take issue with Pastor Morton that there is not much on this doctrine, especially in the second volume concerning the cross. Yet, I acknowledge that atonement as a doctrine is not laid out in the typical modern patterns of subjective, objective, and classic. The special concern of the second volume is the many abuses of the theology of the cross, as Pastor Hoyum noted. This is no small matter, since I am properly associated with the meaning of the theology of the cross (as all Lutherans should be), and we want to get this right. Christ's cross must be considered exegetically, and so in conversation with the fascinating mystical, apophatic traditions that Luther himself went through and conquered. It is also true that Christology, as it is normally done in Platonic terms of person and work, is rather slim in volume 2. Yet, incarnation, cross, and resurrection appear in spades where evangelicals should put it: in the third volume, or the third article of the Creed, which specializes in the Holy Spirit and sacraments.

I am pleased that all the reviewers noted that there are several layers in *Luther's Outlaw God's* “systematic theology.” On one level, there are the historical and dogmatic discussions that we see emerge in Luther's own lectures on Scripture and in his preaching to Erasmus. Pastor Morton observed that both medieval scholasticism prior to Luther (and even earlier antiquity and its interplay with Platonism) and postmodernism after Luther fall into the same mistake. That allows me to address all of these together and allows the works to range over the whole history of theology.

There is also another level in these volumes that concerns direct preaching or pastoral care for souls. This involves time with great sermons in Scripture itself: the story of Jonah, Paul's sermon to the Greeks at the Areopagus, Moses's burning bush, and the astounding sermon on the last words of David. That is where the christological doctrine hits the road. It is what Pastor Hoyum calls catechetical dogmatics. Preachers can use it directly. And yes, there is another layer addressing

all those Protestants who come after Luther and replicate the previous problems in scholasticism—including the very best, like Kant, Hegel, and Otto. Pastor Hoyum calls this an engagement with philosophical theology. It was encouraging that the reviewers agreed it was worthwhile to address such misinterpretations of the law and gospel—right up to the present “postmoderns” like Derrida. That kind of work is what makes Luther so interesting going forward. Luther is not behind the failing Enlightenment, but ahead of it. No doubt some long footnotes and recounting of modern fears of the “dangerous Luther” could be clarified and expanded—that is the work left for these younger theologians.

All the reviewers see the way forward for theology. They are inspired by the living word of Scripture, and how to deliver this in the present. They see Luther for the future—not as a meager choice between an “early” form (who supposedly never broke free of scholasticism) and a “later” Luther who fell into apocalyptic furies. It is worth noting that the followers of Luther have always had problems with Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*. Consequently, even Luther is made non-Lutheran, and we are left poking into dark holes of various Protestant scholastics or Evangelical Catholics, as Pastor Hoyum noted. Professor Saleska seems right to me when he notes that all theology ruins itself when it becomes a search for a non-accusatory law.

Luther was unabashedly confronting the two monsters of theology: evil and predestination. He did not accept the facile solutions of previous theology, and he saw in Erasmus where the future of theology was headed. Luther did not accept the ubiquitous notion that the reason for religion was to locate, preserve, and ignite human free will. Instead, Luther learned the power of God’s word in a simple promise of freedom. God’s will apart from his word, as an outlaw God, is awful. Nothing can change that truth, short of getting a preacher. All the reviewers noted that this is the single theme of *Luther’s Outlaw God*. To learn and directly address the difference between God unpreached and preached is enough for any theology, and indeed for a life. As Pastor Hoyum says, you might escape from these books with an actual blessing! ☩

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