

Deus Absconditus in Luther's Early Sermons

By Steven D. Paulson

Deus absconditus always starts with a humble, human prejudice against itself and its own knowledge. Accordingly, in his brief lectures on history *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (1822–1831), Hegel scolded Germans (especially Kant and Schleiermacher) for accepting the limits of knowledge when it comes to the great things above us (God's secret counsel) and thereby abandoning history's future to what he called »mere chance,« having accepted »the doctrine, which has now become a prejudice, that it is impossible to know God,« and thereby we have abandoned »Holy Scripture's commands as our highest duty, namely, not only to love but also to know God.«¹ So much for *deus absconditus*, Kant, and the Enlightenment humility.

Indeed, Hegel is correct that it is not the hidden, uncertain, dark, impenetrable God and human limits of knowing that would rightly be the harvest from Martin Luther, but rather God revealed, known, and entirely certain. Hegel's only mistake, though it has been monumental, was thinking that this clear and searchable divine will was precisely the universal, eternal Spirit of reason, that is, *lex aeterna* that Hegel thought history revealed as the state in what he calls the »moral whole.«² It is true, Luther's main interest with *deus absconditus* is clarity, not obscurity. But that certainty is not a moral whole, and furthermore, faith's certainty does not humbly submit in silence to the limits of a creature before its Creator.

It is also true, that in addition to opposing normal modes of humility (either epistemological or ontological), Luther is especially the great teacher

1 G.W.F. HEGEL, *Reason in History*, trans. by R.S. HARTMAN, 1953, ch. II, 12.16.

2 Loc. cit., 49.

of the cross—the way Christ’s crucifixion is the contrary, unexpected and even offensive revelation »under the sign of its opposite« that we simply call God hidden *sub contrario*, especially after the renewal by Walter von Loewenich’s *Luthers Theologia Crucis* (1929) and the early twentieth century’s Dialectical Theology. Meditation on Christ’s cross would never be the same once this distinction of cross and glory was broached.

Yet, what makes Luther still ahead of us to this day is his honing and sharpening of faith’s certainty against Erasmus and the humanists. Consequently, it is Luther’s *De servo arbitrio* (1525) and not the *Disputatio Heidelbergae habita* (1518) that is the masterwork concerning *deus absconditus*. With this discovery, Luther eschewed both the epistemological humility of human knowing in the infinite transcendental distance between creature (and especially sinner) and Creator, and the ontological humility with his great *theologoumenon*—the distinction between God unpreached and God preached. That distinction is shocking, because it ultimately distinguishes God from the law. No one has ever been more apophatic than that, and at the same time no one is more cataphatic than Luther, specifically in Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the sacramental word. God has never been more hidden outside of preaching, and yet more present as a graspable God within it.

With this *deus absconditus*, Luther gave us the concrete practice of preaching as predestination and *Seelsorge* that is the reason some of us, who live far away from Wittenberg and even farther away from the 16th century are called »Lutherans« even to this day, rather than Gabrielists, Bernardians, Erasmians, Oecolampadians (or for that matter even Philippists, Wittenbergians or Protestants), and is why Luther scholarship is not an end in itself for us, but a matter of life and death.

I Luther’s deus absconditus to 1517

The particular interest in this Luther Congress is to consider Luther’s teaching of *deus absconditus* in his early sermons, up to the publication of the 95 *Theses* in 1517. The central theological locus for Luther in this early period up was *repentance*, and so everything »early« culminates in Luther’s challenge in the first thesis from Matt 4:17: »Dominus et magister noster Iesus Christus dicendo ›Penitentiam agite &c.‹ omnem vitam fidelium pe-

nitentiam esse voluit.«³ Our question is simple: What does God hiding have to do with such absolute repentance covering the entire life of believers?

It was typical of this early Luther to think of repentance as a form of humility, and so, as Hegel later observed, to think of humility epistemologically as the limit of human knowing. But humility could also be understood ontologically in the sense of the mortification of the human will—including the body. The secret theological method of both epistemological and ontological humilities was to reduce human knowing and/or human willing to as near to nothing as possible without losing being (*ousios*) entirely—either God's or our own. Being was then taken to be the exalted divine attributes extended downward to creatures in such a way that they can participate in them. God's attributes, which are many, could then be united and summarized simply as love, especially in the divine form of *agape*.

But within this way of thinking is an occult presupposition—being is in essence law, love is its form, and grace allows humans to participate in this system so that they ultimately fulfill love according to the limits of human capacity. Love is the gracious system of law in which all humans live, move and have our being in what is often described as joyful obedience to the first commandment. *Being* is therefore taken as the pagan (and especially Platonic) word for what Paul and the whole of Scripture call »Law.« Luther at first fully imbibed this humility theology that seeks to reduce human knowledge and will to as near nothing as possible, while yet retaining the common being that which unites God and creatures. Accordingly, whatever else happens theologically, being must not be interrupted, it cannot be removed from God or creatures and it certainly cannot be ended without eternal life itself being lost. This kind of application of humility to God's ways of hiding then applies at two critical theological moments. First, it is assumed that being cannot end at the cross of Christ with God dying, otherwise who would be upholding the judgment of the law? Secondly, being cannot end for sinners in the process of being saved, since if the sinner died, who would fulfill the law?

For this reason, Luther is often depicted as engineering a radical change of direction in life when he took up *deus absconditus* that moved from humans proudly ascending or transcending upward into the divine to a down-

3 WA I; 233,10f.

ward moving, humble theology in which God descends in the incarnation. However, the limit of this humility was asserted in that neither Christ's death nor our own could be understood to evacuate the law itself. The law is an ironclad common denominator between God and ourselves that could not possibly undergo a negation, or crucifixion, any greater than humility in the form of self-denial. Luther participated in this humble theology until he understood just how deeply hidden God really was in relation to human assumptions. Then he understood that self-denial finally lies to itself and God in order to sustain the law's eternal goodness—it organizes everything so that humans are to blame for suffering and evil, while God is exonerated of blame, especially for predestination. But eventually Luther radicalized apophatic theology in the shocking negation of the law—Christ the end of the law (Rom 10:4). So, Luther used Paul's tenth chapter of Romans (as well as 1 Thessalonians' scandalous portrayal of Satan who opposes the almighty God) to make the final distinction of God, preached and unpreached.

If we are going to understand Luther's *deus absconditus*, including especially the early years under consideration here, we must notice that there are three decisive stages in Luther's wrestling with *absconditus*. First, he rejected Dionysius' »negative« theology—beyond being, »unseeing« in a »wise silence.« »Beyond being« refers to the law in its exonerating form, and so represents Dionysius' ambition of finding an eternal law that blessed rather than cursed humans and in which the holy would finally come to rest.⁴ Luther abandoned this by the first Psalms lectures in which he began to ridicule this dream.

The second phase is marked by Luther's turn to the »Cross alone is our theology« against scholastic theology in the Romans Lectures, and especially in the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), as Luther says he was given occasion by Staupitz. This was an intense but short-lived transition of several years that is a kind of hyper Augustinianism along with the radical turn to German mysticism.

4 As in LUTHER, *Ennarationes in Psalmos* (1513), WA 3; 124,29–33: »Latibulum dei est tenebre: primo quia in fidei enygmata et caligine habitat. Secundo Quia habitat lucem inaccessibilem, ita quod nullus intellectus ad eum pertingere potest, nisi suo lumine omisso, altiore levatus fuerit. Ideo b. Dionysius docet ingredi in tenebras anagogicas et per negationes ascendere. Quia sic est deus absconditus et incomprehensibilis.«

Finally, Luther reached the lasting insight concerning God's hiddenness in *De servo arbitrio* (1525) in contrast to humanism and the whole of scholasticism (including the mystics): »Aliter de Deo vel voluntate Dei nobis praedicata, revelata, oblata, culta, Et aliter de Deo non praedicato, non revelato, non oblato, non culto disputandum est.«⁵ Only then was humility hiddenness as humility abandoned, along with its underlying assumption of God as law.

Around the time of our special interest in 1517 and the 95 *Theses*, Luther had reached the zenith of his second, Augustinian and German-mystical use of *deus absconditus* that he called *sub contrario*—most clearly in the Heidelberg Disputation, 1518: »Sed qui visibilia et posteriora Dei per passiones et crucem conspecta intelligit.«⁶ This theme lays out a kind of theological method regarding the hidden God, and especially the sinner's relationship to the law in which one is humbled so low that one does not expect the law's approval as Dionysius' »wise silence« did, but rather accepts the law's accusation as total and final. Luther later described this moment in *De servo arbitrio* as his own *salutaris desperatio* (being offended by God, Christ and the law) that was *gratia propinqua*. What was this salutary despair? First, it was salutary in that it brought him near to grace—but it's salient feature was that it was truly and irrevocably *despair*. This theology of the cross seemed to prescribe a tight-rope path that a viator must walk with two great ditches threatening on either side. On one side one could easily mistake faith for humility, especially in the form of *resignatio ad infernum* and *odium sui*. Self-negation that applies the law's final judgment to oneself before the law itself can do so is salutary, and near grace—but it is not grace. It anticipates the law and hopes for pity from the judge—however it determines to approve of the judgment without any reassurance of grace. It is near grace, but is not grace.

On the other side was a second ditch that thought of the cross as merely a transvaluation of values, an upside-down law, that necessitates what today is called a permanent revolution of morality (i. e., the enthusiast's practice of pacifism, political empowerment of the slave over the master, queer theory, the divine preference for the poor, the encounter with the »Other« etc.).

5 WA 18; 685,3–5.

6 WA 1; 354,19f.

Briefly, this ditch was to fall into a negative theology of glory that does not actually negate, but simply inverts the law, thus giving the oppressed a new mastery while the master is reduced to the slave. This inversion seemed at first like grace, but simply employed a law that favored the despised and condemned the powerful. The law itself remained as the constant element—and this law never stopped doing its singular work of threatening and condemning. Thus by 1517 Luther found himself near grace, but what he met there was actually despair. For this reason, even this early, intense use of humility in relation to the law did not lead to the freedom that would make Luther into Luther.

II *Luther's early Sermons*

Luther never abandoned *sub contrario* hiddenness or the theology of the cross in content, though he rarely used the terms of the cross later. Yet, the form and use of »cross alone is our theology« did in fact change significantly. It changed so much that we have concluded that Luther did not really know how to preach evangelically before 1517. He had not figured out what the sermon actually did, especially in relation to the divine law. Consequently, the preaching had much to say about God's hiddenness and our humility, but had not yet learned how far the law must be distinguished from the gospel.

For example, Luther wrote a sermon on 1 John 5:4 for George Mascov, provost of the Leitzkau monastery (1512) where he asks »What is ›being born of God?‹« And »what is the victory of ›him who overcometh?‹« The sermon scolds priests for having too many ceremonies and not enough repressions of the lusts of the flesh, and concludes with Augustine's dictum: »Fides impetrat quae lex imperat.«⁷ Here we find Luther's first major step to what is truly evangelical: faith, not love. But the legal structure overshadowing this faith remained the same as it was before Luther became a true preacher: the preacher is still understood to motivate a reluctant audience to act toward

7 WA I, 16,38–41: »Verum quoniam res ista multa et magna est, hac vice sat est dicere, quia fides impetrat, quae lex imperat, ut Augustinus dicit, h. e. in omni tentatione mundi nostri ipsa clamat in corde et invocatur manum invisibilis Dei, levans in montes oculos suos, unde veniat auxilium sibi.«

fulfilling the law—this time by their faith.⁸ Faith emerges as something more crucial than love; however, faith remains the act of fulfilling the law. In order to divest himself of this, Luther had to learn what was meant by the *verbum reale* (as he puts it in his later lecture on Psalm 2), the word that accomplishes what it says, and so an actual preached word that utterly distinguishes the law and the gospel. That is, the law had to be understood to come to an end rather than rest once it was fulfilled.

When Luther looked back to the explanations of the 95 *Theses* in his prelude to the *Babylonian Captivity* (1520) he said:

De indulgentiis ante duos annos scripsi, sed sic, ut me nunc mirum in modum poeniteat editi libelli. Haerebam enim id temporis magna quadam superstitione Romanae tyrannidis, unde et indulgentias non penitus reiiciendas esse censebam, quas tanto hominum consensu cernebam comprobari.⁹

He recognized his own severe limitation in 1517 to come to grips with what it means to have a God who is preached. His earlier, desperate clinging to the papacy in the 95 theses could only end once he had learned what preaching actually was and did, and that a *sermon* must in fact replace the Pope: as he says summarily later in the *Smalcald Articles* (1538): »Meritum enim Christi non nostris operibus aut nummis, sed per fidem ex gratia, apprehenditur et obtinetur sine pecunia et merito, non per papae potestatem, sed per praedicationem verbi Dei oblatum et propositum.«¹⁰

Once he had come to this understanding, the act of preaching was not simply a fruit or offshoot of his evangelical discovery, but the *Ding an sich*. His early preaching prior to 1517 had much to say about God's hiding and our human limits, but had not yet penetrated the real issue of what God's hiding meant in relation to the law. We can use a slogan for Luther's later teaching of *deus absconditus* and its relation to preaching: *the only solu-*

8 It was a long and hard-fought battle, but by the time of the *Antinomian Disputations* Luther became very clear. It is neither you nor I who fulfill this law, but Christ, and when Christ does it, he brings the law to an end: »Responsio: Fides sola praestat, ut remittantur nobis omnia peccata, et hic totus decalogus est impletus per fidem, quia sola fides [...] donat mihi Christum, qui est impletio et finis legis [...]« Disputatio II. XXVII. Argumentum. (WA 39,1; 482a,13–16).

9 WA 6; 497,9–14.

10 LUTHER, *Schmalkaldische Artikel*, II,2 (BSLK 121998, 424).

tion to the Absolute is *absolution*. The sermon elects by giving a graspable God to faith while one is yet ungodly. This absolution, therefore, does not merely turn the law from threat to blessing, but actually brings the law to an end—quiescent, empty—while the promised forgiveness ends divine hiddenness utterly in an irrevocable, certain, clear word that would make Hegel's boldness blush. Eventually Luther would come to make the greatest of all theological distinctions that, to my knowledge, is not made anywhere else in the history of doctrine—that God must be distinguished between preached and unpreached—God naked and God clothed in his word.

1. *Luther's sermon on Matt 7:12 (1512 or 1510)*

Let us go back to the earliest sermons from Luther to consider what he stumbled over in preaching on the way to this distinction of *deus nudus/deus indutus*—all in relation to our primary locus of repentance and the 95 *Theses* on indulgences. After all, when repentance is understood according to the law alone, it must be understood finally in Luther's last attempt to make humility into the true fulfillment of the law. One of the earliest surviving sermons 1512 (1510?) is on Matt 7:12: »Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets,« that is, the Golden Rule—the law at its heart. This sermon is everything that Luther's own Gabrielan school of preaching thought a sermon should be—especially in its connection to *contritio*. Thus, Luther thought his own sermon and preaching duty was a »*consilium*,« or exhortation, that does not redeem, but instead prods the free will. The moral prodding assumes the audience consists of secondary moral agents in relation to the primary, divine moral agency (which Luther accordingly mistakes for Paul's *fides ex auditu* Rom 10:14) on which true repentance is built.

Following contrition, one seeks out the sacraments, especially penance: »it is sufficient that the sinner have contrition, and sorrow over his sins, and that he confess these to God by pouring out his soul before God with the intention to confess these sins to an authorized priest as soon as possible, after the interdict of the holy Church is removed.«¹¹ Thus, repentance is the secondary act of moral agents using both knowledge, and especially

11 Biel's Letter to the Church at Mainz under Interdict, Epist. I in H.A. OBERMAN, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, 1963, 27.

their wills. Luther thus laid out Matt 7:12 logically from the *suppositio*: It is not enough for salvation to do no harm, but rather do good.

The sermon is then understood to be God's word in the form of a New Law whose foundation (Luther later admits in the sermon) was not Matthew at all, but Aristotle's »three human goods« from the *Nichomachean Ethics* I, 7. Nothing could depict the heart of scholasticism better than this way of intensifying even Aristotle's use of the law, and so the sermon serves as the window onto the divine law that serves to remove any darkness or hiddenness from God. The sermon is to make God's law clear; ignorance is no excuse.

Everything in Matt 7:12 is then perfectly transparent. Nothing remains hidden. The Golden Rule is the revealing light to make this clarity possible, so Luther opines that »here you have the whole Scripture in one short saying,« that is the law at heart. If you want to see anything above you, even God in majesty, you are to look in this mirror of the golden rule: »do unto others as you would have them to unto you.«¹² Luther says this assumption agrees with nature, with the authority of Scripture, the patristics, and finally even the theological method of analogy itself. Reason itself requires it. Consequently, the sermon draws lessons for life because the golden rule's law is taken as the form of the gospel, whose content is grace.

What more proof could be given for the sermon's purpose? This assertion, however, is the very definition of what Luther later decries as pure speculation—looking through the mirror of the law to see God's hidden parts.¹³ If anyone hides in this early sermon it is not God, but is only the unworthy hearer, just as the parable of the talents implies. Luther used this

12 WA 4; 594,10–15: »Non ego hoc dico, sed ipse Dominus met, scilicet: ›Quaecunque vultis ut faciant vobis homines, hoc vos facite illis. Haec est lex et prophetae.‹ Ecce in quam brevi verbo habetis omnem scripturam! Sit ergo hoc verbum cuilibet speculum et in ipso et secundum ipsum videat in omnibus operibus suis, an sic faciat proximo suo, sicut sibi vellet fieri, et an sic vellet sibi omitti, sicut ipse alii omittit.« = LW 51,12.

13 WA 4; 594,29f: »Sed respiciat ad speculum illorum verborum, scilicet an sibi sic vellet fieri.« Which fits perfectly the new-Kantian interests of the Luther Renaissance and Karl Holl's first breakthrough of Luther's »new moral awareness« in the Erfurt years 1509–1511. K. HOLL, *Der Neubau der Sittlichkeit* (1919) (in: DERS., *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, Bd. 1: Luther, 1948, 197–217), asserts the uncompromising ethical strictness that meant not only doing deeds, but also commands inner purity.

parable as the »third proof text« in this sermon: »To us has been given—as a talent—what we are able to do, our ability.« The potency in us (our talent) is a gift from God, and the golden rule is our goal—and »all that is required is that we do it.«¹⁴ The sermon and preacher serve to hold up the mirror through which one can see what God wants, how he judges, and in what way the law is ultimately to become not only a threat, but the pathway to perfect rest in God's divine love/law. Once he had preached this way, Luther was certain he had done his duty—God was no longer hidden, and the hearers had no excuse for trying to hide themselves from this God. The transparency is complete, the law is revealed, the sermon has done what Luther assumed it must.

2. *Luther's Sermon on Psalm 60 (by 1513)*

The primary trouble with preaching, Luther began to suspect, was that the preacher himself serves as a kind of obstruction to the intended transparency of God's law to his hearers. Thus, the preacher had to be a medium that must be discarded in order for God's hiddenness to come to an end. The law cannot long stand such a mediator between it and the subject of its demands. Luther's sermon on Psalm 60 (preached on the festival of the martyrs) was later embedded in the Psalms lectures sometime after 1513. The key is that the *preacher is a veil*, obscuring God's voice—a troublesome medium or precipitant that must effectively dissolve in the process of commencing theological education of the law.

Consequently, Luther started with verse 8: »Moab is my washbasin« (taking the Hebrew כִּי־ to mean a cooking pot) in which the world is the pot that persecutes saints. In order to become a dish fit to feed Christ (»make me savory meat« Gen 27:7), preachers must hunt sinners like beasts, kill them with the Word of God, and finally serve up the meat (people dead to sin) to Christ as holy things fit for the Holy One. The godless, we are told, feel nothing of this »cooking« and »serving,« but if anyone in particular is actually moved to feel the suffering of it, Luther assures the audience,

¹⁴ WA 4; 591,30–34: »Sic fiet nobis. Talentum enim nobis datum est possibilitas nostra, teutonice unser vermögen. Hoc enim non ex nobis, sed ex Deo habemus, tam in bonis externis, quam internis et mediis. In his omnibus quicquid possumus, tenemur alteri facere. Quod si non fecerimus, tunc talentum Domini abscondimus.«

he must take it not as proof of God's anger, but as a sign of election. The temporary encumbrance of the mediating preacher is necessary in order to inform hearers of the signs of election revealed in the hearers' own self-inspection or inner feeling. It is true, Luther figures, the feeling is contrary to one's expectation—as here in this sermon one is already seeing the *sub contrario* theme. True, it is not yet a direct feeling that the law is joyous and a blessing but is rather experienced as the very contrary feeling of suffering. This contradiction is not to dismay anyone, but assure him to the extent that it can.

Then verse 6 of Psalm 60: »God has spoken in his holiness,« meaning that God's Word is »poured into another vessel«—who is the preacher himself.¹⁵ So, when a preacher preaches, it is not the Word in its full power, but hidden behind a mask »in another tongue.« Luther then went on to say, »when the Lord speaks without intermediary, He speaks most effectively,« just as in John 6:45: »They will all be taught by God« (διδακτοὶ θεοῦ). This is, in fact, what must happen as long as the law determines one's justice before God: »For a man [a preacher] only tells us what we have done wrong and what good we *should* do. But when God speaks, He says what evil *has been* put away and what good has been bestowed.« A preacher says: »Should!« God says: »Has been.«

Consequently, at this early juncture Luther continues to think that the preacher is merely able to point to a potential merit in his audience that yet awaits fulfilment in the presently incomplete future. For this reason, no one can convey justification to another since justification requires inner, personal movement, and anticipates the ultimate reward of merit for completing the law. Luther warns his hearers about his own paucity as preacher: »the voice of a man cannot speak to the heart, but only the ears.«¹⁶ Further-

15 WA 3; 347,17f: »[...] ideo non est verbum in sua efficacia, sed larva et alia lingua velatum. Sed hic deus loquitur per se.«

16 WA 3; 348,9–16: »Ad alium transferri non potest, sed solus qui audit percipit: eloqui non potest, sed tantum eructat. Quare autem ›cor? Quia deus non ad aures sicut homo, sed tantummodo ad cor loquitur. Ideo cum vox hominis ad cor loqui nequeat, sed tantum ad aures, sequitur, quod solum eructet verbum et non loquatur, quia deus ipsum loquitur solus, qui solus ad cor loquitur. Unde sequitur: ›Lingua mea calamus scribe velociter scribentis, q. d. quod ego dicere non possum: ille sicut me, ita et te velociter [Ps. 19, 3.] docere potest. Sic ›Dies diei eructat verbum. Et nox nocti indicat scientiam.«

more, he asserts even God's »good and pleasant Word, [that says what *is*, and not only what *might be*] is [merely] the wherewithal to self-condemn, to censure and chastise myself.«¹⁷ The preacher gives me the word that says what is truly my own personal confession: I am a humble sinner who must turn from evil.

This is what Luther meant by saying, in this second phase of God's hiddenness, that it was the cross and suffering, not peace and the law's reward, that leads to the true faith epitomized by self-condemnation, self-censure and self-chastisement that accepts the law's condemnation of itself without remainder. Thus, Luther concludes his sermon with a complete confusion of the law and gospel: »Quia Euangelium est regula et mensura: secundum quam dirigimur et mensuramur. Si tamen prius [Hebr. 4, 12.] divisi sumus per idipsum, quod dividit spiritum et animam &c.«¹⁸ Hiddenness was therefore reduced to a person feeling the condemnation of the law—and yet never despising that very law as God's own being and self. The preacher serves the purpose of precipitating this feeling and instructing hearers in its proper use—then the preacher must fade from the scene. No wonder Luther eventually called this a salutary despair.

Yet this is not the same thing as actually preaching the Gospel. What Luther later learned was that the preacher was not such a veil, an intermediary (as he had assumed in this sermon on Psalm 60), but rather speaks God's very word—creature to creature, not hiding and veiling, but »giving that very thing« in what would become a mantra for Luther's preaching: »He who hears you, hears me« (Luke 16:16).

Then, the *Gospel* ceased being understood as the eternal law—a measuring stick of what has been done, or a catalyst for self-condemnation, but was rather a clear promise unconditionally forgiving a sinner in the

17 WA 3; 349,6–14: »Per iudicium, i. e. condemnationem sui, reprehensionem, castigationem (qua enim castigat doctor vel docet ipsum sese castigare et arguere in vilitate sua) dividit ipsum et declinare facit a malo et sic corrigit et emendat sedem Christi. Sed per iustitiam (fidem, qua ex Christo docet sperare gratiam et in eum vivere) metitur et facere bonum docet [Röm. 12, 3.] ac sic preparat sedem Christi. Unde et Apostolus Ro. 12. dicit »secundum mensuram fidei, sicut unicuique divisit Deus«. Quia Euangelium est regula et mensura: secundum quam dirigimur et mensuramur. Si tamen prius [Hebr. 4, 12.] divisi sumus per idipsum, quod dividit spiritum et animam &c.«

18 WA 3; 349,14.

present hearing of the thing: »I forgive you on account of Christ.« Then, John's διδακτοὶ θεοῦ meant precisely to receive a preacher, not to be freed from one. Likewise, God himself would be eternally distinguished between preached and unpreached God, and God would ever after be given with a promise, which is precisely not law.

3. *Luther's Christmas Sermon (1514)*

The 1514 Christmas Sermon is one of Luther's purest, early scholastic kinds whose main division is between two kinds of law—accusing and blessing. This means Luther has not yet made the proper distinction that comes later in his evangelical preaching. The textual premise is: »In the beginning was the Word« (Gen 1 and John 1), in which Luther thinks the two utterances »beginning« and »word« make the same point: Word is the Son of God, who is Christ.¹⁹ »Word« in these two fundamental Bible texts is a singular subject, but Luther immediately adds a caveat to what this must imply about an external and internal aspect of word:

But in order that we grasp this [perfection], it should be noted that there are two words: the first is the internal, which is most properly called the Word, and is most perfect [so in common speech we say things like] »*Es geht ihm nit zu Hertzen*,« i.e. this does not move his heart as it does ours. It would move, however, if we were able to send the inner word itself into their heart; but as things are, we send only the external word into their heart.²⁰

19 WA 1; 20,11–21: »Igitur idem sit, si audierimus verbum ac si Filium Dei seu Christum, secundum quem Deus audiendus. Hoc sic posito, pergit Euangelista ostendere aeternitatem distinctionemque a Patre et identitatem cum patre filii, dicens: In principio erat verbum, hoc est, iam erat ipse Christus, quando incipiebant omnia, non tunc coepit. Non ipse principium tunc accepit, sed erat in principio. Ante enim fuerat quam principium rerum esset, quippe aeternus. Et mira est haec aeternitatis expressio, Et non dubium est quin hic de principio omnium loquatur. Et tamen non ait ›ante principium erat‹, sed ›in principio‹. Et ante principium non dicere potes esse, fuisse, fore: nam haec omnia relative dicuntur, cum praeteritum ad futurum dicatur ›erat‹ vel ›fuit‹.«

20 WA 1; 23,21–40: »Quod ut capiamus, notandum, quod duplex sit verbum: primum est internum, quod propriissime dicitur verbum, et perfectissimum est et repraesentativum et indicativum Filii Dei, quippe quod in sola perfectissima natura, scilicet intellectuali vel rationali, invenitur, quod ex vulgari dicto accipitur, quando solet dici de cogitationibus ›ecce secum in corde loquitur‹, seu Mein Hertz sagt mir das. Si cor tibi dicit, ergo verbum est, imo ita perfectum verbum, ut per tuam experientiam sentias, quod verbum oris

No doubt »knowing« Christ is just as Luther finally articulated at the end of this Christmas sermon. According to Aristotle, the known thing is present itself in some strange way in the knower, who is therefore deified by this knowing (Christ present in faith itself). Indeed, Christ became man in order that man might become God. But the crucial matter here is not the deification of the man, which is certainly true, but Luther means, first, that preaching the word is incapable of making this knowledge of Christ's presence happen. An internal movement is ultimately necessary. Secondly, Christ's presence is equivalent to the law's perfection. Where Christ is, there is the law.

So, Luther assumed that if God is the law, then »in the beginning was the Word« must refer to God speaking internally to himself: »that he alone speaks with himself and says in his heart.«²¹ This inner, divine Word cannot »be poured out outwardly« (preached) without getting, »mixed with other things: but this cannot happen, just as the word of a man cannot do this.« What this inner Word of God (to himself) later gets »mixed up with« in the world is *sinner*s who do not fulfill the law, so that God's perfect inner Word of law hits them as accusation.

But Luther's logic concludes that this accusation cannot possibly be the way the Word was and is within God's inner sanctum—in the beginning. By the logic of the law itself, God's inner word cannot have been harsh and

incomparabiliter minus est et infirmius. Nam nulli potes per verbum oris cor movere, quantum est cor tuum motum a verbo tuo interius, sicut solemus dicere, quando nostra consilia, quaerelas aut monita alii nolunt corde percipere, Es geht ihm nit zu Hertzen, i. e. non movet hoc eius cor sicut nostrum. Moveret autem si ipsum internum verbum possemus in eorum cor mittere, nunc autem solum verbum externum mittimus in eorum cor, imo incomparabiliter minus movetur ab eo quam nos ab ipso intemo. Quae si notasset inter alia mirabilia, quae ex hoc sequuntur, ut infra dicendum est, hoc primum sequitur, quod hoc verbum est omnium verborum perfectissimum, 2do, quod manet intus nec potest perfundi foras, 3tio, quod memo ipsum novit nisi ipse qui habet, 4to, quod hoc verbum est consilium, cogitatio, sapientia, iudicium, veritas, intellectus ipsius hominis, 5to, quod hoc verbum non citius foras mittitur seu manifestatur melius quam per verbum oris vel opus aliud corporis.«

21 WA I; 24, 1–4: »Sic nunc cogita de Deo, quod et ipse solus secum loquitur et dicit in corde suo, primo quod est verbum omnium perfectissimum, de quo hic Iohannes loquitur, 2do, quod manet in Deo nec potest effundi foras et extra Deum, sed manet apud Deum et est Deus.«

judgmental to his own self, but must secretly have been happy and uplifting—inside God—before it got mixed up with sinners like us. The dream of what faith is in this sermon is that one future day, God's word will no longer be mixed up with our flesh and we will not have to listen to preachers like Luther scolding us anymore—we will then have unmediated, direct Beatific Vision into the inner and non-accusatory law:

Speramus autem in futuro inspicere in istud verbum, cum Deus cor suum aperuerit, imo cum non effuderit verbum, sed nos introducet in cor suum, ut videamus bona Domini in terra viventium, cum puram veritatem et sapientiam videbimus: interim enim manus et pedes, oculos quoque et aures ostendit et latus. Sed tunc cor quoque introspeciemus cum omnibus beatis. Non erit autem angustum hoc verbum, sicut nostri cordis, sed infinitum et aeternum, laetissimum praebens omnibus spectaculum et gaudium.²²

What does this mean? The law will one day be happy—even for us, as it eternally is for God when speaking it to himself.

Luther thinks of a participation by the known in the knower, as Aristotle taught him, and so a community of being. However, the way that this union, or community of being, comes about in this early phase is by means of the »word« as a form of thought. The intellect becomes its object, because the word is a thought. This position about what a word is changes completely for Luther soon after 1517, and consequently Luther rejects this sermon's assumptions of *deus absconditus*: 1) The union of a sinner with the word is not through *thought* (knowing what God's undisturbed innards said), but by present *hearing* through a preacher. 2) God as word—in the beginning—is not referring to God seeing his own inner heart. 3) διδάκτοὶ θεοῦ is not referring to a hidden, inner word that discards the outer—because the Word is not the law at all.

But, in this early sermon, Christ is taken to be (very much like Lötze and the later neo-Kantians) the presence of the perfect law as a real, ontological moral agent. Therefore, Christ's effect on the law is to translate it from accusation to perfect acceptance.

These two, accusatory and non-accusatory law, are separable, which, it is assumed, must be the case if one understands the inner, majestic word of God in Christ. That is, that the law's presence of love, the person of Christ in the Christian, is not »known« by effect, but is finally able to be partici-

²² WA I, 24,13–20.

pated in with a joyful obedience of love—the word being known as an ideal, perfect, non-threatening »thought.«

In this way, the presence of Christ is a re-presence that is directly connected to the representation of the sacrifice of the mass. A thought, not an external hearing by means of a preacher, alone enters the heart. The word is contemplated, and one day will be set aside in favor of the direct beatific vision of God when the Word is no longer external-preached, but something internal and visible. This vision was thought to be accomplished, as with Pseudo-Dionysius, through a liturgical act that unites what otherwise had been momentarily absented. Re-presenting Christ following his temporal absence (due to a mis-thought) happens by having the truly valid thought return that was originally present for Adam. Thus, unity with Christ (his presence), must take place in the contemplating, thinking realm, outside the bodily, earthly experience.

This form of preaching assumes a doctrine of God in which the inner trinitarian word becoming incarnate is the primary word hidden in the secondary covering of Christ (the man's hands and feet). It re-presents, pointing back from itself to the real location or thing that can be used for the purposes of thought. The inner word is therefore really a thought. The faith that becomes the word is a thought-thing, by which the intellect grasps its object, or better the object is present in it. While this overcomes the worst part of the later German scholarship that tried to press Luther into Kantian moralism, it retains the law as its form of thought, seeking unity with God.

The consequence of this assumption is that, first, the old sinner is not really killed, but merely has the earlier, bad thinking negated. But secondly, it unites with God in the majestic essence that is perfect love so that the golden rule becomes the essence of God, and thus is the true revelation of the incarnation. Furthermore, that golden rule of love is the order of the community of being found within the inner-triune being once one has used up, and discarded, the preached word. The idea is that inside God's triune being one will discover again what Adam and Eve had possessed in the beginning—the eternal law that does not accuse, but is rather the source of joyful service, beautiful order, and perfect truth. That is, loving as one wants to be loved—the perfect word of the golden rule.

The proof that one finally participates in this »perfect word,« as Luther calls it in his Christmas sermon, is that »my heart tells me so.« What

Luther's otherwise laudable, scholastic assumption of Christ's presence in faith itself amounts to is to excite his sermon's hearers to be utter enthusiasts who find God inside. But the law as Christ, rather than Moses, is assumed to approve of an inner person rather than condemn him. In the end, this is not only Christ present in faith itself, it is the law present in Christ.

But when Luther reached his later enlightenment regarding God's hiddenness in the preached word, it is not as »perfect word«, »true thought«, the inner-triune social, a relational community of being in relation with itself, or love as eternal law that is truly Christ's presence. Christ present eventually is expressed as freedom from the law altogether, since Christ not only fulfilled the law for us, but silenced the law once and for all. He did the law—fulfilled it—and just so ended it. One does not become sanctified by joyfully obeying the law. This latter picture of God's word always arrives to the same conclusion—that the word is insufficient so that something must be added to it like the congregation's response, or the favor must be added to a gift, forensic to effective, or faith must be added to love, etc.

Eventually Luther eschewed this phantom and concluded that Christ is not the law; he is not the golden rule. Christ ends the law, and hearing this word sets faith free from that same law. But to come to this conclusion Luther first had to overcome his equation of cross and humility.

4. *Luther's First Lectures on Psalm 116*

Since early on, there is no difference for Luther between a sermon and lecture (and even later this distinction is not the same one we make today) we can use the lecture on Psalm 116, and especially verse 10: »I have believed, therefore I have spoken. I have been humbled exceedingly.« In the early use of this psalm, the last phrase predominated, »Ego humiliatus sum nimis,« and this humility was then used to understand the first phrase: »Credidi, propter quod locutus sum.«

In his first interpretation of »I believe; I spoke« Luther reproved the common use of verse 16: »Dirupisti« by noting that, »Cassiodorus: ›Versus hic tantam virtutem creditus est habere, ut a nonnullis diceretur posse hominibus peccata dimitti, si eum in fine vite sue tertia confessione congeminent.‹«²³ Luther then cautions: »Veruntamen superstitio cavenda, ne

²³ WA 4; 267,34–36. *Glossa ordinaria* says this very thing on v. 16.

sicut multi pro temporali commodo eis utantur, ut qui literas et Euangelium Iohannis contra ignem et aquam portant aut ferrum.«²⁴ You have to use all the Church's required sacraments, and with true contrition! So even the »I believe, I spoke« of v. 10 was then the utterance of a prayer. Later, when Luther learned who the preached God was, this »I believe, I spoke,« would become a sermon, not only a prayer, and so Luther eventually used the verse to explain how all Christians are priests and how faith is precisely not humility, but certainty.²⁵

Yet, early on Luther's exegesis centered on what he thought was the movement from the literal sense of Scripture to the sense of the faith: »Ego dixi in excessu meo: omnis homo mendax. Iste est excessus, quo per fidem levatur super se, ut videat futura bona. Alioquin et ipse erat homo mendax, sed in excessu factus mendacium excessit et verax factus est per fidem.«²⁶

24 WA 4; 268,3–6.

25 As we find, for example, in LUTHER, *Das eyn Christliche versamlung odder gemeyne recht und macht habe, alle lere tzu urteylen und lerer tzu beruffen, eyn und abtzu-setzen, Grund und ursach aus der schrifft* (1523), WA 11; 412,5–13: »Ists aber also, das sie gottis wort haben und von yhm gesalbet sind, so sind sie auch schuldig, das selb zu bekennen, leren und ausbreytten, wie [2. Cor. 4, 13] Paulus sagt 1. Corin. 4. »Wyr haben auch den selben geyst des glaubens, [Ps. 116, 10] darumb reden wyr auch, wie der Prophet sagt Psalm 115. »Ich bin gleubig [Ps. 51. 15] worden, darumb rede ich«. Und Psalm 50. sagt er von allen Christen »Ich will die gottloßen deyne wege leren und das sich die sunder zu dir bekeren«. Also das hie abermal gewiß ist, das eyn Christen nicht alleyne recht und macht hatt, das gottis wort tzu leren, sondern ist das selbige schuldig tzuthun bey seyner seelen verlust und gottis ungnaden«. And again, in the *Greater Galatians commentary* Luther says, »Ista mutatio et novum iudicium non est opus humanae rationis aut virtutis, sed donum et effectus Spiritussancti, qui cum verbo praedicato venit, qui fide purificat corda et spirituales motus in nobis parit. Ideo maxima differentia est inter nos et inter hostes et depravatores verbi. [...] Quare nihil nos moveat, quod mundus, cuius opera testificamur esse mala, iudicet nos esse pestilentissimos haereticos et seditiosos homines, eversores religionis et publicae pacis, obsessos a diabolo qui ex nobis loquatur et omnes actiones nostras gubernet. Contra hoc perversum iudicium mundi satis sit nobis testimonium conscientiae nostrae, quo certo scimus divinum esse donum, quod non solum credimus in Iesum Christum, sed palam eum etiam praedicamus et confitemur coram mundo. Ut corde credimus, ita ore loquimur, [Ps. 116, 10] Iuxta illud Psalmi: »Credidi, ideo locutus sum, ego autem humiliatus sum nimis« etc.« WA 40,1; 572b,20–24 and 573b,11–20.

26 WA 4; 273,14–18.

By transcending, Luther meant the mystical »ecstasy«, which he thought (by this point) comes not in the Dionysian fashion, but through humility. The psalmist is humbled through the ecstasy because the »great things« of Christian faith are recognized as absent from the believer. Those great things lie in the future, thus motivating the present sleeper (who has not yet transcended) to search for God's hidden things above (ecstasy) that have now been revealed to faith—but precisely as absent, not present and thus to be grasped only in the future.

So, this Psalmist cries out in prayer for the things he does not have. He is no longer silent regarding the future, but rather learns in praying that he is himself a liar, which means he recognizes that he lacks anything worthy of God in the present. The speech which faith utters is then taken to be the highest, most theological speech possible, appearing in the form of prayer—for the absent things. This would also dramatically change in Luther's near future, when the speech of the Psalmist is no longer the form of lament that seeks the absent things of the future (ecstasy) in the present humility that lacks anything. It is rather the very speech that gives, bestows, and makes the future things present in faith. Faith then does not lack, but precisely possesses the great things uttered in the form of the promise. This promise is not a carnal thing, but is nevertheless very worldly, low, and incarnate because that is the nature of the promise of Christ in the sacraments of preaching. Eventually for Luther, preaching makes faith abound in present things in the form of the absolution that forgives sin and those present things are no longer feared as something easily misused by unfaith that is liable to fall into merely the »superstitious.«

But for this early preaching, the hidden things of God are not in the present promise-word, but in the future, i. e., not *in re* but *in spe*. This old thinking produced a *simul*, not of justified and sinner, but rather of *humilitate* and *excessus*. Luther pictures that duality as a lying king who thinks he possesses the present things, but who is then transvalued or descends into the form of a truthful beggar who lacks everything until his spiritual journey is done.

Ecstasy was then not rest in God's nakedness as life beyond the law's accusation (Pseudo-Dionysius), but the mystical and spiritual eyes that see the hidden things (the dream of the day when the law exonerates), but who presently experience tears and struggle. Of course, the absent things of faith

are presently revealed under the contrary (*sub contrario*), and in that way we can see what the future blessing is—not just eternal life or good judgment from Christ, but the eternal law in which life finds its law without accusation as joyful obedience. In this way, Psalm 116 represented Luther's theology of passion and cross that turns pride into humility. It takes what is considered first and makes it last, what is considered good in this fleshly word, and makes it bad, what is high, low and what is light dark, lacking abounding etc., but its underlying premise is still that the majestic will and substance of God is eternal law. That law calls us liars who think the law exonerates us presently (humiliates), but also calls us faithful who thinks the law will exonerate us later (raptures).

Consequently, neither the Gospel nor preaching could emerge at this early juncture as anything other than a future hope of the law's affirmation or the election by the law. Consequently, holy speech comes in the form of a prayer that cries out for what it cannot possess, that is, its own righteousness, its own fulfillment of that law. But, Luther figures, this very present lack is what motivates *excessus*, and so the striving, holy motivation, or movement of faith is still being fulfilled by love in its higher forms of love for God rather than love of the self. Even such mystical language as the bridal imagery was conceived as a wedding of the holy to the minimally holy as measured by the law that nevertheless manages to rapture them both in their unequal union. It gives both bride and groom the vision of *excessus*, which can see the final goal but also the knowledge that one has not arrived, and will never arrive, until the very end of the world and the final judgment by the law. Then one will supposedly receive in truth what now is only an absent thing—the law's good judgment on account of Christ.

Consequently, the theology of the cross has a habit of running off without Luther's later specification of unpreached and preached God, i. e., what it means to have God in preached clothes that are actually possessed in the present as a promise of forgiveness. Christ's passion consequently morphs into a negative theology of glory that ends exactly where one would expect—in lack, absence, crying in prayer, and restless yearning that cannot be filled without losing the very momentum that allows faith in the law to persevere to the eschaton. But that is to make of the cross' *nihil* a process, transcendence, ecstasy, or rapture that is nihil-ism. This modern development is not Luther's impetus or fault once he jettisons the hiddenness of

the object of faith in the God who is not preached for God's presence in preaching.

Leaving the God who is supposed to be joined in mystical union *ad deo nudu* (and the God whom one is lacking since he lies far ahead in the future) for the God who is present, given, preached in his word, is nothing less than to leave the dream of an exonerating law for the Christ who elects apart from law merely by saying, »I forgive you.« When Luther later takes leave of »I believe, so I speak« as a prayer of humility, and realizes it is the word of preaching that absolves, then *sub contrario* becomes the more profound *sub contradictorio*—God not only revealing himself in humility, but actually contradicting himself and his promise that we see profoundly in the radical texts of Jonah, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok, or the Syrophoenician woman.

Meanwhile, Luther's flirtation with the brutal/sweet German mystics was a way of seeing if God really could speak immediately, without the mediation of a preacher, and thus if one could manage to self-apply the measuring stick that would lead to repentance by means of true, deep, heartfelt sorrow over sin in the form of a true, life-long repentance. Luther had yet to determine what role the preacher actually played in the doctrine of God or of repentance if preachers are no longer merely to be discarded for immediate union with the divine. This required a definite and absolute distinction between law and gospel, and the new teaching on divine hiddenness with its double liturgy of fleeing from God in majesty and running to God in the preached word of absolution.

4. *Luther's Sermons on St. Martin's Day (1515) and Luke 18:9–4 (1516)*

As we get closer in time to the 95 *Theses*, we have a fragment from Luther's 1515 Nov 11 St. Martin's Day sermon that says: »Unum praedica, sapientiam crucis!«²⁷ Luther recognized that preaching had to change once one abandoned the Dionysian mystical ascent. The subsequent issue concerned what this new preaching must consist of, and what role the preacher plays. The final issue for Luther became the relation of Christ, particularly the cross, to the law itself. The question is then, how does one preach the cross,

²⁷ WA 1; 52.

the blood? More specifically, what does Christ's cross do to the divine law itself?

We can observe the first step in Luther's 1516, July 27 Sermon on the Tenth Sunday After Trinity (on Luke 18:9–14).²⁸ This sermon abandons the »pride« of the Dionysian mystical ascent (through negation) for the *sub contrario* humility of the cross that Luther imbibed from Staupitz' advice to »seek the wounds of Christ.« God's central attribute of God (which Luther pins his sermon up) is unlike either the Dionysian »beyond being«, or Aristotle's unmoved mover who ignores the suffering life of creatures. Instead, Psalm 113:7 says, »He lifts up the needy out of the dunghill,« and so is a most active and most contrary God: »who is like unto the Lord our God, who dwells on high, who humbles himself to behold the things that are in heaven and in earth?« (Ps 113:5 f). God comes down! Thus, Luther takes the basic rule of Christian life to be:

Humilibus consentientes. Si dixeris »non possum« dele ergo [Ps. 113, 5. 6.] istud: Quis sicut Deus Dominus noster, qui humilia respicit in coelo et in [Matth. 20, 14.] terra? Quomodo ergo fiet, ut faciant hoc superbi? Respondeo »per hoc [1. Cor. 4, 7.] verbum unicum: tolle quod tuum est et vade, vel per illud: quid habes quod non accepisti? Si autem accepisti, quid gloriaris quasi non acceperis?«²⁹

This God, Luther insists, is far-sighted. He sees things far away, while all other gods and humans are near-sighted: »Mirabilis est iste Deus ab aliis Diis. Ille remota et longe stantia videt, isti autem proxima sibi.«³⁰ They see only their own insides, contemplating themselves narcissistically. But the true God is not contemplating himself, but busily looking at the sinners he must save. So, instead of ascending or running to God where God cannot see, humility runs away from the contemplating God above. More yet, and contrary to our expectations, God actually beholds sinners, not just the godly. They are in God's range of sight; pride runs to God above. Humility stays put, so that God can come down—a most active God, not the sleeper dreamt of by the pagans. Moreover, the active God concerns himself with sinners rather than the holy.

28 WA 1, 63–65. One of the introductory sermons to the series on the Ten Commandments preached from June 1516 to February 24, 1517, at parish church in Wittenberg.

29 WA 1, 63, 18–22.

30 LW 1, 63.

In this sermon, the Pharisee is the Dionysian who refuses to »draw away« from the majesty by recognizing his own nothingness, barnstorming God's majesty. The Publican is the humble *sub contrarian* who first draws away by turning the full force of negation entirely against himself. Thus, the humble man takes over the law's job, anticipates the Final Judgment, and accuses himself in order to elicit God's pity: I am a sinner!

Through Staupitz, who »gave him *occasionem*,« Luther learned further where to find the nearby God, asking for everything to be done by God, and learning to wait passively.³¹ As in the children's game of hide n' seek, God first hides so as not to be found. But, while God does not want to be found above, he wants to be found below. Where exactly is the God below? Here is where Luther has not reached his evangelical point: »below« means to conform with the rule of the Apostle in Rom 12:16: »Associate with the lowly.« So here is Luther's »middle« phase concerning *deus absconditus* and the theology of repentance: do not flee God's judgment, but go to it! However, the place of God's judgment is found strangely »below« rather than »above.«³² It is in the cross, and one must find his way both from and to that cross. Yet, since a person cannot go backward in time he must find the present form of this cross—which Luther thought he found in Paul's dictum: »associate with the lowly.«

But here Luther makes his mystical shift. The essential place and way to find the poor is not by going out to the street, but in one's self, inwardly. One cannot find the poor outside without first finding poverty within: »et haec est humilitas, qua homo suum nihil agnoscit et Deo relinquit omne bonum, non audet sibi aliquid arrogare.«³³ Here is where Luther's recognition of one's own »nothingness« becomes crucial, but also effectively blocks the actual gospel. Luther suggests two »nothings« that we should recognize. One in myself, which person will never be *something*, and the other in Christ's word (since his word is only in *spe*, not in *re*). Both these

31 WAT 1; 89.

32 Later Luther demands running away from all this judgment entirely, above or below, but in 1516, Luther asserts there is a double movement that is simultaneous: »Igitur recedere a Deo et appropinquare fit duobus modis, scilicet interius et exterius, seu cognoscendo Deum et ignorando Deum« LW 1,63.

33 Ibid. Of course, this will become a sticking point, and remains so in much of mistaken Protestantism that is still seeking to find the cross.

»nothings« are identified by a feeling, and the preacher provides instruction on how to detect these inner feelings. The first has its sign in the feeling of *Anfechtung*. The second is the countervailing feeling of hope for the immanence of mercy. Mercy is nearby! Both feelings are signs of repentance, and for the fervent monk they come so close together that they seem simultaneous.

The preacher teaches how to recognize these two. Yet, both feelings necessarily restrict faith within the ambit of self-reference—which is the true source of the later Protestant problem with the »practical syllogism«—i. e., do I actually feel this *Anfechtung*, and do I simultaneously feel this *hope*? This self-referencing confines faith to faith-in-itself, and fosters a hyper oscillation of mercy and justice in its hearers that Oberman called the »main theme of Biel's sermons.«³⁴ So Luther concluded the sermon with

Quare potius agnoscamus nos esse tales, qualis erat Pharisaeus, et gemamus atque odiamus nos ipsos magis quam illum, et non praesumamus securi, quod Publicano similes simus, quia beatus ille nimis fuit et Filius gratiae, nos autem filii naturae, ideo et irae.³⁵ – We shall [...] hate ourselves more than he [the Pharisee did], and not presume so confidently that we are like the publican [...] who was a child of grace [...].

For this reason, even though faith rather than love is at this point (1515–1516) the complete focus of Luther's sermons, and faith truly has assurance, faith nevertheless remains within a wild vacillation between assurance and uncertainty, between *spes* and *timor*.

Thus, Luther found that he had no direct access, despite being very near the cross. He could only point with his finger to a present *nihil*. He then desperately filled this nothing with »the poor«. But where he put »the poor« (especially inside himself) in this 1516 sermon, he later placed the preacher (who is not *accessed* by the hearer, but who rather breaks in from the outside).

Yet, in this early process of drawing away from God and drawing near Him, sin is not ignored, as Luther will later say, but used as an inner testament to the negativity of faith. Therefore, sin's presence is crucial to faith. Sin negates anything that one would use as righteousness before God in a true, whole life of repentance. However, Christ is not quite present—ex-

34 OBERMAN, Harvest (see n. 11), 181.

35 WA 1; 65,3–6.

cept as a concept. That concept of Christ is then pressed into service as the way future hope is grasped by faith. It is the only possible way the cross can be found, adored and accessed. Luther thought he and his hearers must grasp that cross, and one does that only through signs (in the form of inner feelings), or as something thought in the form of the purely abstract. The thing that is missing between the sinner and the cross, however, is precisely the preacher with the word of absolution. The particular promise that is the gospel, and is Luther's true evangelical discovery, is here absent. That would have to wait until Luther's early sermons come to an abrupt end.

5. *Luther's 1516, December 21, St. Thomas Day sermon on Psalm 19:1*

This sermon has most everything an evangelic preacher would want, except the actual giving of the Gospel.³⁶ The sermon, indeed, moved from moral *exhortatio* to theological judgment—i. e., what God has done (a most active God) rather than how I am ascending to him. The cross is then the central matter, and so Christology and soteriology are its moving parts. All the pieces of the puzzle are here, but the picture remains wrong. The sermon is a careful description of grace, which, while it is opposite Biel's essential Pelagianism, remains in the rational outer structure, or systematic, of law. Luther seems to preserve even the absolute/ordained structure at the foundation of Nominalism. Today we call this the difference between talking about, but not delivering the goods, or speaking about the Gospel, but never giving it.

The sermon not only shows us Luther's second phase of the *absconditus sub contrario* (moving from the monk's humility to the external wounds of Christ, i. e., from what we do to what God has done in the *theologia crucis*), but it is the proper predecessor to the 95 *Theses*, especially the first thesis concerning Matt 4:17: »Repent!« Luther's preaching here remains very much a »thematic« sermon of the scholastic type, and so he identifies his own theme as God's works—his *opera Dei*—and therefore God's Glory as in Ps 19:1: »Coeli enarrant gloriam Dei, et opera manuum eius annunciat firmamentum.« Of course, *gloriam* is crucial in the matter of *deus absconditus*, since it tells us where hiding ends and the revelation—normally

36 WA I, III–II5.

by seeing—is accomplished, especially according the many theories of the beatific vision.

Luther thus gives his theory of preaching outright. Sermons are to »tell God's works,« but the problem for such preaching is that sinners are not attracted, but rather repelled by God's works. The sermon is then to paint a picture of God's glory so people can see with faith what they cannot see (and are actually offended by) with flesh yet, because sinners are offended by God's glory, their own hatred of the Gospel must be revealed before God can be revealed to them. Thus, revelation is a light shined first upon human darkness (to which sinners otherwise remain blind). Hiddenness means first and foremost resisting the sight of one's own true self. It is psychological.

The Gospel is then considered to be the mirror that reveals this psychological sin: »Ideo Euangelium, dum praedicat gloriam Dei, revelat ignominiam hominum, et dum manifestat opera Dei, ostendit ignaviam et peccatum hominum.«³⁷ The Gospel, not the law, reveals shame, just as, »Et sol dum oritur offendit oculos noctuarum, et vinum interficit febricitantes,«³⁸ in just the way that Feuerbach and Freud later referred to alienation or repression.

The problem with Luther's theory is that God's glory, *iustitia*, is necessarily the eternal law, so that *iustitia* is still confused with this assumption of the law. The Gospel that Luther thinks he is preaching is derived primarily from implying God's inner nature that is discoverable through inferring general, eternal attributes—each person (especially God) acting to things outside himself as his nature necessitates—so that since »righteousness« is God's nature (*iustitia Dei*), then his act toward us, it to »make righteous« where there isn't any righteousness—he can't help but do it being righteousness itself: »Est nihil aliud nisi iustitiam, pacem, misericordiam, veritatem, mititatem, bonitatem, gaudium, salutem facere.«³⁹

This assumption of the Gospel still cling to the old habit of scholasticism that Luther later abandoned, which derives the form of the Gospel (what the preacher says) from a speculation of the inner essence of God's nature. Luther took his first step away from this practice of inferring attrib-

37 WA I; III,31f; II2,1f.

38 WA I; II2,8f.

39 WA I; II2,10–12.

utes when he abandoned Pseudo Dionysius, but it was retained here in his second phase, even in the early use of *theologia crucis* and *sub contrario*. It is only his later distinction of preached/unpreached where this is finally overcome. The problem that remains in this sort of sermon is that whenever a person thinks that God's righteousness is the divine inner attribute that is extended to sinners, the sphere or umbrella under which *iustitia* remains is necessarily the eternal law. One is left, then, either to advocate for seeing the beauty of eternal law through some mystical transcendence, or attempting to see the opposite of beauty in the law—a twisted, queer law that accuses and humbles us for our own good and imposes the true law of God for the fake human version.

So, in this sermon Luther distinguishes what things were like before, and after, the Fall. When God was only creating, God made righteousness straightforwardly, the goodness was not hidden at all. He said, »light« and there was light. In this initial relation to creation there was no hiding by God. But ever since the Fall, God's righteousness was forced to operate angularly, and even opposite, his nature. This is entirely due to the new and awful offense that sinners strangely take at God and his law. Subsequently, even the Creator cannot make a sinner righteous in the old way by simply shining a light—revealing or otherwise making things positively. There must now be an »alien work« which Luther employs from Isa 28:21: »Strange is his deed! Alien is his work!«

Ever since the fall, God first »makes men sinners«—that is,

alienum est opus eius, ut operetur opus suum: alienum autem opus est facere peccatores, iniustos, mendaces, tristes, stultos, perditos, Non quod revera tales ipse faciat, sed quod superbia hominum, cum tales sint, adeo nolit tales fieri aut esse, ut Deus maiori tumultu, imo solum hoc opere utatur, ut eos ostendat tales esse, ut fiant id in oculis suis quod sunt in oculis Dei.⁴⁰

God's revelation is not of his own attribute, but of our human sin—using the law of course—that sinners can become in their own eyes what they truly are in God's. Thus, God's hiddenness is a reaction to the prior, human, sinful, hiddenness. It says, »I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal« (Deut 32:39). Luther takes this »kill« as merely a metaphor (if it were literal, it would leave no person who can fulfill the law) for saying that God

⁴⁰ WA I; 112,25–30.

forces humans to see his reality, i. e., the reality that God sees and that truly exists, instead of the false, lying reality humans normally imagine.

Yet here is where Luther takes up the most problematic side of his preaching: the Gospel's office. While the text actually makes »alien« and »proper« into adjectives for the one person, God, working relationally with us to get us to see what he sees (rather than God as he sees himself), Luther subsequently takes these adjectives »alien« and »proper« to refer to the one, simple Word that composes the single and only work of God, i. e., the Gospel. So, Luther preached as if he could purely convey Scripture's and God's secret knowledge of counsel by saying that »Ita et Euangelii officium est duplex.«⁴¹

Gospel's proper work is »non legem, non minas legis, non implenda et facienda, sed remissionem peccatorum, pacem conscientiae, impletam esse legem &c. praedicantium bona, i. e. dulcia, scilicet suavissimam Dei Patris misericordiam, Christum nobis donatum.« This Luther calls *mercy*.⁴² But the first, strange work of the gospel, Luther concludes, is »to prepare a people perfect for the Lord« (Luke 1:17). That is, »Alienum autem Euangelii opus est parare Domino plebem perfectam, hoc est, peccata manifestare.«⁴³ The *Gospel* magnifies sin, in direct contrast to Paul's »the law magnifies sin,« and so the Gospel is the sole word that works repentance. Luther even suggests a new word for this alien Gospel, that he calls »cacangelium.« His hearers do not presently like the law, but he assures them one day they will embrace it. Alien and proper are then two »tones« of one melody, a »harsh« tone and a soothing one for the one rule of law.

Luther then turns in this sermon to the text that would become the central matter of the 95 *Theses*, and so ever since serves as the marker for

41 WA 1; 113,5 f. This issue of the Gospel's »two works« arises later in controversy among Lutherans when Melanchthon is forced to make a distinction between Gospel with a capital »G«, and gospel with a lower case »g«, one encompassing the whole work of God, and the other the distinguishing opposition of law and gospel that rested uncomfortably in the 5th article of the *Formula of Concord*.

42 WA 1; 113,13–16. Though the details are always crucial, since this affects not only Luther's end to the sermon, but also the history of Lutheranism after this, since this discussion is central to the later antinomian disputations—»that the law has been fulfilled« means explicitly, not by Christians but by Christ alone.

43 WA 1; 113,16 f.

the beginning of the Reformation. The primary example of *cacangelium*, or harsh-toned, alien Gospel is John the Baptists': »Do penance [*poenitentiam agite*] for the kingdom of heaven is at hand«⁴⁴—the central matter of the 95 *Theses*. But the very next words of the Baptist (»for the kingdom of heaven is at hand«) are then taken as the sweetest tone—the proper Gospel. Thus, Luther is asserting that God's law holds opposites together in a psychological torment that is necessary for faith. Luther brought the law and the gospel into the closest possible proximity, *simul*, but still had them very much coordinated under the overarching umbrella of God's essence as the law.

When law and gospel are alternating under the large umbrella of the eternal law, it forces the two to be related to a larger, shared goal in the form of two steps, an *ordo salutis*. »The first step« is to admit one is sick, which step is »prepared by John« the Baptist so sinners are »capable of receiving grace.« Death was then made into a metaphor for an empty nothing—a dark hole as preparation for repentance—i. e., a negation or non-being in the form of non-fulfillment of the law. In other words, one must be made an empty vessel into which Christ can come to fill the thing. Death is thereby made into a metaphor for an empty nothing—a dark hole of preparation.⁴⁵ Before one can get grace, one must have an empty hole or cup in which to put it.

Then, secondly Christ brings the kingdom of God, and »to save sinners, comes into them« (Matt 5) with his exonerating law. There is Christ, present in faith itself, as the law: »sunt enim capaces gratiae, esurientes iustitiam, lugentes pro consolatione, pauperes spiritu, mites atque dirigibiles.

44 WA I, 113,29f.

45 Luther has two »nothings« (*nihila*) non-substances, one in myself, which will never be something, and the other in Christ's word, which is not now something, but will be—not in *re* but in *spe*. Both these nothings are identified by a feeling: one the feeling of *Anfechtung*. And the other the feeling of hope, the immanence of mercy. But both keep faith within the ambit of self-reference—and so this retains the problem that is special to Augustinianism and later bothers Protestants regarding the assurance of faith in the form of the minor syllogism. Faith is then a self-reference that assures itself on the basis of one of its own feelings. Faith is then stuck in itself rather than freed in the very present, vocal, *verbum reale*, the preached Word. This is why, even though faith is already Luther's complete focus, not love, and faith remains an oscillation between assurance and uncertainty, between *spes* and *timor*. Sin is not ignored, as Luther will later say, but used as an inner testament to the negativity of faith. Christ is not quite present, except as a concept, which is the way future hope is grasped by faith.

Ideo Christus, regnum coelorum, venit in eos [...].⁴⁶ Christ will ultimately fulfill the law in spirit, and so be »accepted« by the God whose *iustitia* demands it, and then pour his glory into my empty, negative, nothing of a cup—thus saving the law, despite the sinner's own failure.

This theology assumes that the reason everyone hates the gospel is this first part—which eviscerates the hope that I would be found righteous in myself. Instead of being approved by the law, I hear: »You brood of vipers.« Even those who have fulfilled the law in their acts, are »scilicet quia non implent legem spiritu.«⁴⁷ They do not want to be prepared for grace, and to »be dissatisfied with one's self.«

What, then, is this »Christ in me« or Christ present in faith that justifies? For this, Luther turns to Rom 7, which is then interpreted as Paul's cry before baptism's death and resurrection. More specifically, as Luther says, it is the Christian life between two »baptisms«: a baptism of »repentance« and a baptism of remission of sins: »quomodo omnibus necessarius sit baptismus poenitentiae ante baptismum remissionis peccatorum.«⁴⁸

Luther has made a great stride in this sermon: he is sure that when Paul says, »Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?« Paul cannot possibly mean the common scholastic answer: »habitus«! My delivery is not by means of my own constantly repeated acts. Paul says, »Thanks be to God through *Jesus Christ*!« But a problem remains. Paul, Luther figures, must be talking about concupiscence when he says, »wretched,« and »without grace concupiscence does not disappear.« That means, Paul cannot fulfill the law in spirit—even if he does the acts.

How will the law ever be fulfilled, then? Who will do that? Christ will. Christ will fulfill the law in spirit, and so be »accepted« by the God whose *iustitia* demands it. Only those who are dissatisfied with themselves are thus truly repent. This is precisely the point at which Luther proceeds into his 95 *Theses*—with a perfect confusion of law and gospel: »enim est poenitere. Non autem displicent nisi his qui ea cognoscunt, Non autem co-

46 WA I; 114,1-4.

47 WA I; 114,20f.

48 WA I; 114,28f.

gnoscunt nisi qui legem intelligunt: legem autem per se nemo [Röm. 3, 20.] intelligit nisi explicetur, hoc autem facit Euangelium.«⁴⁹

For this reason, Luther ends his sermon by saying the following problematic things. 1) The caca-gospel in its alien tone works repentance—exciting fear and the requiring hatred of the self. That is the first baptism of repentance, or preparation for grace. John's »baptism of repentance into the forgiveness of sins« means self-hatred, the first step. The Gospel is the very thing that magnifies sin in Paul (»Wretched man that I am!«), not the law. True, it is supposed to be the gospel in its alien tone that works repentance (dissatisfaction with one's self to the utmost degree—exciting fear and the required hatred of the self). That is the first baptism of repentance. That is, however, only the preparation for grace. Luther says that is what it means when Scripture says of John that he preached a »baptism of repentance into the forgiveness of sins.« One is only dissatisfied when he does not know the law. Yet, a person cannot know the law unless it is explained. That explanation is the act or work of the gospel, even though Luther proceeds to quote Paul's Rom 3:20 to the contrary, »Through the law comes knowledge of sin«! So far, the first step ends in self-hatred, »O, Wretched Man that I am!«

Then comes the second step: Christ. Luther says, »Grace infuses love,« which is for Paul's conscience to be made »more confident« since there must be despair to have faith—but not too much. But the increased confidence comes in the form of a sign that Christ's perfect fulfillment has now been poured into your own empty hole: you will want to keep the commandment, even though you are »yet unable.« Not yet in *re*, but in *spe* you will be able to keep the commandments. In the meantime, the feeling that you want to keep the law is sufficient to the Spirit as your faith's down payment.

On what ground is this grace infused, then? And how? Only when one's love is perfected. Christ's love, the fullness of Christ, is accepted until he too [Paul] is finally made perfect: »Gratia autem infundit amorem, quo fit fidentior, dum videt se velle servare legem, et quicquid non potest servare, quod Christi plenitudo pro eo suscipitur, [1 Cor. 15, 57.] donec et ipse perficiatur.«⁵⁰ This part of Luther's sermon is not unlike the scholastics, as

49 WA I; 114,33–35.

50 LW I,115.

with Thomas: love is the crowning virtue. Love is infused in us by God; it is a gift and as such is a foretaste of glory. Meanwhile, God accepts the fullness of Christ's love, instead of ours, until the time of our fulfillment has come. Christ is there, but what Luther is missing at this point is that Christ is specifically, crucially—not the law. Veracity, truthfulness, and the assurance that God does not lie is not grounded on any foundation of the law that assures us that this is God's inner essence or where justice and mercy kiss. Later Luther will assert that mercy actually contradicts wrath. There is a great duel in which mercy conquers, but not in God's inner being. It happens only in Christ, whose word is now precisely not any law, order, program, work, or charity, but is a hiddenly, present new world above and beyond the law. God is not then the mystical being beyond being in his essence, but beyond the law in Christ—who also is hidden in the deepest of all darkness, i. e., the preacher whose word makes faith where and when it pleases the Holy Spirit.

III Approaching the 95 Theses (1517)

Luther's St. Thomas Day Sermon (1516) is remarkable for being almost one year in advance of the beginning of the Reformation and the posting of the 95 *Theses*. Almost all the themes of God's hiddenness are there assembled, but they still come out wrong. What they are missing is the distinction of God preached and unpreached, and this has at its core that one has all divine favor and gifts (the grace and indwelling of Christ) outside and beyond the law entirely. But for that occurred to Luther, the law itself had to cease being God's glory and act—even in Christ's crucifixion and in the absolution of the sinner. Once Luther came upon that assertion the sermon become an actual election, rather than merely alluding to an election that has or will happen elsewhere—whether back in history at the crucifixion of Christ or in the future when the law is believed to be fulfilled by sinners.

But for that we must go beyond 1517, beyond the sacrament of penance entirely, and into a new understanding both John's and Christ's call: »repent!« Especially by the time of Luther's *De servo arbitrio* and his mature understanding of *deus absconditus*, Rom 7 was taken to refer to the Christian after baptism. Furthermore, Baptism ceased being two, as in the 1516 St. Thomas Day Sermon, and instead came to be understood as singular.

John's baptism would then no longer be merely preparation for the gospel, but Luther saw it as the gospel itself. Then Luther no longer considered repentance of forgiveness as a second step on the way to righteousness. Christ's cross no longer served as down payment that God accepted until sinners could pay their own debt in relation to the law. After 1517, Luther begins divesting himself of these themes that were so prominent in his early sermons, especially the notion that God's hiddenness was primarily the »internal clarity« of persons who imagined they had finally discovered a law, revealed by Christ, that does not accuse. Instead, Luther moves from internal clarity to the external office of preaching. Consequently, the proper theological distinction was no longer that between an accusing and a comforting law, but rather the more profound distinction between God unpreached and God preached found in *De servo arbitrio*.⁵¹

This evangelical discovery cannot be seen by an historian alone (who must operate by the laws of history, and so of cause and effect) as if we could see how Luther begins as an Okhamist or Gabrielist preacher and gradually develops by small steps to the final freedom. It must begin with his evangelical discovery and then we can work backward—in this case systematically in order to see when and where this happened, and even more importantly how and why. When it comes to *deus absconditus* the harvest of Luther's discovery is not stated clearly until *De servo arbitrio*. This later distinction does two things at once that make Luther so important when it comes to discussing God's hiddenness. First, Luther moves from the internal clarity of self-examination to the external clarity of the publicly preached word that he calls a public fountain.⁵² That is, faith's certainty is givable or sharable from the outside rather than an exercise in self-examination. Second, the external clarity of preaching distinguishes law and gospel absolutely, or theologically as it regards God, not simply as they affect hearers psychologically. When it comes to preaching, these are both major changes and are very often overlooked. Law and Gospel are terms that do not merely refer

51 WA 18; 685,3–5: »Aliter de Deo vel voluntate Dei nobis praedicata, revelata, oblata, culta, Et aliter de Deo non praedicato, non revelato, non oblato, non culto disputandum est.«

52 WA 18; 606,37–39: »Quis dicet fontem publicum non esse in luce, quod hi qui in angiporto sunt, illum non vident, cum omnes qui sunt in foro videant?«

to two different experiences of God, or really anything internal at all. It is rather God moving from accusation to a promise that is the unimaginable end of the eternal law: »Habet enim suos limites usque ad Christum, ut Paulus infra dicit: ›Lex usque ad Cristum. Illo veniente cessat Moses cum lege, circumcissione, sacrificiis, sabbatho, cessant et omnes prophetae.«⁵³ The law, until Christ! From that time on, God's hiddenness and revelations are not merely internal movements of the psyche, but are the more profound movement of God himself in and through the preaching office: God preached or not preached.

When God hides, my feeling or experience is uncertainty. When God reveals (or better now, preaches) my feeling or experience is certainty. But my certainty is not a chance, internal movement. It is given to me from outside by a preacher. However, one more thing must be said: my certainty is precisely not in me—not my expectation of finding assurance in my fulfillment of the law, but is outside in Christ's fulfillment of the law. This does not make the law agreeable or without accusation, it ends the law—quiescent, empty—freeing me not only from sin, death, devil, but from the law itself.

In these early sermons from Luther we note primarily the movement from *deus absconditus* as the negation of lower desires for the higher (or lower thoughts for the higher, as in Pseudo-Dionysius) to the profound humiliation of *sub contrario* hiddenness and German mysticism. The wounds of Christ alone suffice for a sinner's righteousness that depends utterly on faith rather than a form of love. But the problem with this intermediate understanding of *deus absconditus* is that faith is humble in so far as it is faith in what is not there—the *nihil*. This is where Luther's profoundly humble, but theologically problematic, utterance (that was so important recently to Rudolph Bultmann and the lesser existentialists following Hegel) enters the scene, especially in the early Romans lectures:

Sic amor transfert amantem in amatum. Ergo spes transfert in speratum, Sed speratum non apparet. Ideo transfert in incognitum, in absconditum, in tenebras interiores, Vt nesciat, quid speret, et tamen sciat, quid non speret. Sic ergo Anima facta est spes et speratum simul, quia in eo versatur, quod non videt, i. e. in spe. Quę spes si videretur, i. e.

53 WA 40,1; 45,21–23.

Si sperans et speratum sese mutuo agnoscerent, iam non sic transferretur in speratum i. e. in spem et ignoratum, Sed in visum raperetur et cognito frueretur.⁵⁴

By 1517, Luther's profound treatment of God hidden *sub contrario* helped Luther abandon the Dionysian attempt to barnstorm God's secret counsel, specifically love as the highest desire. In Luther's second phase, love is replaced with faith. Thus, Luther rejected »the deceiving theology« of the scholastics as a whole—not just Gabriel or Ockham, but including the heart of scholasticism in Thomas, the Lombard, Anselm (and not excluding Franciscans) that had turned everything up-side-down from Scripture. In the place of such deceiving theology, Luther put a theologian of the cross:

Num quo tempore coepit Theologia Scholastica, id est illusoria (sic enim sonat graece), eodem evacuata est Theologia crucis suntque omnia plane perversa. Theologus crucis (id est de deo crucifixo et abscondito loquens) poenas, cruces, mortem docet esse thesaurum omnium preciosissimum et reliquias sacratissimas, quas ipsemet dominus huius theologiae consecravit benedixitque non solum tactu suae sanctissimae carnis, sed et amplexu suae supersanctae et divinae voluntatis, easque hic reliquit vere osculandas, quaerendas, amplexandas. Quin beatus et benedictus, qui [Jac. 1, 2.] dignus fuerit deo visus, ut ei donentur hii thesauri reliquiarum Christi, immo qui intelligat sibi donari.⁵⁵

Luther takes this from Jac 1:2, »Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials,« which trials come only to the elect of the children of God. In doing so, Luther had moved from the scholastic repentance as elicited acts of love to the matter of faith. However, faith remains yet an oscillating balancing act between two extremes (in the first uses of »*simul*« just as in the slightly earlier Romans lectures), i. e., between the sun of grace that knows it is elect and the dark shadow of terror that one is not elected. The primary sign of election was the feeling of despair or reprobation. Luther then made the internal feeling primary at this stage. *Odium sui* and *resignatio ad infernum* were the great treasures of faith.

As in the early sermons we have already noted, all the parts are found in the sermons like faith rather than love, the importance of the word for faith, the *simul iustus et peccator*, that faith alone justifies, and even that faith is passive (suffering humility) rather than active right up to the *Resolutiones*

⁵⁴ WA 56; 374,14–21.

⁵⁵ LUTHER, *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* (1518), WA 1; 613,21–30.

disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute (1518). Yet, the proper evangelical preaching does not yet emerge. Luther was entirely open to unmediated unity with God (and so especially the German mysticism), but the divine law stood in-between the creature and Creator. Moses' veil remained in the form of the eternal law and so the preacher became a final obstacle.

The remaining dilemma can be seen most clearly from John Calvin's much later assault on Luther's own, mature notion of repentance. Calvin's argument is not simply a better ordering of things Lutheran, but specifically demands that repentance must properly be *after* faith, not before, and not during. Calvin used Luke 24:47: »Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem,« in the same way that he used Paul's »and those whom he predestined he also called« (Rom 8:30) as an *ordo salutis*. First, Calvin insisted, forgiveness of sins must arrive, then, and only then, repentance follows:

no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance. There are some, however, who suppose that repentance precedes faith, rather than flows from it [...] such persons have never known the power of repentance [...].⁵⁶

But the problem with this negative faith is that it trusts what is not there—a nothing, the *nihil*. The Christian is then to believe in an inner, empty cup, prepared for the fulfillment of the law, but there is necessarily nothing in there. Luther's sermon on Epiphany 1514 said something similar:

Haec est enim Myrrha pura et electa, sese in purum nihil resignare, sicut fuit antequam esset, et nec Deum nec aliquid extra Deum cupere, sed solummodo ad beneplacitum Dei volenter reduci ad suum principium i. e. nihil. Nam sicut nihil fuimus, nihil cupivimus antequam crearemur nisi in sola Dei scientia, Ita oportet illuc redire, ut aequè nihil noscamus, nihil cupiamus, nihil simus. Haec est via Compendii, via Crucis, qua brevissime perveniatur ad vitam, ad quam per opera nunquam pervenitur sed magis aberratur.⁵⁷

With this, Luther had gone as far as he could with pure, abstract, theoretical faith that attempts the impossible—to trust the hidden, unknown dream of the eternal and exonerating law. Later, Luther found quite the opposite to be the case. Faith, as Luther will later say in his *Large Catechism*, »aliquid

56 JEAN CALVIN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by H. BEVERIDGE, 1959, vol. 2, 510 (III.3.1).

57 LUTHER, *Sermo Die Epiphaniae* (1514), WA 1; 123,38–124,4.

habendum esse, quod credat, hoc est, cui innitatur et qua re suffulta persistat.«⁵⁸ Furthermore, God in his word (Christ, the promise) is not secured, and the word's veracity itself is no longer confirmed by God's competing attributes of judgment and mercy. Such divine attributes are not proved by the assurance of the ordering and balancing within God, which is the most dangerous thing bequeathed to Luther by Nominalism, especially that both the ordained and potential wills of God are supposedly expressions of the singular eternal law—either in the form of unused possibility or the determined actuality of law.

In matters concerning *deus absconditus*, the discovery of the difference between law and gospel as a preached thing (the *word* of the cross, not only the cross as an idea) was not merely to effect anthropology or the *pro nobis*, but also the doctrine of God himself. Eventually Luther would always distinguish between preached and unpreached, or God in his word or in himself. The security or assurance of God's word was then no longer sought by barnstorming naked majesty. Faith was not the attempt to balance God's judgment and grace, honor and mercy, wrath and love, but it clung to the proclaimed word itself. Thus, the word in this preaching office came ultimately not in the form of the absolute law, but of the absolution itself. It was then not prayer, but proclamation, and when the preached God arrived, the endless oscillating between the assurance of *Anfechtung* and the feeling of mercy, or between doubt and assurance, finally came to an end.

IV Conclusion

Luther's problem up to 1517 was that he had retained the sphere of the law as the being of God, at least theoretically—and with that, law and gospel were conjoined in an unstable high-wire, balancing act that tried to keep grace and despair in a greater union of self-hate and love for God. This then figured that there must be two kinds of law—a cursing and blessing law. The search for this blessing or non-accusatory law became the perennial problem of orthodox Lutheranism and general Protestantism ever since that attempts the synthesis between forensic and effective justifications, or two types of law—a hypothetical and actual.

⁵⁸ LUTHER, *Großer Katechismus* (BSLK 696,29).

The problem that remained with Luther's early *sub contrario*, and so his approach to repentance and God's hiddenness, concerned the dominant issue of the place of the law in the system. Later on, Calvin solved this dilemma by simply cutting the Gordian knot of this infernal oscillating and gave God's eternal law pride of place so that at least hypothetically gospel precedes law. Then faith precedes repentance, and repentance means living into the law of God that blesses, a joyful obedience, third uses (even a third use that is primary) etc., rather than Luther's own freedom from law. Calvin's choice settled the ongoing problem of Augustine's sign of election by means of *odium sui* and *resignatio ad infernum*—reducing the sinner to nothing. The resolution arrived late at the final judgment, not as present assurance (in *spe*, not in *re*). But in doing so, Calvin merely represented what was already emerging among the second generation that feared Luther's teaching that a person must learn to flee from the majesty, nakedness and purity of God's predestination by fleeing to the preached God. Hence come the constant attacks by reformed theology ever since on Luther's *deus absconditus*, most notably in modern theology from Karl Barth.

Yet, Luther went a very different way. He halted all exoneration of God for predestination by means of the law. In his later, evangelical preaching Luther rejected the mere negation of hiddenness from the inward, perpetual sinner (self-hatred) for the stunning negation of the law itself. To do that was to get rid of God as a moral agent altogether when it came to the justification of sinners. Luther removed the basic assumption that God's essence was legal—and only so reliable. God's moral agency was, after all, what Hegel called the cunning of reason. So, while Hegel eschewed enlightenment humility when it comes to *deus absconditus*, he feared Luther's way of distinguishing God from the law even more. That appeared to remove all human hope for ever of answering the question: am I elected? Along with the scholastics, Hegel thought the answer to predestination sickness could only be found in the majesty of God, not in the preaching of God. But that secret majesty of God had to assume the eternal union between law and gospel as one word, in one essence. Furthermore, the Christian life was depicted merely as a life obedient to God's law, and the fulfillment of that very law was what marked true *iustitia*.

But we do need to speculate or wonder how Luther viewed his own early preaching and his own personal *Anfechtung*, or even why he specifically

abandoned it as untenable. He told us directly when he gave his final teaching on *deus absconditus* in *De servo arbitrio* concerning Rom 9: »Esau I hated, Jacob I loved.« There Luther recognized that the *iustitia dei* of which Paul speaks is not *lex aeterna*. God is not acting as a moral agent when he hates Esau and loves Jacob. While *Anfechtung* is indeed especially the suffering of predestination sickness, and is thus never to be ignored, such trial and temptation by God is not to be mistaken for a sign grace itself or the treasure of Christians as Luther had assumed in his *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* (1518).

Instead, in *De servo arbitrio* Luther taught plainly that predestination sickness had two theological outcomes. One is the suffering of evil (what the modern world fixates upon). The other is the question, »am I Jacob or Esau?« (what the medieval world fixated upon). Luther finally concluded that all of scholasticism, indeed all of theology, attempted to hold together the impossible oscillation that he learned from the Augustine, and even more flagrantly the mystics like Tauler or Mechthild. This merely perfected blaming the self in *odium sui* and *resignatio ad infernum* in service of something greater: to complete the exoneration of God (*iustitia dei*) from all evil. This pious method sought to justify God in the face of the two monsters of theology: suffering and predestination.

Up to 1517, and part of 1518, *deus absconditus sub contrario* was used by Luther in just this way—until he became aware of how near it was to grace. But it was not in fact grace. Christ had addressed the rich young ruler in just this way with the bitter-sweet: »You are near the kingdom!« So, Luther realized that the reason theology plays this dual game of self-hate and exoneration of God is for its own hidden, secret theological purpose of ensuring that God and law are identical—despite the fact that this unity was hidden under the terrible scourge of the law's accusation. Righteousness was then sought in the hidden, majestic *nihil*—that law was God, and God was law.⁵⁹

59 LUTHER, *Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute* (1518), WA 1, 558,2–8: »In hoc momento (mirabile dictu) non potest anima credere, sese posse unquam redimi, nisi quod sentit nondum completam poenam. Est tamen aeterna, neque potest eam temporalem existimare, solum relinquitur nudum desiderium auxilii et horrendous gemitus, sed nescit unde petat auxilium. Hic est anima expansa cum Christo, ut dinumeren-

Humans are thus blamed for sin, and God is exonerated whenever anything evil can be proved righteous in the end. Furthermore, God's predestining choices of some and not others can be measured as just according to the law, not to the condemned, but to the law. The truth of this justice is never seen until the final judgment day. Until then, preaching is meant only to inform people that both of these divine works are underway: the condemnation of all and the salvation of some—both served up according to the glorious order of eternal law. For those who are saved, the assurance is then given that though the law presently accuses, it will ultimately embrace the elect and include them in its gracious orbit—approving them and God at once, in perfect unity and immediateness. And that, after all, is the mystical dream of *raptus et gemitus*.

However, it finally dawned on Luther that this prospect throws one onto the horns of a dilemma, as Luther notes in *De servo arbitrio*. If the law neither vindicates God for evil nor for predestination, then what can flesh say to this? It is bound to say No! Then, either God is *not* (so that there is no predestination and we make our own fate, as in modern secularism), or God is evil. Indeed, it would then be true that God's choice of Jacob itself is evil. But the problem here is in the assumption of God as law.

Thus, Luther began to see that the Christian life is not legal or salutary obedience to the law. It is not living into the law or experiencing joyful obedience. There is no eternal repentance following faith's forgiveness in the form of a life conformed to God's mind and heart as the covenant of grace. Preaching in that kind of early *sub contrario* fashion is simply the priest giving judgment—in general. It assures people that God's majesty, which seems tyrannical now, will become a blessing and affirmation for the elect. The Gospel is then mistaken as the eternal law of God in both the forms of his loving will and infinite mind. But Luther soon recognized that the *iustitia dei* that Paul speaks of is not *lex aeterna*. Predestination is precisely not legal. God is not acting as a moral agent when he hates Esau and loves Jacob.

What, then, is repentance? Once Luther fought through his *sub contrario* in this legal sense, then *sub contrario* becomes the unexpected accident of getting a preacher—*sub contradictorio*. Repentance then moves from *deus*

tur omnia ossa eius, Nec est ullus angulus in ea non repletus amaritudine amarissima, horrore, pavore, tristitia, sed hiis omnibus non nisi aeternis.«

nudus to deus indutus. As we find later in the *Smalcald Articles* and *Large Catechism*, God is a sermon and thus a graspable God. Evangelical repentance is then not taken up as in Calvin's later joyful obedience shaped by the law. Nor is Luther's repentance the freedom for good works or love. For true repentance Luther takes »the fiery angel,« John who »destroys both sides« of the oscillating *sub contrario* when he says, »Repent!«⁶⁰ This repudiates both sides of legal repentance. One side says repentance is pre-requisite to justification (Biel, and the scholastics in their eternal fight between attrition and contrition) who then says to the Baptist: »Too late, I have already repented, and I hate myself to prove it.« The other (Protestant scholastic) thinks of repentance following the Gospel, and so says, »John, you are too late, since I no longer need your instruction. My justification has already come and the Holy Spirit is at this very moment working repentance in me, molding me into joyous and free obedience to God's law.«

And, if the Baptist were to reply to these two, »how do you know this to be true,« I answer: »I know this because I am friends with the law, the law does not attack me but guide me, as I feel it in my heart. I do not need your ›Repent.‹« Yet, what does the Baptist actually say? »Repent, all of you!« So, Luther concluded: »the whole edifice is lies.« On one side I see false sinners (self-negators of the old Augustinian kind); on the other side I see false saints (of the third use, Calvinist kind). Instead, you all need forgiveness, whether you have failed to prepare for it, or even if you think you are already past it. Then the Baptist takes his long, bony finger and points them away from themselves and their inner signs, and says, »Your repentance is over there.« That is, »Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world« (John 1:29).

However, where is the Baptists' »over there?« Of course, one presently hearing this command to repent cannot go back to Palestine to find this Christ. John is saying these things as a preacher, and so giving the graspable, preached God. This completely topples the Pope and all other enthusiasts. Repentance, now means not wallowing in your misery nor being too proud

⁶⁰ LUTHER, *Schmalkaldische Artikel*, III (BSLK 445,18–20): »Hie kommt der feurige Engel S. Johannes der rechten Buße Prediger, und schlägt mit enem Donner ünter alle beide in einen Haufen Spricht: ›Tut Buße.‹«

to beg from the preacher.⁶¹ So Luther concludes: if the priest won't give you absolution, then demand it. »Repent« thus means: »It is not the law, you fool! Go over there to your preacher for your righteousness—it is there, and only there, the gospel. Flee the divine majesty's inner law, and cling only to that man's particular promise.« If the preacher won't give it to you, demand it, like the Syrophenician woman demanded it from Christ: »Hic enim necesse est coactionem inverti, ut nos in praeceptum et tu in libertatem venias.«⁶² By this means, a preacher stops being a judge who points to the final judgment to prove that God is good and right in all his judgments, and directly elects.

This turns, or totally repents, a sinner by means of reversing the compulsion. A preacher does not free the sinner into the law and thereby exonerate God for his choice, but lets God push all evil before him, and elect the ungodly directly—without the mediation of the law. Then and there one has immediate union with God through the preached word. Repent means: it is not the law! Go over there to the preacher—it is the gospel!

For this reason, Luther repeatedly uses one mystical phrase throughout his life that he often attributes to Mechthild of Magdeburg. When attacked by the devil, one refers neither to one's humility (*resignatio ad infernum* or *odium sui*), nor to the grace and mercy of God in the golden rule, but one says simply, »I am a Christian.«⁶³ Luther then amends this to his evangelical confession: »But I am baptized.« So, he concludes that »neither the devil, myself or God needs to hear anything more than that,« which sermon is God acting without regard to evil, pushing it forward wherever it is found, and so likewise is God's predestination in the preached word: »I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.«

So, Luther moves from love to faith, but faith must be in something that is not itself. In itself faith finds only negation—absence, nothing, the nihil. But faith cannot simply be placed in just any available thing. It needs be in

61 LUTHER, *Großer Katechismus* (BSLK 731,26): »Si miser et egenus es, accede et utere hac medicina.«

62 BSLK 732,34f.

63 E.g. WA 44; 98,13–25: »Sicut alibi recitatur exemplum de Mechtilde moniali, ea vexabatur a Diabolo, quod plane nihil sciret aut sentiret de fide [...]. Monialis ergo nihil aliud tentationis illi opponebat, quam hanc vocem: CHRISTIANA SUM, hoc est sum baptista in sanguine filii Dei, sum cibata corpore et sanguine Christi.«

Christ, who is specifically not the law. So Luther concluded in his *Smalcald Articles*, »Mit dieser Busse stossen wir Bapst und alles, was auff unser guten werck gebauet ist, zu boden; Denn es ist alles auff einen faulen, nichtigen grund gebauet, welcher heist Gute werck oder Gesetz [...].«⁶⁴ That is the greatest, deepest, darkest hiding of God because human love, hope (and even faith) desperately wants to find its object in the assurance that God not only makes righteous by legal means, but is himself, in naked majesty, the eternal, undying, just, merciful, dependable, rational, fair law. Accordingly, his judgments of predestination would presumably always be right, holy, good, and beautiful despite whatever he decides about me in particular. But thankfully God's predestining choices are not right, holy, good and beautiful, and God himself is not, in the light of glory, revealed as morally right.

Instead, God's will, history itself, predestination, the cross, and preaching are all accidents, having their purpose outside the law and in Christ. Nothing could be more present, and yet so darkly hidden as to be opposed and hated by everything that is righteous and good in this world. Sinners want assurance of their eternal election in God's naked majesty in the secret form of a rational, fair law, but God's predestining choices (like Jacob rather than Esau) are not right, and God himself is not moral in the light of glory. Instead, God saves us offensively through a preacher with a single word that is hated by everyone except those who need it: Christ saying, »I forgive you.« That is God in his word, not in his inner, secret self. But having this absolution, you actually have the hidden God and his absolute, secret counsel, without any remainder. Luther's preaching would change after 1517 because of this, and so became evangelical. Thus, his teaching about the central matter of the 95 *Theses* and a whole life of repentance would also change once he had discovered that the hidden God is not the law.

64 BSLK 447,10–12.