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The 31st Annual Reformation Lectures
The Luther-Erasmus Debate Revisited

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Foreword

In this issue of the Quarterly we are pleased to share with our readers the 1998 annual Reformation Lectures, delivered on October 29-30, 1998 in Mankato, Minnesota. These lectures were sponsored jointly by Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. This was the thirty-first in the series of annual Reformation Lectures which began in 1967.

Prof. Arnold J. Koelpin of New Ulm, Minnesota presented the lectures. He attended Concordia College, Milwaukee, and Northwestern College, Watertown, WI. He continued his education at the Lutherische Theologische Hochschule, Oberursel, Germany, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI. He was ordained into the Holy Ministry by his father. He did further study at the University of Erlangen/ Nuremberg, and was a Th.D. candidate with Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Maurer as his Doktorvater. His dissertation work (entitled The Lutheran and Anabaptist Debate on the Question of Baptism, 1521-1536) was interrupted by illness, and he returned to the United States. Since 1962 he has been a professor at Dr. Martin Luther College (now Martin Luther College), New Ulm, MN. He teaches Religion, Church History, and History and has led several summer study tours to Europe. He edited the book *No Other Gospel* – Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord 1580-1980. He is writing a book on the Lord's Supper for the People's Bible Teaching Series.

The topic of the lectures was: "Luther's Legacy: The Luther-Erasmus Debate Revisited." Prof. Koelpin presented the topic emphasizing three main themes: The Enslaved Will and God's Absolute Freedom; The Cross, God's Mask in Human History; and Scripture, the Revelation of History's Lord.

The reactors to the lectures were Dr. Karl Fabrizius and Prof. Erling T. Teigen. Dr. Fabrizius is Associate Pastor of Our Father Evangelical Lutheran Church, Greenfield, WI (LCMS). In 1994 he received his Ph.D. in religious studies from Marquette University. Dr. Fabrizius' dissertation examined the exegesis of Rupert of Deutz (ca. 1076-1129) in the Gospel of Matthew. Prof. Teigen teaches at Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN. He has lectured, written, and published many articles for various conferences and theological journals, including lectures to confessional Lutheran groups in Latvia, and St. Sophia Seminary, Ternopil, Ukraine. We trust that our readers will find these lectures and the reactions to them, to be interesting, instructive, and edifying.

This issue includes also the index to Vol. 38. Volume 38:1 contains the index to Volumes 32-37.

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The Luther-Erasmus Debate Revisited

Prof. Arnold J. Koelpin

Bethany Lutheran College
S. C. Ylvisaker Fine Arts Center
Mankato, Minnesota
October 29 and 30, 1998

Commemorating the 450th Anniversary of the Leipzig and Augsburg Interims

Lecture One: *The Enslaved Will and God's Absolute Freedom*

Seeing life from a Scriptural perspective

The Luther-Erasmus Debate
highlights the Theology of the Cross

Introduction

I. Root and Fruit of the Reformation

Your speaker vividly remembers the day at the University of Erlangen when Prof. Wilhelm Maurer began a Reformation seminar by stating flatly, "Justification by faith is not the root of the Lutheran reformation. It is the fruit of the reformation. The root of the reformation is Luther's return to the theology of the early Christian church."

The jarring effect of that statement continues to this day. For none of us can appreciate Martin Luther's reform unless we understand that the cross does not stand alone at the center of our justification before God. The cross can only be rightly understood on the background of God's nature and work, so clearly spelled out in the early Christian creeds.

In a seminal writing, *Die Einheit der Theologie Luthers* [The Unity of Luther's Theology, Maurer, 11-21], Prof. Maurer explains what he had succinctly stated in the seminar. We do not intend to review the article here. But what Maurer expressed there enlightens our lectures here. For we intend to spotlight how justification, won for us on the cross, relates to us sinners who stand before the holy and majestic God each

moment we take a breath.

In a way it is fitting to follow this course in the year 1998. As Reformation anniversaries go, this year celebrates the 450th year of the famous or infamous Augsburg and Leipzig Interims of 1548. The Interims managed a temporary political solution to religious problems in the Holy Roman Empire after the Lutheran princes' defeat in the Smalcaldic War. In the Augsburg Interim Emperor Charles V formally spelled out how he would "deal with religious matters in the Holy Empire until issues are settled by a General Council [of the church]. At the forefront stood the issue of justification by faith.

Within the Lutheran church, the pressures of the Interim produced an intense struggle to recapture Luther's heritage after the Reformer's death in 1546. The long-range result of this struggle was to be a Lutheran confessional consensus in the Book of Concord. Today as then, we need to recapture that heritage, and, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, to make this legacy our own.

We commend Bethany College and Seminary for opportunity to do that in a broad public setting. During the next days we will spend time with one of Luther's most defining and challenging theological works, *The Bondage of the Will* [LW 33]. In it Luther crystallized an understanding of the absolute impotence of the sinner before God in a way that restored the cross to a brilliance not known since the early Christian church. The medieval church's problem was not that it failed to take sin seriously. Christians confessed in the Creed daily, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." But the confession was muddied by penitential practices.

Luther's great theological contribution was not the preaching of the cross as such. His humble service was to draw a clear and unmistakable distinction between the work of God and the works of man. St. Paul had already drawn the line. Martin Luther reinforced its meaning for churchly life and

practice: "Therefore we maintain that a man is justified by faith *alone* | apart from observing the law" [Rm 3:28]. Taken seriously, that line was a revelation.

As we revisit the Luther-Erasmus debate, Luther's Biblical insights on the nature of man and God will be brought to bear on our conduct of Christian education and Bible interpretation. The lectures aim not only at our understanding, but at our heart. For by God's Spirit, studies on God's Word always remain practical and personal, precisely because they are God's Word for us.

II. Human will power

In presenting an essay that focuses on our human will, we have touched a nerve. In our day and age we are consumed with studies that dissect the human being inside and out. School curricula are dotted with analytic studies in anthropology, psychology, sociology, and the like. The delicate interrelationship of our inner and outer self fills newspapers and courtrooms with hotly contested psychosomatic insights. Of the three ideological bombshells dropped on Christianity in the last two centuries by Darwin, Marx, and Freud, it was Freud who opened new vistas to understand the inner self apart from divine influence. In an age of scientific advancements people are amazed by people's inner potential for both good and evil.

But, according to Luther scholar Eberhard Juengel, there is a consequence of today's scientific studies on human nature that is easily overlooked. He writes: The study of "anthropology is itself a decidedly modern science. Paradoxically, however, the growing inability to make definitive statements about humanity parallels its emergence as a separate scientific discipline. The more we know about humanity, the less we can say what it is. And the less we understand the nature of humanity, the more senseless existence as such ap-

pears. Humanity cannot be defined, *homo definiri nequit;* this is the basic conviction of modern anthropology" (Juengel 44f).

For good reason, therefore, our study highlights the Christian view of man at its nerve center. To face the world with the message that we stand impotent before God defies the everyday experience of people's abilities. As a result, human potential movements have sprung up like mushrooms in the Christian church in the name of God. From Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral to the spread of Pentecostalism across the globe, preachers and parishioners are drawing from the inside out to come to God. Decision theology is based on the ability of a person's will to make faith commitments to God. The altar call only underlines the exercise of that will.

To gainsay the human potential in the arena of religion seems to dehumanize us at the core of our being. A university professor voiced that perplexity when he said thoughtfully, "How can you say that even the good things we do are evil and unacceptable in coming to God? Aren't you saying, in effect, that good is evil because our will is bound to sin? Doesn't that view of our will destroy all semblance of morality? My experience tells me otherwise. I know of Buddhists that lead more respectable lives than Christians. Would a just God discriminate?"

Our preaching and pastoral care demand that we give answers. In mission work at home and abroad we meet people who want to know about themselves and about God, and how this jibes with their own notions. We need to give a testimony from the Scriptures that is clear, forthright, personal, and true. Luther's insistence that Christ's work means nothing if it were not meant "for you" highlights the personal direction of God's work and of our mission. Our mission is evangelical and pastoral. In bringing people to the knowledge of the truth, Christians teach that our human will is intimately bound up with God's loving will toward us as revealed in the holy Gospel.

A. Bound to sin

Our modern experience is not unique. Early Christians already faced these questions. As they gave witness to pagan society, they struggled to express their Christian faith in confessing terms. So God, they said, is a *triune* God and Jesus Christ is God *incarnate*, expressions they carved out in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds to fit the Bible Word.

But it was given to St. Augustine to clarify in confessional terms what Scripture says about the nature of man. To do so, Augustine placed the term *original sin* on the table at the center of the church's testimony. In coining the term *de peccato originali* to counteract Pelagius, Augustine put the accent on the will of man. For Augustine the will drives a person's actions in life, his choices, his desires, his intents. The will embraces our memory and intellect, and it has the quality of love, the desire to be reunited with God. Ever since Augustine set the stage, the doctrine of the will has become a battleground of Christian teaching and practice.

In this brief essay we cannot unfold the debate on the doctrine of man from Augustine to Luther, as profitable or frustrating as that historical journey might be for our understanding. If we had been a mouse in a monastery, we might have listened to the learned discussions and distinctions made by such noteworthies as Aquinas and Duns Scotus. They jogged back and forth on the checkerboard of Aristotle: Aquinas holding that the will is subordinate to the intellect; Duns arguing for the primacy of the will in making human value judgments (Seeberg, II, 103, 148).

But it remained for Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther to take the debate on the will of man into the public arena in an epoch-making way. Luther recognized that fact from the beginning. He freely admitted that Erasmus had gone after the jugular [*Lat. jugulum* in WA 38:786,30]. It was to be a fight to the finish. At stake was the validity of Biblical theol-

ogy over against humanistic philosophy. At issue was whether people possessed a free will before God or a will enslaved by sin and dead to God. And Luther commended the learned scholar for not piddling around with silly side issues as had his previous Catholic opponents.

"I praise you highly for this also," Luther wrote with sincere flattery, "that unlike all the rest you alone have attacked the real issue, the essence of the matter in dispute, and have not wearied me with irrelevancies about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such trifles. You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot [*jugulum*]; for which I sincerely thank you" (LW 33:294).

This high praise masked Luther's evangelical intent. For him the question of the enslaved will was not open for debate or discourse, as little as were the subjects of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. These matters were settled by Scripture, they were articles of faith, and therefore the doctrine of the enslaved will was as clear as the Scriptures it reflected (LW 33, 295).

From the outset of his writing on *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther laid the foundation of faith on the Bible testimony and not on human analysis. He chided the biblical humanist for taking the skeptics' position on this teaching because his mind, his experience, and his desire to keep peace in the church led him to take "no delight in assertions" (LW 33: 20-24). "The Holy Ghost is no skeptic," Luther wrote with pastoral concern, "and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written in our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience" (Ibid., 24).

1. Freedom to choose?

What was Erasmus' hang-up? Two issues go to the heart of the debate for this brilliant scholar, two issues that are

bound to come up when we talk to people about Christian faith. They are the questions of freedom and responsibility.

Permit an aside at this point. At the Lutheran University of Erlangen in Bavaria, a seminar course was posted as "Original sin?" In separate sessions the doctrine of original sin was viewed historically by professors of each theological discipline. The result of the seminar was reportedly twofold: 1. The doctrine of original sin was said to be an invention of St. Augustine, and 2. This classical teaching was said not to square with the Bible. Why? Because according to Scripture we are responsible for what we do, and therefore God does not let us off the hook and will judge us accordingly. Simply stated, the reasoning is this: If, as Luther taught, our will is enslaved, what happens to our human freedom and accountability?

Erasmus picks up on this question. His sense of basic morality as encoded in the Ten Commandments led him to ask the obvious: Why would God command "You shall" without expecting that "You can"? [LW 33:128] To say that "you must" without the possibility of doing what is asked not only seems unfair; it leaves us morally irresponsible. We have to be able to choose whether to steal or not to steal, whether to worship God or not worship God. Robbed of the ability to choose good from evil, we would be left no moral choice. And God himself could not hold us accountable for our actions.

The only human alternative to this predicament is to throw up our hands in despair. Robbed of our personal freedom to choose, we must act as we do by chance, not by choice. In that case we would no longer be in control of our actions. And such a deterministic view of life was unacceptable and repugnant to Christian teaching.

But for Erasmus the theological alternative to this dilemma was even worse. Robbed of free choice, we must act as we do because God controls our life by divine omnipo-

tence. Then we do everything of necessity. We don't really lead our own lives. We become no more than mere puppets and God is pulling the strings. Everything we do in life is determined, or even predetermined, by God, even to the point of death. How ridiculous! "Does the good Lord deplore the death of his people which he himself works in them?" Erasmus asks with sarcastic rhetoric, and then explodes, "This seems absurd!" (LW 33: 139)

What was the scholar's line of thinking? As Erasmus saw it, it is absolutely essential that people should have freedom to choose, especially the freedom to choose God's grace or to refuse it. He himself defined free choice in this way. "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a person can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them" (LW 33:103). For that reason the scholarly linguist chose his words carefully. In making his case for human freedom and responsibility, he avoided the Latin word for will *(voluntas)* and, as Luther and Augustine before him, stayed with the Latin word for choice *(arbitrium)* even though his definition shows how the two interact.

The Latin word *arbitrium* envisions two or more things out there which one has to arbitrate, that is, to make a choice or judgment in order to master the matter at issue. For this reason the title of Erasmus' work *De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe* is best translated *An Essay concerning Free Choice*. The question of choice and decision is the issue around which the debate raged.

In his analysis Erasmus clearly was arguing from the thought world of the ability of a human being to choose in matters of faith, no matter how weak or enabled by divine grace his will may be. In the discussion over free choice, the religion of the human potential stood at loggerheads with the doctrine of the enslaved will, as clearly as human works differed from the gift of faith. In Luther's eyes there was no middle ground between them. Free choice before God and the enslaved will were as diametrically opposed to one another as are God and Satan. And Luther said as much:

> *Thus the human will is placed between the two [God and Satan] like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills, as the Psalm says: "I am become as a beast [before you] and am always with you" [Psalm 73:22]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it* (LW 33:65f).

Thus we live our lives in the contest between God and the Devil. Such a reading of Scripture seemed to Erasmus to be too absurd. From his interpretation of Scripture, he rejected the enslaved will out of hand in favor of free choice. Now it remained for Luther to explain himself and to clarify the issues of freedom and responsibility from his newly-won insights into the Gospel of free grace.

2. Free will, a misnomer

Writing on the nature of the will was not new to Dr. Luther, a devoted Augustinian. The subject had occupied his pen ever since the *Ninety-five Theses* put him on the defensive. Under pressure from Rome he clarified his stance before his fellow monks in Heidelberg by opening up the doctrine of the will. A reading of the *Heidelberg Theses* shows that Luther dug deeply into the Scriptures. Even today, perhaps especially today, these theses should be recommended reading for everyone who studies the nature of man.

In the Heidelberg theses Luther takes up the doctrine of man according to the Biblical paradigm on human will in four states. That is, the will as it exists:

1. Before the Fall when our original

parents had a **free** will, potentially open to sin or not,

2. After the Fall when our will is so **bound** to sin that it is impossible for us not to sin,

3. After rebirth when our still sinful will is **freed** by the righteousness of Christ, and

4. In heaven when our will is **perfected** and forever free from sin.

In the theses Luther expands on the nature of the will in the second state, that is, our will after the fall into sin. Clarity on this point, he felt, is necessary for understanding Christian teaching. It is the background for the theology of the cross as opposed to the theology of glory. Clarity on this point helps us to know ourselves as we really are and to know God as he really is, to know what we can do before God and what God has done for us in Christ.

To know the nature of the unregenerated will is foundational for Gospel preaching and is the reason for this study. For what we teach about man's will after the fall describes every baby born into the world. It describes the life of every person on earth apart from Christ's redemption. It describes the reason why Christ came to our rescue. It is the point at which a flood of questions comes from those who want to know what Christians teach about the nature of man and the work of God.

Luther is aware of all these implications at Heidelberg when he takes up the question of the will and asserts categorically that "free will, after the fall, is nothing but a word" (LW 31:48f; WA 1:354 *arbitrium*). It is simply a misnomer. To say otherwise goes contrary to what Jesus himself taught when he said, "I tell you the truth, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). Six years later Erasmus took up the cudgel against Luther on this very point and challenges

the contention that free choice is a misnomer.

In response, Luther reasserts what he had written at Heidelberg. The enslaved will is Biblical truth, as contrary as it seems to the mind. But more serious still, in Luther's eyes, are the consequences of deluding ourselves that we possess a free will before God. As he had made clear at Heidelberg, we actually compound our guilt by imagining we are able to draw good out of a sinful heart. For as long as the human will "is doing what is within it *(facere quod in se est)*," Luther concludes, "it is committing deadly sin" (LW 33:48, trans. in Dillenberger, 502).

This self-delusion has serious consequences. To make claims on our inner goodness before God as if what we do were a matter of merit, Luther concludes, merely "adds sin to sin" and makes a person "doubly guilty" [LW 31:50]. We are guilty in the first place because sin has separated us from God and we lack true fear and faith in God. But when we presume to act on our inborn sense of right and wrong, of good and evil, we become self-righteous and put our self-chosen deeds in God's face rather than our sin. It just doesn't wash, as Jeremiah graphically put it to Israel in the name of God, "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13; LW 31:50).

B. Free choice and responsibility

To bring clarity out of confusion, Luther seeks to explain the problem of freedom and responsibility. He approaches Erasmus' question of free choice from three directions. He contrasts (1) the freedom in which *God* acts (2) with *our* free choice in civic matters and (3) with our lack of freedom, before God. This interaction between God and us raises the important questions of input: If God acts toward us in abso-

lute freedom doesn't that limit our human freedom and, as Erasmus feared, make us into play actors? Or, better still, as Erasmus would have it, isn't the way God acts toward us in the final analysis contingent on the way we act in life?

1. God is in control

The questions beg a reply and Brother Martin takes them up one by one from Scripture's perspective. For Luther it is necessary to approach the question of freedom, first of all, from God's point of view as the all-powerful Creator. For what makes God to be God is that no will or law is above him. God acts as he does toward us in absolute freedom because he is the omnipotent creator of all things whose royal will knows and wills all that happens according to his good pleasure. Nothing happens in life without his will and determination. "Free choice is plainly a divine term," Luther observes, "and can properly be applied to none but the Divine Majesty; for he alone can do and does (as the psalmist says [Ps. 115:3]) whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth" (LW 33:68). Thus God is in control and works all in all in life.

Such absolute power and independence blows our minds. It simply won't do for us to play God and try to bring him down to our level of understanding. To ask the critical question, as Erasmus did, "why some are touched by the law and others not, so that some receive and others scorn the offer of grace" lies hidden in God's will and is for Luther "by far the most awe-inspiring secret of the Divine Majesty, reserved for himself alone" (LW 33:139).

To follow up with questions such as, "Why does God not cease from that movement of omnipotence by which the will of the ungodly is moved to go on being evil," or to ask, as every pastor has been asked at least once in his ministry, "why [God] permitted Adam to fall, and why he creates us all infected with the same sin when he could either have preserved

Adam or created us from another stock or from a seed which he had first purged," Luther says, "is to desire that for the sake of the ungodly God should cease to be God" (LW 33:180f).

As natural as these questions may be to our human inquiry, they knock on the secrets of God's divine majesty. We are trying to go to a place where no human being is able to go. The *why's* and *how's of God* are the unanswerable questions of life. They lie hidden with God himself in the inner recesses of his will. When contemplating the ways of God to man, his absolute freedom from all contingencies, we must put our finger to our lips and say with St. Paul: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Romans 11:33). It is enough for us to worship God in his absolute independence and freedom and humbly to confess with Luther:

> *God is he for whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard. For nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because he ought, or was bound, so to will. On the contrary, what takes place must be right because he so wills it. Causes and grounds are laid down for the will of the creature, but not for the will of the Creator, unless you set another Creator over him!* (LW 33:181, trans. in Dillenberger, 197)

Thus the dear Doctor makes a basic and critical distinction in pursuing the question of free choice. He distinguishes between God's hidden will *(deus absconditus)* and his re-

vealed will *(deus revelatus)*, that is, between God in his majesty and God in his Word, between God nude and God clothed. "God in his own nature is to be left alone," Luther appeals, and he begs all of us who like Erasmus seek to limit God's free choice to drop the inquiry. "In this regard, we have nothing to do with him, nor does he wish us to deal with him. We have to do with him as clothed and displayed in his Word" (LW 33:139, trans. Dillenberger, 191).

In distinguishing God from God in this way, Luther knew exactly where he was headed. From the beginning of his work on the enslaved will, Luther observed that "you cannot possibly know what free choice is unless you know what the human will can do, and what God does" (LW 33:36). The problem we have with the questions of the will and free choice comes from the fact that God deals with us in contraries, contrary to our will and our way of doing things. Why? Simply because our sinful nature cannot take God nude in his unapproachable majesty as Moses once learned first hand on Mount Sinai [Exodus 33:19-23, as carried out in the Heidelberg Theses].

2. His control is hidden from our eyes

For this reason God hides his control in the events of life, as a butterfly is hidden in a cocoon. What we observe with our eyes masks God's actions. Therefore he comes to us in a way that makes room for faith, which grasps the ungraspable. In a double-take on God's work among his creatures, Luther calls our attention to the difference between God's hidden will and his revealed will. In both cases God hides himself [Sasse, 49].

In his majesty God hides from us the unanswerable *whys* and *hows* of life. We simply do not know how to match God's

omnipotent control with the fact that some are saved and others are not. In our frustration we make the mistake of imagining that it finally falls back upon our human freedom to choose for or against God's will. Even worse, as blind sinners we make an attempt to inquire into God's hidden will and try reading his mind. If this were possible, God would be no greater than our mind and we would be God. We would have reduced God to a system.

But God is God. He acts toward us in absolute freedom and omnipotence. And we can rightly say that he controls all things. He is really and actively present in all that happens. He is the active doer in all human decisions and happenings. He is the fixed point from which all things began and toward which all things are headed. He alone is the creator and we are his creatures. He alone is without law and control. But his control remains hidden from our eyes, like the butterfly in a cocoon.

Only by faith can we understand what is hidden to the human eye. And Luther steers us in that direction. "It is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden," Luther states as a matter of fact. That is exactly why God deals with us in contraries. "Nothing is more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it," he observes. "Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as Scripture says, 'The Lord kills and brings to life' [1 Sam 2:6]" (In LW 33:62).

Now we know why God revealed himself to us in his Word, in a promise, in the cross. In the cross God comes out of secrecy and reveals his will to us in a most peculiar way. Contrary to all human experience, God reveals himself by hiding himself. That seems mighty strange to us. Revelation normally occurs when something comes out of hiding. But when God comes out of secrecy, he hides himself. That is

exactly what St. Paul told the Corinthians: "We speak of God's *secret* wisdom, a wisdom that has been *hidden* and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But God *revealed* it to us by his Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:7-10).

Now we understand what Luther means by God Clothed. Because of our sin God wrapped a veil around himself. The creator came in the form of a creature. He put on human clothes and came in the form of a man. Already before time began, God's secret plan was to reveal himself by hiding himself. From eternity God planned the coming of Christ under the veil of flesh to suffer and die on the cross for all who had no other choice but to live and die in their sin.

But God remains hidden in the cross. As Luther had once set forth in the Heidelberg Thesis 20, "He deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." What does this mean? It means that "it does not help anyone nor does him any good to recognize God in his glory and majesty unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross" (LW 31:52f).

The cross is God's great contrary that knocks out all free choice. Why? Because in the cross God acted beyond our will and choosing. In the cross God makes the dead alive. He takes our sin, our death, our impotence as his lot. And he gives us his righteousness, his strength, and his life as our own. For the cross is not glorious to the human eye. Like the electric chair, it is an instrument of torture and death.

In the cross God shows our will for what it is, enslaved to sin and dead to God. In the cross God makes us appear before him nude and impotent. He exposes our total lack of freedom to come to him on our own. The cross is the ultimate preachment of God's anger over sin. In the cross God uproots the root sin from which all the fruit sins grow, our pride and self-

ishness, our disobedience and debauchery, our hatred and selfish desires.

But God hides himself under the contrary of the cross for a reason. Unseen to all human eyes and beyond all human choice and comprehension, "*God* was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." Not the human will nor free choice has access to God hidden in the cross. God is both the initiator and the fulfiller. For the mask behind which God is hiding himself in the cross is his love for us. The cross is God's ultimate control over life. And this mystery would have remained forever hidden if it were not for the work of the Spirit of the Living God. The Holy Spirit lifts the veil for us to see God himself hidden in the cross. By the gift of faith the will that was the devil's riding horse becomes the instrument of God. Our still sinful will is freed by the righteousness of Christ.

3. Responsible action

As lovely as this gospel sounds, does it really answer Erasmus' concern about free will? Does not God's sole action effectively eliminate the will of man? If God controls all things, are we merely going through the motions in life without a will of our own? Or if the human will is a riding horse of either God or Satan, who is riding it and what are we to do? Is our will merely a plaything between two superpowers?

Our experience tells us otherwise. In life *people* are the doers and decision makers, not God. People are the crafters of the future, the doers of good deeds and evil, the humanitarians or destroyers in society. The decisions of people and nations and individuals determine the course of events. History is replete with such stories. If Christianity teaches that we have no free choice and God controls all in all, then what remains of human freedom and responsibility?

To answer, Luther turns the perspective around from God's

point of view to ours. As we view the question of free choice from the underside, we are confronted with a paradox (LW 33:64ff). In dealing with us, God does not take away our freedom to act. God is the essential doer in all that happens because that is what makes God to be God. But in our daily life God does not make us into puppets or rob us of the freedom to act. How are we to understand this seeming contradiction?

In a striking passage Luther takes up the issue of human freedom. He frankly admits to Erasmus that as creatures of God we have a so-called free will and are responsible for what we do. But the term is loaded and deceptive and we should use it only in an improper sense. It is loaded because free choice does not pertain to our relationship to God. It is deceptive because free choice is limited to matters "below us." "A person should know," Luther says with measured precision, "that with regard to his faculties and possessions he has the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to his free choice" (LW 33:70).

The scenario is this. Far from being robots, we can and do make daily decisions with regard to things below us. We decide whether to marry or not to marry, whether to flee the plague or not flee the plague, whether to chop down a tree or to let it stand. We are free to choose, even though our will is dead to God, enslaved by sin, and bears sin's consequences. In this way our deeds can be judged. God lets us be ourselves with all our foibles and frustrations, however limited our choices and actions might be in the light of God's judgment.

Thus individuals, peoples, nations, and tribes act and make decisions that have consequences. In all we do God expects us to act, and to act responsibly. In every situation of life we act according to the measure of wisdom given us by virtue of reason and conscience. God gave us conscience and Ten Commandments to guide us [Rm. 2:12-16]. On the surface we have the potential to act decently, morally and ethically, even to the point of giving reverence to god by whatever name we

call him. But this action is limited to things "below us," to the earthly civic realm, and receives God's temporal blessings only there. In this world we act, and we live with the consequences of our actions. But at bottom- and this is Luther's major concern- it is either a world of trust in God or a world of unbelief.

Faith or unbelief- one or the other determines our actions and our eternal destiny. The first is a free gift of God's Spirit and clings to his free grace. The other is a product of our sinful will and celebrates our free choice. Therefore Luther brings the discussion of the proper use of the term "free choice" to an end by asserting with Biblical force: "In relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a person has no free choice, but is captive, subject and slave either to the will of God or the will of Satan" (LW 33:70).

4. The will as a riding horse

We have come full circle. Denial of access to God by free choice raises the most decisive question of all. How then do we stand in the presence of God? And what does Brother Martin mean by asserting that our will is either God's riding horse or Satan's? This unsettling observation is the flash point in the entire discussion for Luther the theologian. It is his final answer to all human speculation about free will, and it looks squarely at two basic Bible truths, as contrary as they might appear to the human mind.

In the entire discussion Erasmus fails to understand the depth of our sin and the greatness of God's grace. For this reason the function of the Law and the Gospel goes right over his head. In his analysis of free choice Erasmus was arguing from the thought world of human morality. His fatal flaw was that he could not extract free choice from the human ability to do law works. Earth-bound reason led him to conclude that if God commanded us to live a life acceptable to

him, we must have the inner potential to do so. Ours is the choice. By free choice we actually ride our own will either for God and against Satan, or for Satan and against God.

The great humanist clearly bases his case on a law attitude *(opinio legis)*. It is that legal attitude by which all people live since Adam's fall. For back then Satan made a promise and kept it: "If you obey me, you will be *like God*, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 2). Adam and his children gained a good-evil knowledge, but at a price. They separated from God, lost the *image of God*, and scuttled the source from which all true goodness, righteousness and holiness flow (Ephesians 4:24; see LW 12: 308ff).

Mankind was now fated to live by the knowledge of good and evil. From that fateful time in Eden good-evil morality was to be the world religion of peoples and nations and tribes, the religion of natural man, the religion of all civic life and secular education. It is a religion of human performance, of free will and free choice. Ignorant of God, we are turned back upon ourselves (*incurvatus in se*). Freedom from God is bondage to self. "Man cannot by nature want God to be God," Luther once wrote, "but instead wants to be God himself, and God not to be God" (WA 1: 225, 1f).

At this point Luther begins his instruction by once again invoking the contraries in God's Word. "It is Satan's work," Luther states, "to prevent people from recognizing their plight and to keep them presuming that they can do everything they are told" (LW 33: 130). As long as Satan rides our will, he will convince us of free choice before God as he did in Eden. He does not want us to know God as revealed and preached in his Word. In an incisive passage Luther chides Erasmus for attempting to push God and Satan out of the picture and to steer a neutral course between them:

> *You, who imagine the human will as something standing on neutral ground and left to*

> *its own devices, find it easy to imagine also that there can be an endeavor of the will in either direction, because you think of both God and the devil as a long way off, and as if they were only observers of that mutable free will. For you do not believe that they are movers and inciters of a servile will and engaged in a most bitter conflict with one another. For either the kingdom of Satan in man means nothing, and then Christ must be a liar. Or else, if his kingdom is as Christ describes it, free choice must be nothing but a captive beast of burden for Satan, which can only be set free if the devil is first cast out by the finger of God [Luke 11:20].* (LW 33: 237).

Because a neutral middle ground is an illusion, Luther puts us face to face with God as revealed in his Word. There God lets us know in no uncertain terms two things about his will and ours: 1. He tells us that as far as God's will is concerned he "wills all men to be saved" [1 Timothy 2:4], and 2. "It is right to say, 'If God does not desire our death, the fact that we perish must be imputed to our own will.' The fault is in the will that does not admit him, as he says in Matthew 23 [:37]: 'How often would I have gathered your children, and you would not!'" (LW 33:140).

If there is no logic to the fact that the merciful God wills all to be saved, yet not all are saved because of a defect in their will, so be it. The Scriptures reveal these contraries to us beyond our comprehension. Let reason be taken captive by faith. We have no right to ask "why that majesty of his does not remove or change this defect of our will in all people, since it is not in man's power to do so, or why he imputes this defect to man, when a person cannot help having it" (Ibid.). It is enough that God's Word warns us about the impotence

of our enslaved will in coming to faith.

That is the very reason why God gave us the Law. Through the Law God unmasks Satan and his power over us. "The work of Moses or a lawgiver," Luther points out, "is to make man's plight plain to him by means of the law and thus to break and confound him by self-knowledge, so as to prepare him for grace and send him to Christ that he may be saved" (LW 33: 130f). "The words of the law are spoken, therefore, not to affirm the power of the will, but to enlighten blind reason and make it see that its own light is no light, and that the virtue of the will is no virtue" (LW 33:127).

That is exactly what the Apostle Paul meant, Luther indicates, when he writes, "Through the law comes the knowledge of sin" [Rom. 3:20]. So the law does not confer any will-power, as Erasmus wrongly imagined, but it furnishes us the knowledge of our sin-bound will and its impotence to do what God commands. At this point Luther takes the great teacher into the lecture hall for a lesson in Biblical grammar. Erasmus and all of us need to understand the use of the imperative and indicative moods of the verb form. When God gives a command in the imperative mood, Luther explains, "man is shown what he ought to do, not what he can do."

If Erasmus objects that the Ten Commandments are given in the future indicative, "You *shall have* no other gods," or "You *shall* not kill or commit adultery," Luther explains that "the Hebrew frequently uses the future indicative for the imperative." If the Ten Commandments "were taken indicatively (as they are expressed)," Luther continues, "they would be promises of God, and since God cannot lie, the result would be that no man would sin, and then there would be no need of them as precepts" (LW 33: 125f).

The lesson done, the application follows. Why did God give the Law? The answer is simply that "blind self-confident man may through them come to know his own diseased state of impotence" (LW 33:128). Through Moses the enslaved

will is unveiled for a reason. By knocking out free choice God leads us to a knowledge and appreciation of his free choice in the work of Christ.

How different and distinct from the Law is the work of God's free grace. When God says, "I desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn and live" [Ezek. 18:23, 32], this is not an expression of the Law. And all moralists, like Erasmus, misread God when they say that God means this: "I do not want a person to sin mortally or become a sinner liable to death, but rather that he may turn from his sin, if he has committed any, and so live" (LW 33:137). In such an interpretation the devil is still the rider, not God

The truth of the matter is that this evangelical Word is "the sweetest comfort, the loveliest thing in Ezekiel." For note it well: God does not say, "I desire not the death of a *man*." God says, "I desire not the death of a *sinner*." This plainly shows, Luther writes in a glorious finish, that God is speaking about "the penalty of sin, the fear of death. And he lifts up and comforts a sinner from his affliction and despair, to give hope of pardon and salvation, so that a person may be converted and live at peace" (LW 33: 136f).

Thus God in grace rides our will, freed from sin by Christ the Crucified, still balky because of our sinful nature, but living by the forgiveness of sins. In Christ our once enslaved will has become a "slave to righteousness," as St. Paul explains in his great exposition of the meaning of baptism in Romans 6.

We have come a long way in looking at the doctrines of the enslaved will and God's absolute freedom. With Luther we have learned to rest the case in God's hands and in his Word, to let God be God and man be man. Our faith-born self-knowledge now turns to worship of God, as we join the dear Doctor in his wrap-up:

Since God has taken my salvation out of

> *my hands into his, making me depend on his choice not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion, but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or any adversaries to be able to break him or snatch me from him [John 10:28f].*
>
> *So it comes that, if not all, some and indeed many are saved, whereas by the power of free choice none at all would be saved, but all would perish altogether. What is more, we are also certain and sure that we please God, not by the merit of our own doing, but by the favor of his mercy promised us, and that if we do less than we should or do it badly, he does not hold this against us, but in a fatherly way pardons and corrects us.* [LW 33: 289]

To this we say, Amen! So it shall be.

C. Human potential in modern guise

As we today spread the Word, we thank Luther for his Bible work. It helps us understand where people are coming from as we face the Erasmian understanding of God and man in modern guises. Following the Scriptures we know that to turn a person's attitude from free choice to free grace is God's work through his revealed Word.

Scripture indeed testifies that our sinfulness is "so deep a corruption that nothing sound or uncorrupted has survived in man's body or soul, in his inward and outward powers" (FC: Ep I:8). Scripture describes the total depravity of our will before God in clear and uncertain terms. In Genesis [8:21]

Moses states the case pointedly: "Every inclination of [a person's] heart is evil from childhood." Likewise the Apostle Paul instructs us on the depths of our corruption: "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). The result? Blinded by our own sinfulness, we are unable to recognize the depth of the damage "by a rational process, but only from God's Word" (FC:Ep I:9).

Following the Confessors we need to recall Scripture's teaching on the root sin as we face today's free choice and human potential movements in many guises. Secular education does not have a corner on educating people regarding the potential of the human will. Despite all disclaimers much that passes under the name Christian or evangelical attempts in some way to draw on our inner strengths, our thinking and choosing, to come to God on our own.

The Trappist theologian, Thomas Merton, does just that. He describes our earthly journey as a reverse journey with a false start:

> *If we were to return to God, and find ourselves in Him, we must reverse Adam's journey, we must go back by the way he came. The path lies through the center of our soul. Adam withdrew into himself from God and then passed through himself and went forth into creation. We must withdraw ourselves (in the right and Christian sense) from exterior things, and pass through the center of our souls to find God. We must recover possession of our true selves by liberation from anxiety and fear and inordinate desire. And when we have gained possession of our souls, we must learn to "go out" of ourselves to God and to others by supernatural charity* [Merton, 316].

The words of Merton compare favorably with many eastern religions for whom the strengthening of the will by meditation is the way to reunion with the divine.

More subtle in the use of the will is the synergistic approach of many so-called evangelists. With fervid conviction they proclaim a catalog of modern sins and point to Christ as the way to salvation. At the same time, they call on the spiritually dead to muster up strength and with God's help to come to God.

"You've got to take the pencil," a sectarian preacher stated illustratively as he stood on the doorstep. "God offers us salvation, just as I am offering you this pencil. But you've got to take it to be born again." The object lesson on the will was as striking as it was appealing. But on the strength of God's Word it must be turned down. We have neither the power nor the strength by nature to choose to take God's salvation, nor the will to be reborn. We are "dead in trespasses and sins," Paul patiently explains against all influence of the gnostics (Ephesians 2:1,5; Colossians 2:13).

The counter illustration drawn from the Lutheran confession is equally striking: "As little as a corpse can quicken itself to bodily, earthly life, so little can a man who through sin is spiritually dead raise himself to spiritual life, as it is written, 'When we were dead through our trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ'" (FC:Ep II:3).

The doorstep conversation calls for a response. "Sir, you suggest that I can assist in my rebirth by an act of my will, by accepting God's offer. But that is impossible. Let me explain. Here you are standing before me as big as life. But you did not choose to be born; you did not will your first birth. Your father and mother gave you life because of God's command and promise, 'Be fruitful and multiply.' Like your first birth, you cannot will your rebirth. Just like your first birth, your rebirth is a gift of God through his Word and promise. By baptism God raises us from death to life, as St. Paul clearly

says to the Romans, 'We were therefore buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life'" (Romans 6:4).

With God's Word to guide us, we are able to meet the monster of free choice before God in its many guises. Dear God, we pray, give us your Spirit to believe what you say in your Word. Only through you can we understand and apply the lessons of the enslaved will and free grace in our ministry.

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Lecture Two: *THE CROSS, GOD'S MASK IN HUMAN HISTORY*

Understanding history from a Christian perspective

The Theology of the Cross
highlights the importance of learning history from a Christian perspective

Educational Application of the Luther-Erasmus debate

Introduction

I. God's mask

Luther's insights into the enslaved will and God's absolute freedom have a major impact on our conduct of Christian education, and specifically on the understanding of history.[1] For history is life and the way we teach people to look at history reveals our understanding of life. Here too the Christian view of life is anchored in the cross. In the Christian view of life *(Weltanschauung)*, all education begins with God and ends with Christ and his work on our behalf. Christ is the fixed point from which all life gains its ultimate meaning.

The ancients felt the need for a point of departure as they sought the meaning of life within the scope of life itself. But the goals of self-knowledge, self-improvement, and service to the world terminate at death's door. As one observer of life says with a sigh of resignation, "Ripeness is all!" [Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V, ii, 9]. Beyond that, the rest is given over to speculation and myths about the afterlife, its nature, and its promises.

God's promises for life come from the other direction. From eternity to eternity, they are ultimately revealed in the life of God's Son who personally came to earth to release mankind from bondage to the devil. Luther says as much in *The Bondage of the Will.* God and Satan contest for our life [LW 33:70]. But how to distinguish between the devil's work and God's activity is found alone in God's Word.

To distinguish God's work from Satan's is one thing. But to separate our life from God's work violates God's activities in life, that is, in nature and history, because nature is God's mask and history is his cocoon. Luther uses these two pictures to clarify how God continually does his work under the cover of everyday life.

"What else is all our work to God - whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in the government - but just such a child's performance?" Luther asks with anticipation, and then concludes, "These are the masks of God, behind which he wants to remain concealed and do all things" [LW 14:114].

Our eyes therefore are deceived by appearances, and God's concealment in everyday life escapes our understanding. "He could give children without using men and women," Luther points out. "But he does not want to do this. Instead, he joins man and woman so that it appears to be the work of man and woman, and yet he does it under the cover of such masks" [Ibid.].

The truth is that God does not operate like Tinkerbell in a magic kingdom. "We have the saying," Luther writes, "God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a wand. God gives all good gifts, but you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask" [Ibid., 115]. God's hidden rule in history is simply the basic paradox Luther carries out in *The Bondage of the Will:* God works all in all, but does so in us and through us. This is the riddle of history in Christian perspective.

II. Life in historical perspective

As a dutiful teacher cognizant of the latest educational fads and buzzwords, your speaker began his history class by collecting student profiles. Because most students were new acquaintances, it is helpful to know where they were coming from, where they were going, and what they hoped to achieve in the course. In many cases the results were an educational disaster. Backgrounds in history were, by and large, a wasteland of trivia without rhyme or reason.

Given that situation, we teachers have our work cut out for us. To raise the question of teaching life from a Christian historical perspective is one of the finest educational questions we can raise because we can wrongly separate Bible history from subsequent history and divorce the Christian faith from the real world.

Combining the offices of Christian teacher and historian deserves the high praise Martin Luther once gave to all who teach life's story from a Christian perspective. The great Reformer and promoter of Christian education freely admitted the importance of being both in training children in the fear of God. "If I could leave the preaching office and my other duties, or had to do so," he frankly stated, "there is no other office I would rather have than that of teaching; for I know that next to that of preaching, this is the best, greatest, and most useful office there is" [LW 46:253].

Then with a Luther-like flourish of bold analysis, the good Doctor took off his hat to history teachers, stating with pointed praise: "Historians are the most useful people and most excellent teachers, whom we can never sufficiently honor, praise, and thank" [WA 50, 384]. The reason for such high honor lies in the nature of history itself. "History," Luther wrote, "is nothing else than the ways of God, that is, grace and anger, which we should believe as if they stood in Scripture."

For Luther knew, as every person should come to know,

that history is life or the story of life. Its lessons come from the narrative of what happened. It is not make-believe, but the real life record of human beings marching down the corridor of time. The study of history, therefore, not only illustrates and reflects life as it is, but above all it pictures God's wonderful dealings with people and is a leading source of human knowledge.

"When one thoroughly considers the matter," Luther said in a moment of reflection, "it is from history, as from a living fountain, that have flowed all laws, sciences, counsel, warning, threatenings, comfort, strength, instruction, foresight, knowledge, wisdom, and all virtues; that is to say, history is nothing else than a monument of divine works and judgments, showing how God maintains, governs, hinders, advances, punishes, and honors people, as each one has deserved good and evil. And although there are many who do not recognize and regard God, yet they must take warning from history" [WA 50:384]. In short, each historical moment presents a slice of life. In it God acts, often contrary to reason.

A. "History's a mystery"

It is this contrariness of history that perplexes us and people we teach. Mathematics comes out with answers, and, practically speaking, we can use its figures to buy groceries and build houses. But history is not made up of answers; it is the narrative of life. It is, to use a cliche, descriptive not prescriptive. The moment we try to figure out what happens, the meaning eludes us. Try as we may, we cannot put the teaching of history into a logical or biological bottle for us to predict its future course. Our own experience of life's passing parade confirms that judgment. In frustration we must admit, we can neither make sense out of history nor can we control it. And what we cannot master remains a mystery to us.

The problem is that there is no fixed point to which to

attach things. What is the meaning of life when there is no logic to what happens? Why study history if there is no way to know where it is headed, no goal or destination which we can ultimately identify? Like "Old Man River," it just keeps rolling along seemingly aimlessly [a Greek observation: *panta rei, everything flows*]. Why trouble our heads with that over which we have no control?

So Hitler was an evil tyrant, we say from hindsight after the fact. Yet at the time pious Germans voted for him and viewed him as a savior. One person's freedom fighter is another person's enemy and devil. President Reagan called Russia an "evil empire" because of its totalitarian, expansionist communist system. The Russians retorted by calling the United States of America "imperialist dogs" because its capitalist system gobbled up the world's material wealth to support the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

Thus judgment strikes against judgment and it all depends on whose historical ox is being gored. With bold insight Dr. Peter Brunner of Heidelberg University, who lived through the Nazi era, reflects on our frustration and vexation with understanding life in our times.

> *We hoped, with the help of reason and technology, to be able to eliminate, if not entirely, at least for the most part, the difficulties and perplexities of life. We hoped for a growth in freedom, in social security, in the blessings of culture, in happiness, and in the fullness of purpose. However we have had to realize that we cannot master the irrational forces in human life. Not infrequently, precisely the means by which we hoped to master these forces turn upon us and increase the menace. The forces of destruction slumber under cover. One small occasion- it could*

> *carry the name of Berlin or Cuba... - may suffice to explode the powder keg upon which we are sitting.* [Brunner, 13]

An illustration will help to clarify our frustration with the historical. The ancient Greeks considered the basic building block of life and the universe to be the atom. *Atom* was the Greek word for the tiniest, infinitesimal thing that could no longer be divided or subdivided; it was the indivisible substance past which one cannot go. Then in the 20th century we did the impossible. We split the atom; we divided the indivisible. And in the atom we found a whole new universe, a microcosm of the big world out there, a universe made up of electrons and neutrons and more. Barely had we opened one door when a thousand doors appear behind it. We never seem to be able to get to the bottom of things!

But what was scientifically bold became historically frustrating. No sooner did the atomic age dawn when the great discovery turned on mankind to its benefit and to its destruction. The atomic energy that heats homes destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And the dropping of the bomb remains etched on our collective conscience.

Despite this historical insight, the real basis of the universe remains a mystery to us. How should we control the course of life which brings both good and evil? Are we cynically to throw up our hands in despair and, like Henry Ford, consign history to the ash can with the epithet, "History is bunk"? Is the final solution to the unanswerable for us to leave all to fate and chance and to fill in the time of our existence with the have-fun epicurean attitude: "Let us eat and drink and be merry for tomorrow we die"? Or do we find the history of life to be only an endless chain of cause and effect, an evolutionary spiral in which the fittest survive and each generation seeks to improve life for the one to come?

1. History is a riddle for us

Our approach to these questions is critical because it reveals our perspective on life. In our approach to these questions we affect our listeners most deeply. Our attitudes toward life and the conduct of life do not pertain merely to Word of God studies. Each of us is but one person and we approach matters of life single-mindedly from a Christian perspective *[eine christliche Weltanschauung]*.

"We have the mind of Christ," the Apostle Paul says in humble gratitude [1 Corinthians 2:16]. For us that is an article of faith and, to repeat Luther's insight, it means, "History is nothing else than the ways of God, that is, grace and anger, which we should believe as if they stood in Scripture." How we teach history reveals to people our view of life, our *Weltanschauung*, our perspective on history.

The question of teaching life from a certain viewpoint is not new. Today two identifiable views are vying with one another to put the key to understanding history in our hands. The one is the evolutionary view; the other, the existential.

In the evolutionary view, life is a constant struggle between opposing forces in which the stronger force wins and evolves into a higher form of civilization. According to this view of history we concentrate on events and people in history that changed life to produce a more modern civilization than was formerly the case. From this perspective history is the record of progress, and it aims to teach us to contribute to the progress of mankind by making the world a better place in which to live.

The existential approach is not so idealistic. From the existential viewpoint, life is catastrophic, not positive and progressive. The truth of the matter is that life is tragic. We lead our life in fear and trembling as we rape nature and our environment until it unleashes its fury against us as has happened in the atomic ash burial pits in Russia and elsewhere.

From the existential perspective history points out that the only way to live is to accept one simple fact: our existence is totally individual and personal. It is completely relative to our experience of it, and consequently nothing makes sense and life is absurd. The only way out, aside from suicide, is to accept what happens in life. We need to accept our fate *[amor fati]*, as did Sisyphus in the ancient myth. He rolled his burden, a stone, up the mountain only to have it roll back down again for another round of the same old thing. Accepting the fact that life is unkind and history is a bummer is the only way to achieve some semblance of meaning in a meaningless existence.

Both of these viewpoints have a kernel of truth in them when viewed from a totally secular attitude. But they fail miserably in penetrating the mystery of history. Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther biographer and church historian, says as much in an incisive passage on God and history. He writes:

> *With our physical eyes we cannot penetrate the mystery of historical happenings. There is no reasonable explanation for the riddle of history. Whatever explanations we have contrived, such as history records progress to a higher type of civilization, it demonstrates how nations are made tough and hardened through battle, it reveals the victory of the just cause, etc. All these solutions will be found to be "vanity," an empty illusion in the face of reality. Not even the often-expressed thought borrowed from nature, that wars result in "the survival of the fittest," holds true.*
>
> *Certainly there is a kernel of truth in this way of thinking. The stronger generally, though not always, proves victorious. But can that always be regarded as the survival of "the*

fittest"? Strength often consists only in a brutal superiority in numbers and material. The idea of the survival of the fittest becomes nonsensical in this age of technical warfare, in which the outcome of a war is decisively affected by the supply of raw material. The struggle for survival of the fittest among animals of the same species is always determined with equal weapons, but with mankind it is usually with unequal ones.

And into a war of physical force another factor enters, an unpredictable factor, which when viewed with human eyes can only be called "chance." This factor is the genius of a military officer who is given to one nation and withheld from another, or it is a revolutionizing invention which comes at just the right time to ward off disaster, or it is the unpredictable weather, rain, an unexpectedly early or severe winter, all of which upset strategic plans.

No, there is neither a logical nor a biological nor a moral formula to define adequately the meaning of history. Here human eyes are blind and see nothing. But do we see more with the eyes of faith? Yes thank God! faith does see more. Because of God's revelation in Scripture, we can see soberly and clearly not only the great turmoil and discord in all aspects of life, but we know of God's stormy presence in them. Yet, above all, we come to understand that God is acting in them. God not merely gives history its life. In and through Christ, he is also history's Lord and Master. So God reveals that he is history's

> *beginning and will bring history also to its end in final judgment according to his word and promise.* [Bornkamm, 204f]

2. The Christian view of history

From his study of Luther, Bornkamm puts into our hands the key to unveiling the secret of history and life. It is found, not in human philosophy or wisdom, but in the word and work of God. From a Christian perspective, all our teaching of history starts at this one fixed point: God holds all things that happen on earth in his hands. He is really and actively present in all things. God accomplishes all in all.

As simple as it may sound and as unreal as it may appear, the mystery of God's work on earth unlocks the secret of all human history. History, as has often been repeated, is his-story and he rules in it. As the One who does not change, he gives permanency to all life and action [James 1:17]. God is the fixed point from which all began and toward which all things are headed. "I the Lord do not change" [Malachi 3:6]; that is God's answer to us in the ebb and flow of history.

a. God is in control

What does this mean for Christian teaching? It means that God is in control. As Martin Luther observed: "No kingdom or government stands and prospers because of human power or wisdom, but God alone is the One who establishes, holds, rules, protects, sustains, and also removes it" [WA Br. 5, 247]. In 20th century idiom we would say, "He's got the whole world in his hands; he's got you and me, baby, in his hands." It means that God controls all things by his omnipotence. It means that he is the only One in the universe that can say of himself, "I Am" [Ex 3:14], and *we are* only because *he is*. He alone is the creator and we are his creatures. His will alone is

without law and control, unless we place another God above him [LW 33:181].

From a Christian perspective, therefore, we understand God to be the active doer in all human decisions and historical happenings. President Clinton may have decided to send missiles into Afghanistan to punish terrorists. We may listen to the speeches of future presidential candidates and make history by deciding for whom to vote. But in every case God causes each of us to do what we do, to speak as we do, to hear as we do. In an incisive and graphic passage Peter Brunner explains the place of God in history in this way:

> *What an atom does, what an electron does, what a seed does when it germinates, what the body of a mother does when it bears a child, what the farmer accomplishes when he sows his field, what a merchant does when he closes a business transaction, what a young man does when he decides on a specific profession, when a man and a woman marry, when a nation establishes for itself a particular system of government, when men revolt, when armies fight- all of these activities are... only a facade of an occurrence whose inner side is God himself present in this event with his effective power* [Brunner,16].

This rule and governance of God wars against our reason and all our senses. We normally deal with what we see and we judge all things according to our reason. Our everyday encounter with life pays little or no attention to God in the universe. Day by day we observe life and from the daily news we read about things that happen, things that make history. People are the doers and decision makers, not God. People are the crafters of the future, the inventors of new technol-

ogy, the creators of creature comforts. People are destroyers of buildings, the crafters of bombs, the detonators of destructive devices. Bill Gates is the billionaire by his genius for micro technology. Missiles deployed by the Israelis during the Gulf War saved the country from disaster.

How does this mesh with God's omnipotent control? Does not the closed system of cause and effect shut God out of the equation? What happens to the three and four causes we list for war when God is the essential doer? Why bother about creaturely activity if all is determined, even predetermined, by God's activity? Is not the Christian view of life only a convenient crutch to escape our responsibilities as citizens? Does not the Christian view of history make our children uninterested in what has happened in the past since it lies beyond our control? More seriously, if God does what he does, does that not make robots of us all? What a repugnant view of life and of God that envisions! Shades of *Erasmus redivivus*!

b. His control is hidden from our eyes

The questions are natural and normal for all who have no eyes for the governance of God. But they are faulty when measured against God's revelation of his power in history. Christians are not cyclopses. In teaching, we have two eyes. Our human eye is focused on the earth and from that view we can tell the story of history in all its interesting and graphic narrative. But thank God, the eye of faith sees all that is being said and done from a Christian viewpoint. Christian teachers are not determinists who vainly imagine we are puppets and God is pulling the strings, for better or for worse.

How then are we to understand God's actions? From the Christian perspective of history, everything that happens is only a mask behind which God himself is concealed. The events of history, Luther liked to point out, "strike our eye. But the divine governance, by which empires are either es-

tablished or overthrown, does not strike our eye" [WA 42, 507].

Our eyes deceive us because God and his activities lie beyond our comprehension. Our eyes are blinded to God's visible presence ever since the day our original father Adam separated mankind from God through sin. Now we can only observe God's "thats," the facts of life and of his revelation. But the "hows" and "whys" of events remain concealed in his divine majesty. We can tell the story of history, and we know from God's word that "all things work together for good to them that love God" [Romans 8: 28]. But what God specifically intends by what happened in specific events lies concealed from our eyes except what he tells us in his Word.

Let us use an example from everyday life. We can tell the story of England's Queen Elizabeth in the 16th century and about her troubles with her Spanish brother-in-law, Philip II of Spain. We can research Elizabethan England's splendid victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 - how it happened, why it happened. From the events we can conclude that the British victory gave England a freedom on the high seas that eventually led Protestant England to colonize in North America.

But we cannot read God's mind in doing so. For all God's activities are wrapped up under a cover of history, like a butterfly concealed in a cocoon. His stormy presence in the rise and fall of nations frightens us, even as a rustling leaf falling from a tree can give an army the jitters in the still of the night. It is as God said, "I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight" [LW 1:174; Leviticus 26:36].

Graphically Luther tells the effect of God's presence under nature's mask.

> *Nothing is more insignificant and despised than a dry leaf lying on the ground. All the*

> *little worms crawl over it and it cannot even defend itself against a speck of dust. But the time comes when its rustling frightens horse, man, spear, harness, king, duke, the strength of a whole army, all political power, and stubborn, greedy and angry tyrants who cannot be frightened by either hell, God's wrath, or judgment but only makes them prouder and more stubborn. Aren't we a great people! God's wrath does not frighten us, but we are petrified and afraid because of one helpless dry leaf! [WA 12:443; 17-I: 72; 19:226; 44:500].*

God hidden in history, therefore, is just another way of telling about his stormy presence in the events that make up our human history. We cannot see through the cracks, try as we may. We are never able to deduce God's intentions by the facts. And it would be especially presumptuous for us to single out historically only those historical events which are positive and in our favor. God is actively present in both good and evil. He told us as much through Isaiah the prophet who proclaimed this word from God: "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things" [Isaiah, 45:3].

B. The Christian view poses three problems

This terrible thought leads us to prepare to answer questions that follow such a view of history. The objections that people raise to teaching about life from a Christian perspective are basically three. The first is a question of freedom, as Erasmus posed it. The question goes like this: If God works all in all by his almighty power, are we not then mere robots? If God is the active doer, does not this belief dehumanize us?

What then remains of our human responsibility and our freedom to make decisions?

1. The problem of freedom

Those objections appear to be valid and we need to answer them. Our answer is as simple as it is profound. In Luther's words from The *Bondage of the Will* we are confronted with a paradox: God is the essential doer in all that happens, but his almighty power does not make us into puppets. History is not the story of people going through the motions while God pulls the strings. In dealing with us, God does not take away our freedom to act. Though it boggles our minds, we teach people that God controls history, yet he allows us to be the actors on the stage of life. As William Shakespeare put it in his inimitable way: "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will" [Hamlet V, ii, 10].

The reality is this. Far from being robots, we can and do make decisions with regard to things below us. We exercise our will each day, even though our will is dead to God, enslaved by sin, and bears sin's consequences. In this way our deeds can be judged.

In that striking passage from *The Bondage of the Will*, Martin Luther clarifies the issue of freedom. In discussing with the humanist Erasmus whether we have a free or enslaved will, Luther frankly acknowledges that we have a so-called free will and are responsible for what we do [see also CA XVIII]. In the multitude of decisions that face us each day we are free to choose. We decide whether to flee terror or fight it, whether to marry or not to marry, whether to cast a vote or to stay at home.

But Luther is careful to point out that free choice is limited to matters "below us" and does not pertain to our relationship with God. "A person should know," Luther states

clearly, "that with regard to his faculties and possessions he has the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to his free choice." God lets us be ourselves with all our foibles and frustrations, however limited our choices and actions may be in the light of the judgment of God [LW 33: 70].

That God does not rob us of such freedom and responsibility is clearly demonstrated in Jesus' temptation by Satan. It is interesting how subtly the devil raises the question of freedom. He simply asks Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the Temple Mount to test whether Jesus believed in God's control. But Jesus knew better. God is not to be toyed with. Such an act, though divinely possible, would be humanly irresponsible. It would be a reckless decision, not done out of trust in God's providential care. Therefore Jesus put Satan in his place by turning the question of freedom back to God: "It says in God's Word," Jesus answered, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" [Luke 4: 9-12].

Thus Jesus gives us the answer to the question of freedom in history. As nations, peoples, tribes, and as individuals, we act and make decisions. History is a record of such actions and decisions, and their consequences. But in all we do, God expects us to act responsibly. In each situation we must act according to the measure of wisdom given us. He gives us the Ten Commandments as our guide.

When we view history from this divine perspective, it opens up a whole new world. It is not a world of compulsion, nor is it a world of impotence. It is a world in which God allows us the freedom to act, but lets us live with the consequences of our actions and holds us accountable for them. At bottom, it is a world of faith and trust in God, or a world of unbelief.

Viewing life from a Christian perspective, therefore, means we teach the lessons of human responsibility under the judgment of God. From a Christian perspective we understand our freedom. And we teach Christian folk a civic-

mindedness which highlights our responsibilities. At the same time we teach them to rest assured that God is in control and does all things according to his good pleasure.

Even when the course of history goes contrary to our expectations, and especially then, we can be certain that nothing happens in life without God's attendant power and purpose. As St. Paul wrote, we can be comforted in knowing that "neither death nor life, neither the present nor the future, nor any power will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" [Romans 8: 38f].

For, beyond his hidden ways, God gives us an understanding of history in his Word. Here Luther's insights in *The Bondage of the Will* shine with the clarity and brilliance of the Scripture they reflect. Jesus is the key to understanding history. By sending Jesus, God broke through the time-warp of life's passing parade and put us face to face with one basic fact: All history is the story of sin and grace- our sin and God's grace, the consequences of our sin in God's judgment on nations and peoples and individuals, the strength of God's grace for all who cling to him and his Word in repentant faith.

The difficulty of deciding how to act faces Christians with special intensity at a time of wartime emergency. During the American Revolution, Lutheran pastors were ambivalent on how to handle the war. Judgment hit upon judgment. At stake for some colonists were the legal rights of English citizens guaranteed by the British constitution. Other colonists, on the other hand, were filled with freedom fever and they acted on it.

Pastor Henry Melchior Muehlenberg opposed the war and prayed for King George in the General Prayer. In a quandary Pastor Runze of the Ev. Lutheran church in Philadelphia wrote his mentor in Germany: "I am glad to leave political judgments to others. My own judgment on the matter is theological. There is no land known to me which in the course of history has not been celebrated because of certain great af-

flictions visited upon it by way of punishment" [Pettengill, 238-240].

Pastor Helmuth, his colleague in Lancaster, agreed. "The All-knowing alone knows what the end of these sad times will be," he wrote cautiously. "England has merited it, to be sure, by its sins if God should permit a break. But, on the other hand, this land has probably merited it as much if God should visit it with tribulation. I at least for my humble part cannot determine whether America is doing right or wrong" [Pettengill, *ibid.*]. To Pastors Helmuth and Runze the war was a judgment of God and a call to repentance.

In the quandary, Luther's words rang true: "History is nothing else than the ways of God, that is, grace and anger, which we should believe as if they stood in Scripture." We can tell the story and learn God's ways from it. The Roman Empire falls from its heights, the German Empire collapses in war, the United States of America rises to the top of the superpowers while rotting from the inside- all these are judgments in which God is at work among peoples and nations and tribes.

Each nation and people acts freely and makes decisions either rashly or by weighing the consequences. But what happens masks God's specific intent in letting things happen. The events alone strike our eye and we can tell the story in all its detail. But the divine governance, by which empires are either established or overthrown, escapes our view. What happens is God's way to call us to repentance, to turn to him in sorrow and faith.

2. The problem of evil

The second problem that people have with teaching history from a Christian perspective is the question of evil. This problem relates directly to God himself and covers the age-old question that philosophers and poets ask: If God is at work in whatever happens, doesn't that make God responsible for

evil? It's no secret that history records evil in abundance-bloodshed and tyranny, persecution and slavery, the holocaust and Hitler, ethnic cleansing and brutal savagery. If God works all in all, does he not work these evils also? What a repugnant and horrendous vision of God!- to use Erasmus' words.

On the surface the question seems to defy explanation. But human eyes are blinded to God and his ways. Try as we may, we cannot lay the problem of evil to God's charge. What makes God to be God is that he is good and righteous and holy. And even though God controls all things, he does not contrive to do us evil. Evil comes only because God permits it to happen. The source of evil is Satan, not God, as the Scriptures testify. In mocking and mimicking God, Satan makes history by trying to upset God's good order. For God did not create chaos. He created the cosmos, an orderly universe, for our pleasure, and he pronounced it good [Genesis 1-2].

But Satan works to undo God's good order by attacking those very orders God instituted for our welfare, namely, marriage and family, vocation and government, and the church [LW 37:364]. Human history records how these orders are constantly under attack. The breakup of the marriage and family is not unique to America in the 20th century. Free love was promoted in the pagan society of Greece and Rome and defended as totally natural. The tyrants of our era differ only in degree and circumstance from Nero, Ghengis Khan, Ivan the Terrible, and the men of renown in Noah's day.

It is important for Christian teachers to tell the story of the blessings and breakdowns of God's order in history. God gives nations and peoples and individuals stability and civic accord through the preservation of family and vocation and government and church. But he also allows civil discord to happen through the destruction of these orders.

In telling the story, however, Christian teachers must avoid the trap of suggesting that God's orders in themselves take away the disorder of sin or bring any sort of forgiveness be-

fore God. We cannot Christianize history or society in that way [Elert, 500]. It would be presumptuous to do so. God gave marriage and family, our vocation and government, as places of action and service, as communal orders in which we are able to live and love. In and through them Christians are able to promote civic righteousness from the attitude of faith and to carry out our service to mankind in manifold ways.

But to gain insights into God's ways, he gave us his Word. Through the Word, God gives us the message of divine anger over sin and divine forgiveness through Christ. The Gospel and the sacraments are the only means through which God delivers people from sin and Satan. Therefore Satan, the evil one, reserves his fiercest and most subtle attack for the church. Here he seeks to get at God by subtly or blatantly undermining God's Word.

As teachers follow the history of the Christian church, people will learn to know that where God's Word is preached a battle is going on. God and Satan are in contest for people's souls. The forces of evil often collaborate to bring God down, first of all, by perverting God's Word, and then by undermining order in the community of people and of nations, contrary to God's will and ways. Satan seeks to sweep away the protecting forces of God's orders so that the Word of God does not have free course. Ask the missionaries in foreign lands if this is not so.

But have we not forgotten God's omnipotence as we discuss the issue of evil? Have we lost sight of the fact that God is in control and works all in all? Yes, we have if we imagine God and Satan are two equal forces in the world. From this faulty perspective we are envisioning two gods, one good and one evil. Such a presentation would confuse people and leave the impression that Satan, the other force in life, is on equal plane with God himself. Wrong! We Christians are not dualists, like the Manichaeans. As powerful as the devil is on

earth, we are not in a "star wars" contest. As much as Darth Vader seems to reflect the contest of good and evil in this world, Satan is not independent of God's omnipotent rule.

The truth of the matter is that even Satan is subject to God's control and he works only by God's permission. As Luther once pointedly remarked, "God remains God even in hell" [LW 38:225]. We don't know how all that can be. The "hows" and "whys" of evil touch the secrets of God's majesty [LW 33:180]. How Satan as part of God's good creation could become evil remains a mystery to us. Why the omnipotent God allows evil to exist and even grow worse defies our comprehension. St. Paul says it for us: "How unsearchable [are God's] judgments, and his paths past tracing out!" [Romans 11:33]

But this we know: that God corrected the course of human history when he sent his Son into the world. Through the cross God turned our history on its head, upside down, outside in. In and through the cross, God solved the mystery of history. He "reconciled the world to himself in Christ" [2 Corinthians 5:19]. And thus we are faced with another mystery, a mystery which God revealed to us in the person of Jesus, a mystery which solves the mystery of history itself.

3. The problem of the meaning of history

What does this mean? It means that the cross is God's answer to teaching history from a Christian perspective. The cross is the fixed point that gives history its meaning. In the cross God comes out of secrecy in a most peculiar way. God reveals himself to us by hiding himself.

That is exactly how the Apostle Paul explains the work of God on earth to the church at Corinth. He writes:

> We speak of God's *secret* wisdom, a wisdom that has been *hidden* and that God des-

> tined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, but God has *revealed* it to us by his Spirit" [1 Corinthians 2:7-10].

Do we catch the key words, "hidden" and "revealed?" They simply mean that when God reveals himself in our world, he goes into hiding. Now that seems mighty strange to us. Revelation normally occurs when, like a butterfly in a cocoon, something comes out of hiding, when something once hidden from sight is now openly revealed. But when God comes out of secrecy, he hides himself. When God shows us his love on earth, he covers himself in flesh and blood. We have said it and sung it, often thoughtlessly, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity" [CW 61].

Miracle of miracles, God reveals himself by hiding himself. There he is at Bethlehem, the baby of whom the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest." There he is standing in the waters of the Jordan, of whom the Father said, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." There he is on the mount, who for a fleeting moment unveiled his glory and stood transfigured before his disciples. And they stood transfixed as Jesus' face shown like the sun and a voice from heaven confirmed, "This is my Son whom I love" [Matthew 17:5]. And then they saw nothing but Jesus only.

In our history God reveals himself by hiding himself for a reason. He knew that persons whom he once created in the image of God [*imago dei*] wanted in vainglory to be just "like God" [*sicut deus*, in Genesis 3:5]. Eyes which once looked God in the face were now veiled by sin and no longer able to see God as he is. The great "I Am," Yahveh, is too great for

us. Pious Israelites did not even dare to pronounce that holy name. But God wants us to know that the lord of history is the LORD who cares. The Lord of life is willing to go into action on our behalf, even if it meant death on a cross.

That is why God's secret plan was to reveal himself by hiding himself. From eternity he planned the coming of Christ under the veil of flesh to suffer and die on a cross to redeem the times. God remains hidden in the cross *[tectum cruce].* For the cross is not glorious. It is an instrument of torture and death. It is condemnation. And as we look at Jesus with our natural historical eyes, we see a person stricken and smitten by God. And we cannot stand the sight, and hide, as it were, our eyes from him [Isaiah 53].

Why? Because in the cross, God takes our pants down, as it were, and we stand before him naked and exposed. What happened there to this righteous and innocent Son of Man reflects with graphic vividness what is to happen to us. The cross is the ultimate preachment of God's anger over sin [FC:Ep V:9]. In it God exposes the root sin out of which all the fruit sins, like disobedience, sexual impurity, pride and selfishness grow [SA III, I, 1f; Galatians 5:19]. The root sin is our total separation from God from birth. Devoid of all true fear and faith in him, we are turned back upon ourselves and, try as we may, cannot keep the royal law of love [James 2:8].

But what our natural eyes cannot see in Jesus' cross because of sin's veil, the eye of faith does see. By the Spirit of the living God, we can see that Jesus' cross is our salvation, that his death is our life, that his obedience is our rescue. The wisdom of the cross is simply this: "*God* was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" [2 Corinthians 5:19].

But the work of Christ on the cross would have meant nothing to us if it were not for the work of the Spirit of the Living God. The Holy Spirit is the one who lifts up the cover for us to see, and there he lets us see with the eyes of faith the

One hidden beneath the veil. Now for the first time we learn the meaning of life and of history from God's perspective.

Yet that mask behind which God operates in the cross will not be fully revealed until we see God face to face. Only at the end of time will the full meaning of history become clear to us. The Christian view of history is truly eschatological. World history is not to be its own judge [*Nicht die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht.* Von Loewenich, 11]. Nor does the goal of history lie within history itself. The goal of history toward which all life is headed lies outside the boundaries of time and space.[2] The goal of history is to be found in God.

The Apostle Paul points to this goal in clear and unmistakable terms when he writes to the Ephesians: "And [God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" [Ephesians 1:9-10].

Only on judgment day will we be able to comprehend the course of life. Only on the last day of this world will the meaning of history itself be revealed in absolute clarity [1 Corinthians 13:12]. Because sin has cast a shroud over life, the full understanding of world history will have to wait until God once and for all time lifts the veil off life and we can see clearly how the events that we study in history are related to God's plans.

Right now as we tell the story of civilization, we see only the evident. We see the marvelous inventions and unmerited blessings and awful tragedies. We learn about wars and plagues, about ordinary people who remain unnamed and the super-skilled who make their mark. We talk about unrest among nations like Bosnians and Serbs, Arabs and Jews, and trace the reasons for their conflict through the historical sources. We tell the story of technological change that revo-

lutionizes life, like the printing press and the computer chip. All these are interesting and real. They form the tapestry of history.

But on closer examination we are still at loose ends. We are fascinated by appearances. Appearances are the measure by which the world measures things [1 Corinthians 1:26-31]. Power, wealth, social standing, wisdom, or the lack of these qualities, consume our time and energies. But the meaning of history still escapes us as each generation of people dies without answering the mystery of history. Appearances deceive because, like that tapestry, we are able to observe merely the reverse side. And there we see the strings and loose ends and no pattern.

When God finally "gathers all things to himself in Christ," he will turn the tapestry of time and space around and we will see his pattern. Then in the light of future glory we will understand that God's judgments are just and right.

In a final impassioned word, Luther asks Erasmus to see Scripture's understanding of life in the light of eternity. "Dear Erasmus," Luther pleads, "There is a life after this life, and whatever has not been punished or rewarded here will be punished and rewarded there, since this life is nothing but an anticipation, or rather, the beginning of the life to come." There Luther rests his case in God's hands. For the light of glory will reveal "that the God whose judgment here is one of incomprehensible righteousness is a God of most perfect and manifest righteousness. In the meantime, we can only *believe* this" [LW 33:292].

Then, in eternity, we will know that we were not foolish to teach the history of nations and peoples and tribes from the perspective of the cross. Then we will fully understand that already in the cross God's eternal judgment bent back upon us in time with the assurance that the Lord of history is our LORD [Philippians 2: 10-11]. Then the meaning of history is finally solved. It is not bunk; it is not a riddle. History

is his-story from beginning to end.

An Afterthought

Let me end with an afterthought. You have been listening patiently to an essay on teaching history and life from a Christian perspective. You have not expected of me, as you will not expect of yourselves, to drag God's word into history lessons by the hair as if we could write the specifically Christian textbook on history. It is enough that our attitudes toward history are shaped by God's Word.

We do well to see God's hand in everything that happens in life, be it good or bad. We do well also to avoid trying to determine God's intent in specific events. At the same time we are prepared to meet the critics who raise faulty questions about the Christian view of life because they do not understand. In answering them we are prepared to testify and to explain our convictions. [See Klatt]

But our teaching will do best to follow the advice that Luther once gave to the city councilmen in Germany, as he encouraged education in schools and gave specific curricular advice. He wrote them in words still pertinent to us today:

> *Children are to be instructed and trained in schools or wherever there are learned and well-trained schoolmasters and schoolmistresses to teach the languages, the other arts, and history. If this were done, children would hear the happenings and sayings of the entire world and would learn how various cities, kingdoms, princes, men, and women fared. In this way they could in a short time place before themselves, as in a mirror, the character, life, counsels and purposes, success and failures, of the whole world from the be-*

ginning.

As a result of this knowledge, they could form their own opinions and adapt themselves in the fear of God to life in this world. Moreover, from the study of these histories they would become judicious and wise in their judgment as to what should be sought and what avoided in the external relations of life. And they would be able to assist and direct others accordingly [LW 45: 368f].

So ours is an awesome, but important task. Teaching people is nothing more than training the coming generations in the fear of God to take their place in the history of nations. We can help to do this by telling the real-life story of peoples and individuals, of civilizations and single biographies, with all the verve and candor of graphic narrative. To teach them we need to cultivate the art of storytelling, as we do with the Bible stories.

If we have learned anything from our study, it should be this. Teaching history in our curricula is not a trivial pursuit. History is the story of life, our life as human beings, the life of the peoples who have gone before us and in whose footsteps we walk in our own time and our own place. But the story is not meaningless, nor nonsense, nor an unsolvable mystery. The sense of what you are telling others about life comes from the Christian faith. History has a fixed point in God and it has a goal, because the Lord of history revealed himself as history's LORD.

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Endnotes

[1] Luther scholar Werner Elert observes: "Actually the demand that history be represented at the universities stems from Luther, who made this demand as early as the year 1520" [Elert, 483n].

[2] Elert, W. "The World as Space," and "The World as Time," is a deep but thorough commentary on the Christian historical perspective according to Luther, pp. 405-517.

Lecture Three: *Scripture, The Revelation of History's Lord*

Interpreting Scripture in an historical and grammatical context

The Theology of the Cross highlights the historical-exegetical approach to Scripture

Hermeneutical Application of the Luther-Erasmus debate

Introduction

I. Unique scriptural insights

Although Luther's writing on *The Bondage of the Will* has been alternately praised and condemned, Luther himself considered it one of his three best works. He placed it alongside the Large and Small Catechisms for good reason. Embedded in this work is a depth of understanding that can easily escape us.

At the core of the Luther-Erasmus exchange is the question of the interpretation of the Scriptures. In the *Diatribe* Erasmus tried to shield himself from Luther's attack by agreeing to let Scripture be the final arbiter of the debate. The issue for the Dutch Bible scholar turned, not on a question of the authority of Scripture, but on its interpretation (LW 33:19ff). As a general rule of interpretation, Erasmus denied the interpreter's right to make dogmatic statements *[assertiones]* when the Scripture text is "obscure and abstruse" (LW 33:24f).

Erasmus' biblicist reputation had come from his work on

the Greek New Testament Bible text as well as from clever satires on monks' bellies, celibate priests, and the activities of the renaissance Pope Julius II. In the latter he revealed a bravado of character that made the scholar the talk of European universities. But true to his name, this peace-loving humanist hated quarrelsome truths and refused to make assertions about biblical teachings that to him were "obscure."

Luther seized on the term. For Luther the theologian, the "hiddenness" of God reached into the core of God's revelation. Luther had made that point clearly and concisely in the Heidelberg Disputation, Theses 19-20. There he had unveiled the theology of the cross on the basis of Isaiah 45:15, "Truly, you are a God who *hides* himself" [LW 31:52]. The terms for the debate were now out front.

To clear the air, Erasmus admits to doubting those assertions that run contrary to the "inviolable authority" of the Scriptures and the "decrees of the church" [LW 33:22]. Subtly he shifts his ground from the inviolability of Scripture taken on its own terms to favor traditional ecclesiastical interpretation. Luther catches the ploy and charges the classicist with acting like the character in Terence's comedies who affirms: "If they say yes, I say yes; if they say no, I say no." Erasmus' levels of understanding amounted to a double standard.

Yet Luther willingly concedes that many questions in theology are validly answered by "yes and no" *[sic et non],* the dialectic used in scholastic reasoning. Therefore Luther divides the question of interpretation. "If you are speaking about useless and indifferent dogmas," he answers Erasmus, "what is new? Who would not wish for the liberty to adopt a skeptical attitude here? If on the other hand you are speaking of dogmas that are vital, what more ungodly assertion could anyone make than that he wished for the liberty of asserting nothing in such cases?" [LW 33:22]

When the truth of Scripture is at issue, Luther can be no

skeptic. Faith is at stake! "The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic," he asserts, "and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience" [LW 33: 24]. And Luther finishes his thought by exposing Erasmus' undogmatic dogmatism for what it is. "Why, then, do you too assert, 'I take no delight in assertions,'" he asks in a well-aimed touch' meant for the heart" [LW 33:21].

The reverend Doctor of Theology, sworn by oath to uphold the Scriptures, now sets his terms for the debate: "I will not only consistently adhere to and assert the sacred writings, everywhere and in all parts of them, but I will also wish to be as certain as possible in things that are not vital and that lie outside of Scripture" [*Ibid.*].

To clarify his position, Luther zeroes in on the key word, "hidden." That one word epitomizes for him the problem of our finite mind trying to grasp the infinite God. That one word anticipates his discussion of the double hiding of God.

From the outset, Luther purposefully distinguishes God from God to prepare the reader for his later distinction between God hidden *(deus absconditus)* and God revealed *(deus revelatus)*, between God nude and God clothed, between the invisible God hidden in his majesty and the visible God hidden in the cross, between God the Creator masked in his creation and God hidden in the Scriptures as his swaddling clothes - in short, between God himself and God's Word.

Luther draws the line clearly: "The distinction I make- in order that I, too, may display a little rhetoric or dialectic- is this: God and the Scriptures of God are two things, no less than the Creator and the creature are two things." The burden of that bold observation relates to the uniqueness of the Scriptures and its interpretation. To appreciate the magnificent conclusions that Luther draws, we await the end of this essay. For now we take a wider perspective.

II. Uniqueness of the Bible

A singular uniqueness of the Christian Bible is that it is anchored in history. On the surface, this assertion too may fly right over our heads. After all, are not the scriptures of other religions similarly unique? Does not a course in world religions demonstrate that ancient Hindu Vedas from the East and the Book of Mormon in the West exemplify writings also anchored in history? Is not the claim for the uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures just another case of Christian *chutzpah* instilled from its Judeo-Christian past?

The questions are valid. They do not merely focus our attention on the task of comparing religions. They are especially important for the conduct of Christian missions. The apostle Paul demonstrated as much on his visit to Athens. He turned the religious curiosity of the Greek nation into an opportunity to inform these cultured people about "an unknown god" by taking the historical tack (Acts 17:16-33; cp. Peter and Stephen to the Jews, Acts 2 & 7).

Our presentation does not intend to compare the Christian Scriptures to those of other world religions. Our humble task is to gain a perspective by showing how the Christian Scriptures relate to the course of human history. By drawing from the Scriptures' own self-understanding, we aim to sharpen our awareness of the marvelous uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures in one respect, namely, their understanding and use of history.

This goal demands that we know how the Christian Scriptures understand history. Only then are we able to turn this insight around and use history as a tool to understand the Scripture text. In the interrelation of the understanding and use of history lies the secret of the Christian faith and its testimony to the world. Why? Because all Christian understanding and study of history is anchored in God himself.

III. The Christian Understanding of History

In Christian belief, God created history "in the beginning" when he created "the heavens and the earth" and all that they contain (Genesis 1). In the widest sense, all history is set in God's time and space.[1] Time and space are two basic divine dimensions in which "we live and move and have our being" [see Acts 17:24-28]. They are, as it were, the box which God made for mankind, the crown of his creation, to live in. When time began, God created the universe in its length and breadth and depth. He made its "woodlands, fields and meadows" [CW 587], its sights and sounds and smells.

As elementary as it may sound, people and events operate on the stage of history at certain times and in certain places (Acts 17:26b). In the annals of history we keep track of nations and circumstances through the medium of chronology and geography. They contextualize life, not as happenstances, but as part of God's good earth, his creative order. Pegging things chronologically and geographically helps us to sort out happenings from one another and to tell their story.

It is important to know "timing" and "placement." Abraham did not live at the time of Moses. Abraham was a nomad in Palestine before the great Lawgiver led the nation of Israel back to it. Consequently, the Hebrew patriarch did not live under the restrictions of the Mosaic Law-code given some 430 years later. He lived by faith in God's universal promise made to him (Genesis 12:2-3). And St. Paul explains the historical significance of the difference in Galatians 3. As in any human testament, Paul writes, the law cannot change the prior promise. So Moses' Law served as a necessary codicil to the Abrahamitic Promise until Christ came.

Similarly, it is historically important to know Mohammed did not live before Christ (B. C.) but in Arabia some 600 years after Christ (A. D.). The difference in time and place helps to contextualize an understanding of the two religions,

both of which claim Abraham as their own. In this way, time and space rescue our understanding from pure abstraction. When we tell the story, they give present reality to what happened in the past. Time and space help us to store and retrieve the story from the memory bank of history for our learning and edification.

A. The Lord of history

Now all this which is history and life - because history is life or the story of life - will not make sense to us unless we understand, according to Luther, that God controls history. And God's lordship over life only makes sense when we face the secret of history itself.

1. Mastering history

To our human eye, history is nonsense. As Henry Ford unabashedly stated on the witness stand, "History is bunk." History perplexes us because it is inexact, illogical, irrational, and disturbs our innate sense of perfection the way things ought to be. As a result, we grow frustrated precisely because we can neither master nor control history. Time just appears to keep flowing on endlessly on this spaceship Earth. In frustration we ask ourselves: What is it all about? What is the meaning of life and the significance of history, of life, of the universe?

Left alone to judge from experience, we necessarily conclude that chance or random selection govern life. "Good luck!" is our wish for life. There is no fixed point to which we are attached. The moment we imagine that we can control life, the means by which we hoped to master it turns on us and increases our fear and frustration. Whether we rely on moral codes, atomic fission, probability printouts, or stun guns, the forces of destruction are crouched, like a lion, un-

der cover (Genesis 4:7).

How can we judge otherwise when wickedness flourishes and the righteous suffer? [See LW 33:289ff] Confucius sadly observed that "the wicked often prosper and the efforts of the good sometimes come to naught" [Eastman, p.154]. Martin Luther noted for Erasmus how "proverbs and that parent of proverbs, experience, testify that the bigger the scoundrel, the greater his luck" [LW 33:291. Ref. Job 12:6; Psalm 73:12]. In assessing the story of individuals and nations, even the greatest minds crash on the question of history's meaning. So in our philosophies we end up "denying the existence of God and imagining that all things are moved at random or by blind Chance or Fortune" [Ibid.].

2. God is in control

But thank God, God provided another way! It is the way of faith in history's Lord. The uniqueness of the Christian Scriptures is that they testify to Scripture's Lord in the context of history itself. In the Scriptures, God is not an abstraction, a force which exists outside the realities of history. Nor is he caught within history's bounds. The omnipotent God who created all things is not an unknown god, a make-believe being known only by a set of truths and wonders, or a mythological creature whose image needs to be fashioned in wood or stone or metal to be real. All such gods are gods of our own making [Isaiah 44:9-20]. They are powerless idols and only reflect the desired power of our impotence.

The Lord of history is history's Lord. He is a God who acts. In his omnipotence he frees our world from the closed systems of causal relations that plague our understanding of life. Mankind, the producer of things as a creative artisan *[homo faber]*, may indeed extend the boundaries of the possible by trying to master space or by controlling the conscious or even the subconscious. A single dominant person may

undeniably alter world affairs in a brief period of time.

But as observable as these historical facts may be in the human record, there still remains no creaturely activity from which God is detached. The Lord of history is in and under all human decisions and historical events. What makes God to be God is his omnipotent will. In that perceptive passage from *The Bondage of the Will,* Martin Luther counters the historical vision of every humanist by asserting:

> *God is He for Whose will no cause or reason may be laid down as a rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but [his will] itself is the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or reason, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will. On the contrary, what takes place must be right because He so wills it. Causes and reasons are laid down for the creature, but not for the will of the Creator unless you set another Creator over him!* [LW 33: 181]

A frightening thought? Not really. All this insight says is simply that "He's got the whole world in his hands." The Son of God "descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God," for a singular purpose, "that he may eternally rule and have dominion over all creatures" [Augsburg Confession III, 4]. In all historical happenings therefore, God is the essential doer (Acts 17:26b). It means that nothing happens without history's Lord, as many a Psalm testifies [See Psalm 139].

> *What an atom does, what an electron does, what a seed does when it germinates, what*

> *the body of a mother does when it bears a child, what a farmer accomplishes when he sows his field, what a merchant does when he closes a business transaction, what a young man does when he decides on a specific profession, when a man and a woman marry, when a nation establishes for itself a peculiar system of government, when people revolt, when armies fight a war- all these activities are... only the facade of an occurrence whose inner side is God Himself, present in this event with His effective power* [Brunner, 16].

The living presence of God in all history puts us in a special relationship with the Creator, a relationship that can never be neutral. What is created is always in the hands of its Creator (Romans 9:21). "Where does a person who hopes in God end up except in his own nothingness?" Luther observes.

> *But when a person goes into nothingness, does he not merely return to that from which he came? Since he comes from God and his own non-being, it is to God that he returns when he returns to nothingness. For even though a person falls out of himself and out of all creation, it is impossible for him to fall out of God's hand, because all creation is surrounded by God's hand. So, run through the world; but where are you running? Always into God's hand and lap* [WA 5, 168].

B. The Lord of history is history's LORD

In the Christian view of history *(Weltanschauung),* God's absolute freedom and sole activity is a great comfort. It is

joyous and certain because the Scriptures reveal a point of view that transcends our present history of time and space. "We should transfer ourselves outside time and space," Luther advises, "and look at our life with the eyes of God" [In Elert, 491].

Why is that? Because God views all history from the perspective of eternity *(sub specie aeternitatis).* The end toward which all life is pressing is not chaotic, like Satan's attacks on God's good creative order. In God's will, St. Paul informs us, history's goal is "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." This is the "mystery of [God's] will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment" [Ephesians 1:9f].

1. The LORD uniquely revealed

Does God's sole activity, then, make puppets of us all? If God conceals his will in a mystery (1 Corinthians 2:7), are we merely play-acting while God pulls the strings? Not at all. Even though we act in history and act responsibly, we cannot determine God's hidden will merely by observing what happens historically. On the surface, historical facts only reveal the things we do and what happens around us. We cannot deduce God's intentions or our own hidden motives from them. The truth is that we are fooled by appearances. [See Luther's discussion LW 31: 43 #3 & 4]

Why is that? Simply because the Scriptures reveal that God works, as it were, behind a mask. History is his cocoon behind which he operates in loving concern for his creation which lives in bondage to sin, death, and Satan. For, "God is in our power," Luther observes in a Christian twist of logic. "We do not live in ourselves but in him, and he acts and speaks all things in us... He, however, who believes in the power of God recognizes it is nothing but the work of man, a rotten,

ineffective, and vain delusion. Whoever relies on this, builds himself a hell" [LW 14:82].

Moses once tried to unmask God. On Sinai's mount he asked to see God face to face in his bare and unveiled glory. But God turned him down flat. "Nobody can see God and live," the LORD told him. But God did permit Moses to see him from the backside. "I will put you in a cleft in the rock," God said, "and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen" [Exodus 33:18-23].

There, from the "backside," the LORD of history uniquely reveals himself contrary to appearances. God's backside as he passes by historically is not what we expect God to be like. The backside does not attract us as does the glory of the face. The backside reveals God's shame, and we hide, as it were, our faces from him (Isaiah 53:2-5). The backside masks his saving acts among men in the reverse of normal appearances. God reveals his glory by hiding it. He covers his majesty by cloaking it. In the Incarnation he puts on the mantle of a creature and covers himself with our shameful wickedness. God's Son enters our time and space as one of us, in a place called Bethlehem, at a time when Quirinius was governor of Syria, to redeem the time [Luke 2:2].

As unbelievable as it may seem, God's Son really and truly exchanges places with us - the Prince with the pauper [Galatians 4:4f]. Contrary to all expectation and appearances, God's Son clothes himself in flesh and blood so that he can effect a great exchange in our history. He trades the white robe of his righteousness for our filthy rags [Isaiah 64:6], washes our clothes in his real life-blood, and then covers us with the garment of salvation [Isaiah 61:10]. We will never understand this joyous exchange of his death for our life. Only the Spirit of the living God takes the mystery of the cross out of the realm of unbelievable history [1 Corinthians 2:10ff].

2. Scripture's self-understanding

But it matters for Scriptures' understanding of history that we hear the story (Romans 10:14). History is his-story. It is God's Word to the world. Both Old and New Testaments verbally proclaim his mighty acts in our time and in our space. The Christian God revealed in the Scriptures is not an abstraction; he is personal and real. His activities reveal God's love for the world (John 3:16) and his judgments on all unbelief (Matthew 24 & 25). The same all-powerful Word that called time and space into being is strong to save. In creative love, the Lord of history personally changed the course of history by becoming our Savior and our LORD.

In a survey of the Scripture, Martin Franzmann testified that "nowhere, in any aspect of it, does this word lose its character as history." He then, in a grand summation, clarifies in what sense God's Word is historical:

> *It **has** a history, being the crown and fulfillment of God's previous actions and promises; it **is** history - the recital of the mighty works of God which culminates in that epochal history when God dealt decisively with the sin of man in His Servant Jesus of Nazareth; and it **makes** history - it is the word of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord moves creatively in it. It calls upon men to turn, and turns them, and thus catches men into God's last great movement in history toward God's last goal* [Franzmann, 19].

The desired outcome of God's acts of love in our time and space is to have us live with God always - in time and in eternity [2 Timothy 1:9b-10].

IV. The Use of History in the Christian Scripture

A. The task and tools

The Christian understanding of this awesome sweep and scope of history makes the study of history an indispensable tool for understanding life and the Scriptures which unveil life. Because the Lord of history is simultaneously the LORD in history, the study of history helps us to interpret the Scripture text. Time and space put life in context; they serve no less a purpose in interpreting the Scriptures.

The task requires humility. If the Christian understanding of history teaches us one thing, it is that we cannot sit in judgment over the Scripture text. God not only crafts history, he also crafted the Bible record [2 Timothy 3:16]. This means two things with regard to reading Scripture. First and foremost, Scripture is a seamless whole and will be its own interpreter. But equally important, comprehending its view of history *(Weltanschauung)* requires the Spirit of its Creator. Without the Spirit of God the marvelous uniqueness of the Scriptures will bypass us [LW 33:28].

To approach the Scriptures in humility requires that we use a number of tools. History is an important tool, though not the only one at our disposal. The use of history in interpretation is inherently interconnected to the text itself and to its specific terms.

B. The circles of interpretation

For understanding the Scriptures, these three - terms, text, and historical context - work in harmony to convey the Scriptural meaning. There is nothing particularly unique in this historical-exegetical approach. The skill of exegesis is common to all reading and communication. E. C. Hirsch's

bestseller, *Cultural Literacy*, recently highlighted how closely history and language interrelate for reading a text. He calls the combination of language and culture "a nation's dictionaries" [Hirsch, 91].

Knowledge of both history and language are important for the learning process, Hirsch concludes, because they provide core information stored in the memory [*Ibid.*, 29f]. Without a knowledge of explicit words and the historical background, the text often just hangs there. The story is out of focus. We cannot integrate what is written because the words fly past us as does the setting. Our understanding becomes fragmentary. We end up processing information, but not really comprehending. The facts are disconnected from the sense. And we grow bored. Here history comes to our rescue; it integrates what we read or hear by providing a real-life setting.

1. In historical context

In God's own way, one of the major purposes of history is to provide a lifelike context for communicating his Word. Without the context, reading the text could become a mere straining at words. The text loses its simple historical sense and, unless otherwise indicated by the words themselves, takes on a foreign meaning. Luther chastises the rabbis for getting so hung up on words in the Talmud that the Old Testament became a code book, little different from its Roman Catholic counterpart in the Book of Canon Law [WTR V, 5670].

2. Under the cross

But neither does the historian become the guru of interpretation. The skill of reading the text historically must never isolate itself from the specific words and from the flow of the text itself. Historicists overevaluate history as a determinant

of events. Like their rabbinical counterparts, they can get so hung up on the time/place contexts that the LORD of history revealed in the cross recedes into the background [Elert 480f]. For the grammarian and the historian, the cross must remain the touchstone of interpretation. The text remains out of focus unless the cross (the Gospel) intersects and enlightens it.

In writing to the Romans, St. Paul complains about his people, not because they lack zeal for God, but because "their zeal is not based on knowledge" [Romans 10:2]. The knowledge they lacked was not Scripture words or Scripture history. The Torah and the Ancient Scriptures were sacred to Jews. They were as schooled in looking for outward signs as the Greeks were schooled in great systems of thought. But both Jews and Greeks stumbled when it came to the wisdom of the cross [1 Corinthians 1:22].

Why is that so? Paul explains the problem simply: "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" [Romans 10:3]. Their moral and ethical life had taken on a life of its own instead of life "in Christ" [Ephesians 1:3-14]. Both philosophies of life failed to understand that the Lord of history is history's LORD.

C. History in the service of theology

The modest role for which God created time and place in our history can best be seen by reading the Scriptures themselves. There the great deeds and promises of God are laid in the cradle of the historical. People and places serve God's will. Nature and nations bow to his ways. Time does not just tick by like the second-hand of a clock. God waits for the ripe time *(kairos)* when things are readied, like grain for the harvest, to carry out his good and gracious will [See Galatians 4:4, for example].

1. In the ancient world

Thus the promised world's Savior from Abraham's lineage is not immediately "shazamed" into being, like a god in Greek mythology. Abraham, the father of believers, must himself first father a line and secure the land before the time of fulfillment. He does beget the son of promise in old age beyond all nature and past human comprehension (Galatians 4: 23b). But the land must wait four generations to be secured for a reason: "The sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" in God's judgment (Genesis 15:16).

Subsequently, Israel waits and is tested in Egypt. In the promised land, Canaan is plunged into its own undoing. Thus the history of nations unfolds and we can follow each in its extant literature and records. Divine mercy accompanies the sweatboxes of Israel's slavery in the high civilization of Egypt. Divine judgment stands over the Baal altars and Asherah poles of the Canaanite tribes. In God's good time some 400 years later and by divine directive, Abraham's children march to seize the promised land from the native Canaanites.

The lesson of history is clear from Scripture. God guides the destiny of the world in such a way that nations and peoples, advanced civilizations and creative cultures, serve the ongoing course of his Gospel. We read their history and hear their story in all its graphic detail and learn to know that history is the handmaiden of God's Word.

The later history of Israel under the prophets does not differ from the history of Israel's earlier times. It also is not abstract mythology, detached from time and place and from humanity. It smells of the earth and is earthy. It moves within the framework of datable kings and datable events. God's people, Israel and Judah, are caught in the power politics of Babylon and Assyria and Egypt. We are led by history's habits of the mind to study the maps and the chronology of events to put the prophets' message in context. We read the litera-

ture and chronicles of the nations to understand what's happening. In the records, many thoughts, places and events are spelled out concretely.

But times and geography and people do not dictate the course of history. God does. In all that happens, God is in control and he says as much in graphic and earthy terms through the mouth of his prophets. "This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: a basket of ripe fruit," the prophet Amos reports. And then God sends his people the following message, "The LORD said to me, 'The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer'" [Amos 8:1f].

Within two generations God's people go into captivity. Ten tribes are "lost." A remnant of Judah returns to Jerusalem. But Israel's captors themselves are led captive in sequence: Assyria, Babylon, Persia. So even the most distant and mighty nation must bend to the LORD's will, and its civilization vanishes from the pages of recordable history.

2. History's focal point

In New Testament times the historical sense remains the same. When called upon to spell out the Christian view of history in simple terms, the Apostle Paul unveils for his heathen audience the double point of history. All history, he explains, is encompassed in two people: Adam and Christ. Adam is the earthling, the created progenitor of mankind. "Sin entered into the world through [this] one man and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" [Romans 5:12].

Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God the Father, is the other man. He was the right man, the One appointed by God to give us life with God. In and through Christ God made mankind to be the focal point of his love. The glorious good news is that Jesus Christ is history's real focal point.

What does this mean? St. Paul gives the explanation:

> *For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! How much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ* [Romans 5:15 & 17].

This Christian gospel was first preached in a world that had grown old by stages. The ancient empires of Egypt, Babylonia, Persia and Greece were gone from the scene. At Christ's time Rome stood at the height of her power. Christ and his apostles lived within the context of those times. Life in Judea in Jesus' day reflects those particular times; the spread of the Gospel in the Apostolic age occurs within that particular age. In reading the New Testament, we need to gain a "cultural literacy" of the Roman world. Its language and culture are "dictionaries" of the times to help our textual understanding.

Such an isagogical preparation for reading the text exegetically is history's modest offering. It sets us into that particular day and that particular age and thereby enlivens every Bible study with real-life contexts. By using the tool of history, we are given the vital context within which we gain a greater understanding of the sense of history - the Lord of history is history's LORD.

That insight puts all history into focus. Next to the holy Trinity, the mystery of history's LORD revealed on the pages of the Christian Scriptures is the sole foundation of our comfort, life, and salvation (FC VIII: 18). In, with, and through Christ Jesus, our LORD, we learn to sing Easter's song: *Christus vivit!* In him let us celebrate life! *(L'chaim!)* And the celebration of life, in the final analysis, is what history is all about. For "God so loved the world that he gave his one

and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" [John 3:16]. That is the Christian Scripture's unique message, set in the context of world history.

V. Concluding observations

A. God's revelation

It is not Luther's interest in debating Erasmus to establish the authority of Scripture. Erasmus is in agreement with that position. As far as Erasmus is concerned, the question is: How can one establish which interpretation of the Scriptures is correct, particularly in matters where Scripture is obscure?

To answer, Luther divides the question. Terms, text, and context, as any scholar knows, are important in getting at the Scripture text. They combine to elucidate the Scripture. If a text is hard to interpret and is "obscure," it is our problem, not God's.

In respect to the external clarity of the Bible, therefore, Luther frankly admits, "there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar" (LW 33:25f). In translating the Bible, Luther baldly stated that he did the work "only as a service" and that "no one is forbidden to do a better piece of work" (LW 35:183).

But struggling with the terms and contexts of these texts "in no way hinders a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture." What appears obscure to our minds, God's Word asserts with all clarity. What God promised to Adam and his offspring and to Abraham and his descendants is fulfilled by the Lord Jesus and sealed by his resurrection.

For what still sublimer thing can remain

> *hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher [Matthew 27:66; 28:2], and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ, the Son of God, has been made man, that God is three in one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally?* (LW 33: 25f)

The marvel of God's gracious acts toward mankind is that he laid his Word in the cradle of words and expressions, and in the swaddling clothes of our history, for all to see and for faith to grasp. God remains hidden to our mind for one reason only. Ours is the veil, as St. Paul says to the Jews (2 Corinthians 3:15; 4:3f).

Our natural mind is veiled by sin, even as our natural eyes cannot stand to see God in his glory, unveiled, nude, in his unapproachable majesty, that is, to see God as he is (יהוה), God himself (Exodus 33: 19f). If it comes to knowing God's hidden will, Luther states, "It is enough to know simply that there is a certain inscrutable will in God, and as to what, why, and how far it wills, that is something we have no right to inquire into, hanker after, care about, or meddle with, but only to fear and adore" (LW 33:140).

But God's revelation is God's coming out of hiding in his own peculiar way. He reveals himself by hiding himself in flesh and blood. In God's revelation, he can be seen and nothing is really obscure for faith. The analogy of faith is not some inward insight gained by analysis. The analogy of faith is the God-given insight that rests on the mighty acts of God revealed in the holy Scriptures. Without the cross and the resurrection, the whole Bible would be forever obscure to sin-veiled eyes. "Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?" (LW 33:26). This is for Luther a mandate for Scripture's confirmation, not reduction.

The cross and resurrection must intersect all words and passages of Scripture and bring them to light. From Adam onward, from Abraham forward, the Christian faith is a promising tradition. The promise fulfilled in the life of Jesus illuminates the entire Bible. The one who would try to interpret God's Word by pure reason and without Christ is as foolish as the person who would "light a candle to see the sun," as Luther scholar C. F. W. Walther once observed.

B. The clarity of Scripture

But Luther has not finished his observations on the critical term "hiddenness." He wants the world to know that "matters of the highest majesty and the profoundest mysteries are no longer hidden away, but have been brought out and are openly displayed" in the Scriptures (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16) and in our preaching (Luke 24:45; Mark 16:15). These insights are vital for the mission and ministry of the church (LW 33:28).

For this reason Luther puts the matter of the clarity of Scripture in unmistakable terms. As a guide for scriptural interpretation, he distinguishes the double clarity of Scripture from the double hiding of God in them.

An unbeliever who reads Scriptures knows not a whit of what the Bible says. God is hidden from him even though he can recite passages from memory and quote the Scriptures, Bible in hand. The *internal clarity* of Scripture remains hidden to his sin-darkened mind because "no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it" (LW 33:28). If Erasmus were referring to such obscurity, Luther would concede the point.

But there is another hiddenness of the Scripture that is most salutary and on the basis of which every Christian lives.

This is the revelation of God in Christ. Here nothing is held back in all of the Bible. For the simple of heart who by God's own Spirit take God at his word, the Scripture displays an amazing *external clarity*. If Erasmus by his doubtings questions the external clarity of the Bible, then Luther refuses to concede this point. "If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light and published to all the world" (Ibid.).

Erasmus' two levels of interpretation were unacceptable for Luther because they obscured the teaching of the cross. The Scriptures themselves admit only one interpretation, namely, the text of the Bible as clarified through the teaching of the cross. Therefore to consign the mysteries of God to the level of the skeptic where God clearly says what he means and means what he says is to overlook God's revelation of himself and his ways in his Word.

In a grand summation of the problem of Scripture interpretation, Luther puts the question of Bible interpretation into the perspective of eternity. Setting aside Erasmus' interpretation of the Scriptures on two levels, Luther substitutes looking at God's revelation in view of three lights - the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory.

> *If, therefore, the light of the gospel, shining only through the Word and faith, is so effective that this question [of God's mercy and judgment] which has been discussed in all ages is so easily settled and put aside, what do you think it will be like when the light of the Word and of faith come to an end, and reality itself and Divine majesty are revealed in their own light?*

Luther asks the question of Erasmus out of pastoral concern. The Reformer faces the Scholar with the consequences

of letting God be God in the hope of turning his sharp mind to the truth of God's revelation. He lights each lamp individually and illuminates God's hiddenness in the three kingdoms of divine activity:

> *1. The light of nature.*
>
> By the light of natural reason, we cannot solve the problem how it can be just and right that the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper in this world.
>
> *2. The light of grace.*
>
> The light of grace gives the Scripture's answer. The life of the righteous is not lived by worldly standards but by faith. Therefore the life of the righteous is hidden with Christ in God.
>
> But Scripture's answer poses another insoluble problem. If, according to the light of grace, we live by faith in Christ alone, how can it be just that God damns a person who is unable by any power of his own to do anything but sin and be guilty?
>
> Both the light of nature and of grace can only question God's justice and conclude that it is unjust for God to save one wicked person freely and without merit, but damn another who appears to be less, or at least not more, wicked.
>
> *3. The light of glory*
>
> But the light of glory in heaven will bring to light what now is hidden to our natural eyes. What is incomprehensible here because sin has veiled our understanding will there reveal in absolute clarity that God's ways are perfectly just and righteous.

At present we live in between then and now. Living as we do "in the meantime," we can only believe this to be true. The cross is God's love in eternity bent back to us in time. Through God's revelation of his grace God admonishes and confirms our faith and helps us by a similar miracle of God's Spirit to understand the hidden ways of God in our natural life. [See LW 33:292]

To hold to this faith is a consummation devoutly to be prayed for. And so we end our study: God, in your mercy keep us in the faith that grasps the revelation of God, hidden in the cross, clarified in his Word, preached to the nations, seen by the angels, and confirmed by the Spirit! [1 Timothy 3:16]

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Endnotes

[1] See Elert, W. *The Structure of Lutheranism.* Ch. 5, "The World as Space," Ch. 6, "Time."

Reaction to 1998 Reformation Lectures

by Karl F. Fabrizius

As a parish pastor and theologian I find Professor Koelpin's essay raises some rather important questions regarding congregational life and the teaching of the faith. He has once more reminded us that Luther considered this "one of his three best works." (63) If we are to place it in the company of the Large and Small Catechisms, then it is clearly to have an impact on the catechetical and liturgical life of the Church. Luther even writes that we must know these things if we are to lead a godly life (LW 33:35). In the time allotted to me today I will address four issues regarding this godly life which flow out of Professor Koelpin's essay: (1) catechesis and storytelling, (2) sermonizing and the exegetical task, (3) hymnody and the will of God, and (4) vocation and education.

I. Catechesis and Storytelling

Professor Koelpin has reminded us that Luther "restored the cross to a brilliance not known since the early Christian church." (6) As we have heard these last two days, that theology of the cross is not some dry academic theory, it is the very story of the God made flesh. But it is not just the story of the past, it is the story of God with us yet today, for in Baptism He has joined our flesh to His that this flesh of dust might be raised up to eternal life. His promise to be with us always is not some warm fuzzy that He gives to us, but the objective promise attached to the office of the public ministry through which He is still at work in his Church.

How am I to teach about this hidden God and about His will if it is so important for a godly life? Here is the question

of catechesis. Catechesis is faithfully teaching the Word of God and passing on the language of our holy faith, so that the baptized learn how to receive God's gifts in the Divine Service, how to pray, how to confess, and how to live where God has called them in the freedom of forgiveness, with faith in Christ and love to neighbor.[1] This definition reminds us of the importance of having a knowledge of the Scriptural context and the language necessary to work in that context.

My generation was taught using workbooks, textbooks, and the 1943 version of the Small Catechism. We learned our proof texts, but in many ways we were easy targets for the destructive tides of Evangelicalism that have swept through our land, as we see from the "back door losses." If passages or Scriptural stories are viewed in a vacuum, they can be interpreted in a multitude of ways so that "Bible loving evangelicals" devour the unsuspecting sheep. In other words, proof texts need a context.

When I began the pastoral task of catechesis, I brought out the old workbooks because that was the way I had done it. I wasn't happy with synodical publications which tended to be questions about feelings with little substantive material. But as I used some older materials I still was not content.

It was in a course on Augustine during my graduate program that I began to understand the art of catechesis as it had been practiced by the historic church. The catechist was to tell the Biblical story to the catechumen. He would start at Creation and work through the Old Testament. This process might last as long as three years as the catechumens were fully acquainted with the history of God's people. Augustine writes that at times the catechist will wonder if the catechumen is benefiting and will have to labor diligently to keep his own mind devoted to the task. Indeed, when the catechist devotes himself to his task he will benefit just as the catechumen.

If your congregations are like mine, you probably frequently marvel at the Biblical illiteracy of many in the congregation. A lot of finger pointing goes on about who is to blame and there is also the hand-wringing about what we are going to do. For many this means new materials or new manuals that have up-to-date issue oriented materials. All of these things move us ever farther away from the Word of God and from the theology of the cross. The textbooks tend to be sanitized selections of Scriptures with glossy color photos and graphics that do more to promote a theology of glory than the theology of the cross.

Professor Koelpin's solution for teaching the history of the world was to "tell the story of the blessings and breakdowns of God's order in history." This same principle is important for catechesis. For example, in teaching the Second Table of the Law I always do the narrative of David's family from the adultery with Bathsheba to the death of Absalom. As I tell the story and refer the children to the Biblical text, they realize that the historical record of God's faithful people has a lot of similarities to their own sinful lives. During the course of the narrative I can ask them about applications in the catechism and discuss the order of God which holds the whole history together in spite of all the disorder in David's sinful household. In addition, the text provides numerous times to refer to the life of Christ, thus telling the story of Christ at the same time. The theology of the cross is seen in the actual details of David's life.

II. Sermonizing and the Exegetical Task

Being able to tell the story in the catechetical process will also impact the way one preaches. Here I must make it clear that I am not referring to some skill that could be perfected in a speech class. The teaching of the Word of God does not depend upon the ability of any man. Instead, it is important to learn to stay out of the way of the text and not clutter it up with a book of sermon illustrations. Quite frankly,

you have an abundance of illustrations in the Word which you are to be preaching. When Scripture interprets Scripture in the proclamation of Law and Gospel, the preacher begins to lead his flock ever deeper into the incarnational reality. Here we find the broad context in the unity of the Scriptures which Prof. Koelpin has reminded us are a "seamless whole" just as the garment which Christ wore at the cross.

It is the incarnation which shapes our view of the Scriptures and of history. Because Christ came into history, grammar and history are essential to treating the text. Luther reminds us that the Holy Spirit Himself came in languages as at Pentecost. However, I must remind you that Christ is the real content of Scriptures. All theology is Christology. Differing views on the sacraments, the ministry, and every other topic are a result of differing views on Christ. Who do we say that He is? Grammar is not a code book that unlocks the mystery. It is Christ who unveils the mystery of the Scriptures. As Luther said in a 1545 sermon on John 5:39:

> *So now, briefly, this is the meaning of the passage: Who wants to rightly read and understand the Scriptures and have eternal life will seek Jesus of Nazareth, Mary's Son, in it. When he finds Jesus there and believes on him, holding him as the only true redeemer and savior, who alone can and wants to give eternal life to all who believe on him, then he is a true doctor of Holy Scriptures.*[2]

Where am I going with all this? Let us consider for a moment some words of Luther regarding history and the Gospels:

> *All the words and stories of the gospels are sacraments of a kind, i.e., sacred signs, by*

> *which God works in believers what the histories signify....Just as baptism is the sacrament through which God restores a man; just as absolution is the sacrament by which God forgives sins, so the words of Christ are sacraments, through which He works our salvation. Hence the gospel is to be taken sacramentally-i.e., words of Christ need to be meditated on as symbols through which that righteousness, virtue, and salvation are given which these words themselves display. You can now understand the difference between the gospel and human histories. The histories of Livy depict and portray those virtues which they themselves are unable to reproduce in other people. The gospel indeed portrays virtues so that it may become the instrument by which God changes us, remakes us, etc....We meditate properly on the gospel when we do so sacramentally, for through faith the words produce in us what they portray. Christ was born; believe that He was born for you, and you will be born again. With that you have the distinctive characteristic of the gospel. The histories of men cannot produce that effect in you.* [*WA* 9, 439, 442 (1519)]

These words from 1519 remind us that preaching and exegesis are not mental gymnastics and do not require a secret *gnosis*. Grammar can narrow the possibilites of a text, but grammar will never answer every question. Perhaps, some will regard this as a little dangerous, but try reading the sermons of Luther. Luther's sermons are designed to proclaim Christ at all times. The comments on the historical life around him in Wittenberg only serve to direct men back to Christ to

make any meaning out of life and shape the hearers in vocation. For in the proclamation of the gospel the Spirit is at work in the Word, as He is in the water, to work His works in you.

At this point it is important to remind ourselves of the privilege and need to preach the Gospel reading each Sunday. The historic practice of preaching the Gospel for the day at every Lord's Day service in conjunction with the Mass was based on this incarnational and Christological view of the Word of God. The chief service of the congregation was held on the day of the resurrection and thus the words of the Risen Lord were to be at the heart of the life of the Church. Through the Preaching Office Christ is in the midst of His people and feeds them on the Bread of Life, both from the Pastor's lips and his hands, as the Gospel is received sacramentally.

But what then about the rest of the Scriptures? Aren't all the words of God equal and in need of equal treatment? If the Bible is the Word of God, how can we distinguish between the Gospels and the Minor Prophets? If the Bible is simply a plan for living as the Evangelicals claim, its books probably should be viewed as all being equal. However, Luther and his followers saw that the words about Jesus in the Gospels were the key to understanding all the other books of the Bible. It is fitting to repeat the words Prof. Koelpin quoted from Luther, *Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?* (LW 33:26) Take a look at the people who gather in the pews of our congregations. They come once a week or less frequently. They are confronted by all manner of evil and misfortune. They need to appropriate the history of Christ in the Gospels as their own story. When the paralytic is brought to Jesus, they need to see that they are that man in need of being granted the freedom which is found in Christ alone, not in their own impotent wills. When they hear the account of the Good Samaritan they need to see that they are the man beaten up on the road and Christ is the Good Samaritan who

has placed them in the inn of His Church. Preaching week after week on the gospels you arm your hearers with a center of meaning, a history which will bring order to their disorderly, sinful lives. The Gospel or "history" of Christ changes the lives of men.

Such preaching uses the Old Testament as its book of illustrations, for these are historical insights into the way God's will was carried out in the midst of His sinful people. In the days of the judges of Israel, men, like men today, were each doing what was right in his own eyes. The final main character of the book provides a commentary on that theme. Three times Samson sees a woman he wants and each time he acts in sin. Like the Pharisees of John 9, he had eyes all along, but he was not seeing, for he did not hear properly. Finally, his eyes are poked out and he sees by faith. Stretching out his arms in the shape of a cross he brings down the temple of Dagon. All the earlier victories mean nothing in comparison to his final victory in which he also dies. The story could be used in various Gospel accounts: Jesus as the strong man, the battle with Satan, Christ's death in the midst of thieves, etc. Each would serve to illustrate the way God is always in control carrying out His will through His masks such as Samson. Indeed, the writer to the Hebrews places this same Samson in the list of those who lived by faith. These illustrations are not only comforting, they produce hope and comfort, for they are God's own words through which His Spirit breathes life.

III. Hymnody and the Will of God

One cannot avoid the area of hymnody when talking about the teaching of the true faith. Good catechesis and sacramental sermons can quickly be destroyed by bad hymnody which is aided by a catchy tune. Those who want to make hymnody a subject of *adiaphora* will soon find themselves without a good understanding of the faith. Now I must credit Prof.

Koelpin for leading me to this topic. His frequent references to "He's got the whole world in His hands" got under my skin enough that I will offer a few preliminary comments on this matter.

Luther's theology of the cross and his writing on *The Bondage of the Will* have had a great deal of impact on Lutheran hymnody. The themes of God in control of all history, the cross as the center of all history, the true end point of all history, and faith's recognition that the will of God is good and gracious are all set forth by good Lutheran hymnody. In what follows you will find what are only the preliminaries to a very rich treatment of the theme of God's will in Lutheran hymnody.

Among these hymns would certainly be Nicolaus Decius' version of the *Gloria in excelsis*. The first stanza addresses the revelation of God's good will in the person of His own dear Son. This is followed by the confession that God's will controls all things.

> *We praise,we worship thee,we trust,*
> *And give thee thanks forever,*
> *O Father, that Thy rule is just*
> *And wise and changes never.*
> *Thy boundless pow'r o'er all things reigns,*
> *Done is whate'er Thy will ordains:*
> *Well for us that Thou rulest. (ELH 35:2)*

Stanzas five and six of the Rambach hymn *Baptized into Thy Name Most Holy* (ELH 242) are a prayer that our dumb beast of a will might be driven by Christ rather than the prince of darkness. In the seventh stanza the language of purpose suggests the topic of vocation.

The J.H. Schroeder hymn *One Thing Needful* (ELH 182:4-6) prays for God to control the believer's conduct through the Word and bend his will and ambition to Christ's wisdom.

Luther's own *Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice* speaks of the sorry condition of our own will which is prone to evil. On the other hand, the Son obeys His Father's will for our sakes.

My good works so imperfect were
They had no pow'r to aid me;
My will God's judgments could not bear,
Yea, prone to evil made me... (ELH 378:3)

The Son obeyed His Father's will,
Was born of Virgin mother ... (TLH 387:6)

Brandenburg's *The Will of God Is Always Best* is a confession of faith which trusts that whatever God sends to His faithful is for good. Comfort, hope, and life come from the knowledge that God's will is always done. (ELH 477:1,2,4)

It is Paul Gerhardt who provides a meaty hymn about the will of God and the theology of the cross. In *Thy Way and All Thy Sorrows* God's rule and direction come from His truth and grace. Nothing can stand in the way of God's will being done, a truth which increases our hope as we await God's pleasure. For this reason the hymn can conclude by confessing that we are children of truth who will soon be conquerors.

Thy truth and grace, O Father,
Behold and surely know,
Both what is good and evil,
For mortal men below:
And whatsoe'er Thou choosest
Thou dost, great God, fulfill,
And into being bringest
Whate'er is in Thy will. (ELH 208:3)

This is followed up in the fifth stanza with a reminder

that God's will is accomplishing its aim at all times even when it does not appear so:

In vain the pow'rs of darkness
Thy will, O God, oppose;
High over all undoubting,
Thy pleasure onward goes.
Whate'er Thy will resolveth,
Whate'er Thou dost intend,
Its destined work performeth
True to its aim and end. (ELH 208:5)

The incarnational roots of such thinking are present in Gerhardt's Christmas hymn, *All My Heart Sings and Rejoices.* Here Gerhardt preaches the Gospel to the sufferers and the brokenhearted. Our Lord is the Conqueror, the Lamb, the Treasure, who comes to banish sadness.

Hither come, ye poor and wretched;
Know His will Is to fill
Every hand outstretched.
Here are riches without measure;
Here forget All regret,
Fill your hearts with treasure. (ELH 115:11)

The cross as the revelation of God's will for man is the theme of Gerhard's Good Friday hymn, *A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth.* There the Son of God willingly takes on suffering and death. The One who rends the boulders is laid in the grave after He is slaughtered as a lamb. Faith looks to the bleeding Lamb and the fear of death is removed.

...When by my grief I am oppressed
On Thee my weary soul shall rest
And o'er grief's ills so conquer.

And when beneath life's stormy woe
My ship is driven to and fro
So art Thou then my Anchor. (ELH 331:9)

All of these hymns and others in the hymnal proclaim the "double point of history" (79) regarding the bound will of Adam's children and the freedom that comes from the last Adam, Jesus Christ. These hymns teach the theology of the cross to new generations of Lutherans long before they ever hear the term "theology of the cross."

Why, then, are we turning our back on teaching these hymns? Instead we offer songs with words like "Jesus' love is bubbling up in me." Even more obvious is the willingness to sing blatant decision theology songs like "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." Here the Pelagian free will position is advocated among our children. What started in a seemingly innocent way in the 1960s and 1970s has become a plague. Now people defend the practice as being cute and of no real harm simply because it has the name of Jesus used in the text. But who is this Jesus? A whole generation was not taught with good hymnody and has become a "sitting duck" target for the preaching of the Evangelicals who love to speak about man's free will.

IV. Vocation, Education, and the Will of God

In my early days as a parish pastor I really did not know the Scriptures, Luther, and the Confessions well enough to be comfortable teaching the faith. It was all an academic exercise that had little real passion. I had given little thought to vocation or the importance of the Table of Duties in the Catechism.

Vocation is the place God gives us in this world to act on the historical stage. Responsible actions are joined to the way of freedom in the Christian life. As those who have been called

by the Gospel, we are assured that God's will is being done at all times. While this is comforting it still does not answer what responsible actions are expected in our daily vocations. Certainly, this must begin with the Commandments, but it is the Table of Duties which provides the basis for discussing some of the most basic vocations of life. There we learn how God has ordered his Church with preachers and hearers, provided governments for orderly society, set apart husbands, wives, children, employers, and employees. In fact, these offices are the basis for confessing our sins as we learn in the Office of the Keys.

The proclamation that God gives us our place in life and in history brings forth the desire to thank and to praise, serve and obey Him with our reason and all our senses. Thus education is an important part of fulfilling vocation in the world. Prof. Koelpin directed our attention to two important works of Luther on this matter. In another section of that 1524 treatise to the councilmen of the cities of Germany, Luther had written:

> *It is a sin and a shame that matters have come to such a pass that we have to urge and be urged to educate our children and young people and to seek their best interests, when nature itself should drive us to do this and even the heathen afford us abundant examples of it. ... What would it profit us to possess and perform everything else and be like pure saints, if we meanwhile neglected our chief purpose in life, namely, the care of the young? I also think that in the sight of God none among the outward sins so heavily burdens the world and merits such severe punishment as this very sin which we commit against the children by not educating them. (LW 45:353)*

Luther goes on to say that it is the responsibility of the councilmen because most parents are not suited for the task and too busy with the affairs of the household. They should realize the benefit to society and spare no expense in training the young. Such schooling should start with the languages, for this is very important for supporting faith.

> *Hence, it is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish. ... Yes, you say, but many of the fathers were saved and even became teachers without the languages. That is true. But how do you account for the fact that they so often erred in the Scriptures? ... When our faith is thus held up to ridicule, where does the fault lie? It lies in our ignorance of the languages; and there is no other way out than to learn the languages. (Ibid., 360-362)*

Here Luther says virtually the same thing he will say in his debate with Erasmus the next year. The Scriptures are clear. It is our own ignorance which stands in the way. So the most important thing about promoting education is its value to the spiritual realm in preparing future pastors who will preach the faith and prophets who will expound the Scriptures (Ibid., 363). Yet, Luther does not want his fellow Germans to overlook the need for well educated young men in the divinely ordered estate of temporal government (Ibid., 367). Even young women should receive schooling for the benefit of an orderly society. Of course, Luther says, *The devil very much prefers blockheads and ne'er-do-wells, lest men get along too well on earth (Ibid., 370-371).*

The *Sermon* of 1530 repeats many of the themes of 1524. Those who do not send their sons to school are idolaters.

Here he is even more specific that education is first of all to provide pastors for the Church.

> *If you will not raise your child for this office, and the next man will not, and so on, and no fathers or mothers will give their children to our God for this work, what will become of the spiritual office and estate? The old men now in the office will not live forever. They are dying off every day and there are no others to take their place. ... He [God] has not given you your children and the means to support them simply so that you may do with them as you please, or train them just to get ahead in the world. You have been earnestly commended to raise them for God's service, or be completely rooted out—you, your children, and everything else, in which case everything you have done for them is condemned, as the first commandment says, "I visit the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me" [Ex. 20:5]. But how will you raise them for God's service if the office of preaching and the spiritual estate have fallen into oblivion? And it is your fault. You could have done something about it. You could have helped to maintain them if you had allowed your child to study. (LW 46:222)*

God's will is that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. The will of God is revealed and accomplished through the preaching of the Gospel. Therefore, the education of children is undertaken for the sake of preserving the pastoral office, which is obtained by the blood and sweat of our Lord (Ibid., 255).

V. Concluding Comments

When I first read *The Bondage of the* Will in seminary, I treated it as an academic work. In preparation for these lectures I began to see that this work is really a prelude to Luther's catechisms. Here Luther sets before our eyes the theology of the cross as it affects our understanding of justification, God's grace, the Biblical story, and all history. It would be wise to return to our Lutheran roots on the teaching on the will of God and man's will as it is presented in the catechism, to regard the Biblical history as a saving history (in the proper sense) which is to be proclaimed and retold anew to each generation, to teach and sing boldly the hymns of the theology of the cross, and to emphasize the importance of education for preparing children for vocation. May God grant that His Church once more speak clearly about the enslaved will of man and the gracious will of God which operates in true freedom.

Endnotes

[1] I am indebted to Pastor Peter Bender for this working definition. Pastor Bender has done extensive work in the area of catchesis, and his materials will soon be available for purchase from the Concordia Catechetical Academy, Peace Lutheran Church, Sussex, WI.

[2] Luther, Sermon on "Search the Scriptures" from Erl. 19, 92-94, cited in Link, George, *Luther's Family Devotions for Every Day in the Church Year: Gathered from the Writings of Dr. Martin Luther*, tr. Joel Basely (Dearborn, MI: Mark V Publications, 1996), 621.

Reaction to 1998 Reformation Lectures

by Erling T. Teigen

This year, as Prof. Koelpin has pointed out, marks the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims, which provoked a struggle that Lutheranism very nearly did not survive. There were political, sociological, and religious issues involved. But at the heart of it, the Interims ushered in a struggle which was rooted in Luther's *Bondage of the Will.* Focusing our attention on these issues is important for us as we continue to struggle with our Lutheran Confession, examining whether or not we will be faithful to the confession begun 481 years ago, and confessed with such great clarity on June 25, 468 years ago. The question continues to be whether that confession of the biblical truth continues to be our confession, or whether it is merely stands as the source of a great tradition, which wends its way through the landscape ever changing.

Prof. Koelpin has captured the most essential points of the *Bondage of the Will.* Apart from the central focus on the question about the free or unfree will, the focus has been on the immensely important theology of the cross, which becomes a hermeneutic not only for biblical study, but for history as well.

As has been pointed out, Martin Luther believed that *De servo Arbitrio* represented some of his most important theological work. That was certainly not because he considered it a literary masterpiece or a brilliantly argued work. Rather, it was because he believed that *DSA* went to the heart of truly catholic, orthodox and apostolic Christianity. Prof. Koelpin has referred to the fundamental issues raised in the *DSA*, and has dealt especially with the marvelous theme of the theol-

ogy of the cross. In this response, a most appreciative one, I would like to explore a little further some implications raised by the central argument on the freedom or bondage of the will.

Nearly thirty years ago, a very important book was published jointly by Augsburg Publishing House and Newman Press. The book, by Father Harry McSorley, was entitled *Luther: Right or Wrong. An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will."* It represented a very honest attempt to come to terms with this serious issue of the reformation, recognizing, with Erasmus and Luther, the fundamental nature of the disagreement. His conclusion was that the difference was not of such a nature as to continue to separate the churches. In several respects, this study prepared the way for the more recent Joint Declaration on Justification between some Lutherans and the Roman Catholic Church.

I would like to spend a little time here with McSorley's argument, because, as much as one may disagree with much of his conclusion, he illuminates some very fundamental issues which are more important for us to examine today than ever. This is not to disagree with Prof. Koelpin's argument, nor to diminish his analysis of *DSA*. Rather, the intent is to underline for us the continuing importance of Luther's book for Lutheran faith and life from a different perspective.

McSorley devoted the largest part of his book to the history of the question about the free will, the most important stopping places being Augustine and Aquinas. For McSorley, Luther's concerns, and his position in *DSA* was fundamentally correct and in accord with Catholic theology, particularly "the desire to uphold the absolute necessity of God's grace for every human act that has any relevance for salvation...and to strike down every doctrine which places the beginning of salvation or the effectiveness of God's grace in the power of fallen man's free will" (304). He suggests

that the Catholic approach to *liberum arbitrium* is simply complemented by the Lutheran *servo arbitrio*. (307). McSorley is prepared to identify Luther's concerns as fully Catholic and "all in conformity with Scripture," and shared by Augustine, Anselm, Lombard, Thomas, as well as Trent.

McSorley sees, however, one flaw in Luther's view. While Luther's major premise is thoroughly Catholic—the unjustified man is unable, unfree to do anything for salvation by his own fallen power of free will—his minor premise is *not* biblical, because Luther does not argue for an unfree will because of man's servitude to sin, but because of his creatureliness, i.e., that "Man has an unfree will because of God's necessitating, infallible foreknowledge of all things" (309). McSorley summarizes Luther's argument: "God foresees nothing contingently. He foresees, designs and does everything with an immutable, eternal and infallible will. Therefore free will is 'entirely destroyed'"(310). This position somehow is not motivated by any kind of cosmic determinism, yet is at the same time borrowed from the historic, deterministic or even fatalistic position. McSorely concedes that the biblical doctrines of providence and predestination "absolutely exclude any concept of *liberum arbitrium* as 'a power...yielding to none and subject to none.'" "Unfortunately," McSorley adds, "Luther does not say clearly, as did Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, *et al.*, that man truly has *liberum arbitrium* and can truly make free decisions, which are infallibly foreseen by God and which are governed by his providence"(313).

Time does not permit here a complete review of McSorley's reasons for making the charges. I believe that McSorely misread Luther, and brought along with him some presuppositions that are not acceptable. Chemnitz' objection in *Examen I* might be an appropriate criticism of McSorley as well: "The decrees of the Council of Trent cover up, confuse, and bury the real issue in this controversy through so-

phistical ambiguities" (424). Whatever it is that McSorley construes as a necessitarian argument, the worst that can be said is that Luther does not follow it consistently, for when he speaks of man's ability to make decisions about things below him, he describes them as contingent choices, i.e., with alternatives that could be chosen or not. Why MacSorley makes that claim, however, becomes clear in what follows.

Before going on with McSorley's argument, I want to call attention to a couple of misconceptions commonly held among Lutherans. The first is that Lutheranism represents a kind of a middle ground between two opposing extremes—the Reformed/Enthusiast axis on the one hand, and the Roman Catholic monolith on the other. In a great act of Aristotelian moderation, the Wittenberg Reformation succeeded in finding the middle ground, achieving balance between two extreme positions. What this view fails to understand is that there are a number of unifying principles held by both Rome and the Reformed which are diametrically opposed to Evangelical and catholic Lutheranism. Reformed theology and Roman theology share similar confusions of law and gospel in the way they promote outward Christian holiness (shared with Lutheran Pietism), and they share a similar aberration in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, the only difference being that one abolishes the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament and the other abolishes the bread and the wine. But both do so on the basis of the same christological aberration. The same is true in the dispute concerning the will. While general protestant theology is no more monolithic in conviction than Rome, Rome and Protestantism operate on the basis of the same principle in their doctrines of the freedom of the will.

A second misconception grows out of a misunderstanding of the Lutheran struggle between 1546 and 1577. As a result of the disastrous Augsburg and Leipzig Interims in 1548, there developed two disputing parties within Lutheranism.

The one has come to be called Philippistic or Melanchthonian, and the other Gnesio (genuine) Lutherans. The fundamental issue between the two parties was whether Luther or Melanchthon was to be regarded as the authoritative and genuine interpreter of the Augsburg Confession. A series of controversies ensued, and in the heat of debate some individuals came to be perceived as intransigent and intractable, those mostly belonging to the Gnesio-Lutheran party. The Philippists tended to cultivate the irenic character of Melanchthon, and cast the Gnesio-Lutherans as the disturbers of Israel, a judgment later scholarship has often accepted uncritically. The misconception is that a group of moderates finally came forward, under the leadership of Martin Chemnitz, Jacob Andreae, and others and made peace with a mediating document. On at least two issues, Free Will and the Lord's Supper, the notion has been that the Concordia formulators backed off positions taken by Luther.

As is often the case in bunk, there is enough truth in it for the misrepresentation to be believable. Many of the members of the so-called moderate party were students of Melanchthon and had cultivated his irenic spirit. Many of them began the controversial period by sympathizing more with the followers of Philipp than with the Gnesio-Lutherans, led by Matthias Flacius. But the upshot was that the document they produced in every case took the theological position espoused by the Gnesio-Lutherans, often stripping away emotive and controversial language, and upheld with absolute clarity Luther's position as the true interpreter of the Augustana.

Back to *De Servo Arbitrio.* One of the issues that separated the Gnesio-Lutherans and the Philippists is exactly the issue at the center of Luther's *Bondage of the Will.* McSorley realizes that and notes that "the attitude which one took toward *De servo arbitrio* became one of the standards by which one was judged to be a Gnesio-Lutheran or a Philippist" (363).

McSorley understands correctly that modern protestant theology is essentially united with Rome on this issue, and quotes H. J. Iwand's assertion that "modern Protestantism, with its doctrine of the self-movement of the human will, stands closer to Thomism than to the Reformation" (363 and note 348). McSorley also notes that Protestant theology in the twentieth century "affirms almost unanimously that man's free will is involved not only in the sins which he commits but also in the faith in Christ through which he is liberated from his sins" (364). In support he quotes Pannenberg's statement that Evangelical theology has "a seldom reached broad consensus" on this issue. Pannenberg lists Rudolph Bultmann, Emil Brunner, Paul Althaus, and Karl Barth; McSorley adds Edmund Schlink [?] and R. Niebuhr. Also germane is the Declaration of the 1937 Edinburgh Faith and Order Conference: "[W]e men owe our whole salvation to his gracious will. But, on the other hand, it is the will of God that his grace should be actively appropriated by man's own will and that for such a decision man remains responsible" (365f.)

The second critical claim made by McSorley is that "the main stream of Lutheran theology, as distinct from Luther's theology, has avoided Luther's necessitarianism and has consistently affirmed, along with the Catholic tradition, that faith involves a free decision on the part of man" (364).

McSorley cites some claims (Pannenberg and Chr. Lasius, 1568, a Philippist) that Luther himself finally rejected the position he had taken in *DSA*, but that is far-fetched enough so that McSorley quickly declares its impossibility. In 1537, in the Smalcald Articles, Luther clearly enunciates the view which he had argued for in *DSA* and which McSorely identifies as "necessitarian": "This hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand it....What the scholastic theologians taught concerning this article is therefore nothing but error and stupidity, namely, ... that man has a free will, either to do good and refrain from evil or to

refrain from good and do evil" (SA III,1, 2,5). However, McSorley thinks that it can be demonstrated that in the Formula of Concord a different line is found. There, he says, "one encounters an element which was totally lacking in *DSA*—the element of a personal involvement or decision of free will in man's rebirth in Christ" (361). Though it is said that man's will is "purely passive" (EP II, 18, SD II, 89), this, according to McSorley, "is always explained in such a way as to admit an active response by man" (361). McSorley reveals the difficulty of upholding such a claim when he writes: "In one place the *Formula of Concord* states: 'There is no cooperation on the part of our will in man's conversion.' [SD II,44] As it stands, this thesis recalls the worst elements of *DSA*. And yet, when we consider the whole context of the *Solid Declaration*, Article II, which is entitled 'Free Will or Human Powers,' it is perfectly clear that what is being opposed in Article II is not the cooperation of the free will *under the action of grace in conversion*. ...[T]he clear implication of Article II, 18 is that the free will, illuminated and ruled by the Holy Spirit...*can* cooperate in man's conversion, justice and salvation and *can* 'believe and give assent when the Holy Spirit offers the grace of God.'" (361) In a note, McSorley rejects the impression that some (like me) take away from SD II that "the free cooperation of the will under grace begins only *after* conversion...not *in* conversion itself." (361, f.n. 340) Contrary to the excessive, extreme, and uncatholic position taken by Luther in *DSA*, the authors of the *Formula of Concord* have modified Luther's position, even if Luther himself did not, and expressed the doctrine of the bondage of the will rather in the traditional, catholic way. Essentially, McSorley thinks, the Formula of Concord has rejected Luther and upheld Erasmus and Melanchthon on this issue. Thereby he can find agreement between the Formula and the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent. The real impossibility of that view, however, one can find in SD II,

43, 44, where Luther's statement from the Great Confession of 1528 promising not to deviate from his doctrine is quoted, and the substance of *DSA* is incorporated into the Formula.

It is striking that McSorley does not appear here to know Chemnitz, the chief author of the Formula. First, in Chapter VI, Canon IV, Trent rejects precisely what has been asserted in SD II: "If anyone says that the free will of man, when moved and excited by God, by no means cooperates by assenting to God, who is inciting and calling, and thereby disposes and prepares itself for obtaining the grace of justification, and that it cannot dissent if it should want to, but like an inanimate thing, does nothing at all and is merely passive, let him be anathema," and Canon V: "If anyone says that after the sin of Adam the free will of man was lost and extinguished, or that it is a thing in name only, yes, a name without a reality, a mere figment brought into the church by Satan, let him be anathema!" (*Examen I*, 410). In his discussion, Chemnitz mirrors Luther in maintaining that in a general way "unregenerate men can to some extent maintain external discipline, that is, perform external honorable works that are in harmony with the law of God and avoid crimes that are contrary to it" (414 f), so neither Chemnitz nor Luther hold to the so-called *necessitarian* view of the will. But just as *DSA* was about *spiritual* things, so Chemnitz says, "The chief question in the controversy concerning free will is about spiritual impulses and actions, or about divine things, about works which belong to God, that we think, will, and do something pleasing to God and salutary for our soul, about spiritual righteousness....Spiritual things are here understood as things which pertain to the conversion of man, to faith, and to piety as these are set forth in the Word of God, that is, in the Law and in the Gospel, such as the knowledge and detestation of sin, contrition, fear of God; to know by faith, meditate on, assent to, desire, seek, want, and accept the promise of the Gospel..." (420). More precisely, the question is "whether in

the same manner the mind and the will have implanted in them, from the moment of birth, such power, such forces and faculties that when he reads, hears, or meditates on the Word of God, he can, without the Holy Spirit, through purely natural powers (as the Scholastics say), conceive such impulses and elicit such actions in the mind, will, and hearts as the Scripture demands for contrition, faith, and the new obedience" (425).

This should be enough to demonstrate that McSorley's assertion that the Formula of Concord modified Luther's position cannot be upheld. It was precisely Luther's position taken in *DSA* that finds its way into the Formula of Concord.

To summarize this point: Just as I believe it fails on other points, the argument that the Formula represents a modification or limitation of a position held by Luther fails here. The doctrine of the Unfree Will enunciated in *De servo arbitrio* stands unchanged in the Formula of Concord. The Formula commits itself to Luther's position in *DSA*.

One last comment on the significance of the Bondage of the Will debate. In the 1880s the Synodical Conference and the Norwegian Synod were rocked by the election controversy. Ostensibly, the argument there was about the doctrine of predestination. And indeed it was. But it was not about Election in isolation; it was about Free Will. The controversy really ought to be viewed as a continuation of the Luther-Erasmus debate, for, as we have seen, the victory of Luther's postion in the Formula of Concord did not mean that it came to be held universally by Lutherans. The bone of contention, as the controversy developed, was not the meaning of "predestination." The issue was whether or not mankind, even assisted by grace, cooperates with God in conversion. The Synodical Conference relied on the position established in *De servo arbitrio.* Only by asserting that man cooperates in his conversion with the spark of his will could it be said that God elects man in view of his faith, which makes salvation con-

tingent on man's own act of will, assisted by grace. Then there is no more *sola gratia*. And that finally is what Luther's book is about—Grace alone.

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