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**Do Divine Election and Human Justification
Still Matter to the World?**

Making Room for the Broader Anthropological
Significance of Traditional Doctrines

Leopoldo A. Sánchez

Director of the Center for Hispanic Studies

Werner R.H. Krause y Elizabeth Ringger Krause Chair for Hispanic Ministries

Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, USA ¹

- I. What's In a Name?—The Traditional Parochial Scope of Election Language
- II. A Basic Human Problem: Broadening and Deepening the Scope of Justification
- III. A Basic God Problem: Broadening and Deepening the Scope of Election
- IV. Running from the Hidden to the Revealed God: A Gift to a Hurting World
- Conclusion

**I. What's In a Name?: The Traditional Parochial Scope of
Election Language**

When my Lutheran Seminary students hear the word “election” they often think about God’s eternal predestination to salvation and, if they have some familiarity with church history, might even suspect we are moving closer to a discussion of classical Lutheran-Reformed polemics. In Lutheran pedagogy, it is not uncommon to place before students the so-called *crux theologorum*, the cross of the theologians, namely, the question *Cur alii, alii non?* or “why (are) some (saved) and not others?”² Boundary lines are drawn between those who

¹ See www.CSL.edu, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO. 63105.

² For a classic Lutheran textbook treatment of election, see Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (originally *Christliche Dogmatik*), vol. 2 (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1953), 473-503. Pieper states the *crux theologorum* as follows: “Why, with the same divine grace for all and the same total depravity in all men, not all mankind, but only a part, is saved is beyond our limited ken in this life.” *Ibid.*, 501.

answer the question by placing the election of the sinner in God's eternal decree of double predestination (Calvinism), the sinner's freedom of the will (synergism, Arminianism), or the sinner's justification before God on account of the merits of Christ whose benefits are applied to us through the Gospel (Lutheran).³

Reformed and Lutheran theologians agree on the reality of human depravity, the severity of sin, and the inability of humans to choose election. Neither Reformed nor Lutheran theologians seek divine election in human free will (or in a version of human cooperation with divine grace), but in an objective reality that is *extra nos*, external to us.⁴ For traditional Calvinists, such objective reality is the sovereignty of God who alone predestines people unto eternal life and death. For Lutherans the certainty of salvation, the consolation of the Gospel, has led them to anchor their election not in God's sovereign will but in the merits of Christ.

One might say that, at least in terms of starting point if not ultimate theological principle, the Reformed are more *theocentric* in their view of election and the Lutherans more *Christocentric*. The former highlight the glory of God as the way to get to Christ's merits, which leads to the Lutheran charge that for the Reformed God's grace through Christ is not seriously intended for the whole world (*gratia universalis*) but solely for the elect. The Lutherans point to the cross of Christ as the way to get to the certainty of divine election, which leads to the Reformed charge that Lutherans deny the sovereign will of God as the necessary cause of eternal salvation and damnation.⁵

³ "The attempt to solve this mystery has given birth, on the one hand, to Calvinism (denying the *universalis gratia*), and on the other, to synergism (denying the *sola gratia*)." Ibid.

⁴ Not surprisingly, Martin Luther's *Bondage of the Will* (*De servo arbitrio*) and its criticism of Erasmus's synergistic view of conversion has had a welcome reception among Reformed theologians who see a similar threat in most of present-day Evangelical Christianity. See J.I. Packer's and O.R. Johnston's "Historical and Theological Introduction" to their translation of Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1957), 13-61.

⁵ At the conclusion to their "Historical and Theological Introduction," not only do Packer and Johnston criticize the present-day Evangelical Christian for its semi-Pelagianism but also Lutheran orthodoxy for hastily passing by what might be termed a Calvinistic concern for divine sovereignty. Ibid., 57-58. The implication is that Lutherans went astray after Luther on the necessity of divine responsibility for election. In a recent study on the sixteenth century reception of *De servo arbitrio* by Luther's and Melancthon's students (the Wittenberg circle), Kolb has argued for theological and pastoral continuity between masters and students in their warning against false speculation on God's predestination and their concern for directing consciences to the means of grace for the assurance of God's promise of election. See Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005). [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Most of the world, however, does not seem to care much about our doctrine(s) of divine election. Perhaps the problem is that election has become precisely that, and only that, namely, a doctrine for theologians to talk about and debate over what God or even Christ is up to in this whole matter. When the world thinks about “election,” what comes to mind for most is voting for some political candidate. If the world out there perceives at all some religious connotation upon hearing the term “election” (an unlikely scenario), it might see election at best as an interesting church problem and at worst as an instance of old church polemics.⁶ Election seems to have been effectively reduced to one teaching among many in a theology textbook, maybe even a field of study in Protestant polemics.

Even if election were to be seen in some way as *an* or even “the” organizing *theo*-logical principle of classic Reformed theology, one arrives at the same conclusion. Election is an intra-ecclesial concern. Lutherans might not give election the place of honor it gives justification in the hierarchy of doctrines (the former is actually seen through the latter), but will definitely speak of election as a doctrine that is of use only to Christians. To be sure, the classic Lutheran reason for this exclusive ecclesiological application relates directly to the consolation of the Gospel the Lutheran confessors want to draw from the doctrine for Christians who despair over and doubt their salvation.⁷

Sinners are not directed to themselves (say, to the strength of their faith, contrition, or fruits of repentance) or to God’s immutable will

Kolb does acknowledge, however, that Lutheran theologians in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century tended to excuse or downplay the Reformer’s views in the *De servo arbitrio* in light of possible Reformed (mis-)interpretations or of Luther’s own correction of his views later in his career. Ibid. 1-10 (see esp. n. 25, p. 293) and 170-197.

⁶ Note, for example, the intra-ecclesial framework in which Packer and Johnston reflect on the significance of Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*: “Has not Protestantism to-day become more Erasmian than Lutheran? Do we not too often try to minimize and gloss over doctrinal differences for the sake of inner-party peace? Are we innocent of doctrinal indifferentism with which Luther charged Erasmus? Do we still believe that doctrine matters? Or do we now, with Erasmus, rate a deceptive appearance of unity as of more importance than truth?” See “Historical and Theologian Introduction,” 59-60. Here my point is not that a concern for doctrinal truth is unimportant, but that the significance of Luther’s views is applied primarily to the church.

⁷ Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method*, 198-270; “The eternal election of God, however, or *praedestinatio* (that is, God’s predestination to salvation), does not apply to both the godly and the evil, but instead only to the children of God, who are chosen and predestined to eternal life...” FC SD XI, 5, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 641.

for the certainty of salvation. They are directed to the cross. Here election at least moves beyond an explanation of the *crux theologorum* to an actual message or proclamation of hope. More on this later. For now the broader question at hand is whether the message of divine election has anything to say to the world? Is election only a matter for Christians or “the elect” as it is primarily portrayed in dogmatic textbooks?⁸ Could it be that the traditional parochial scope of the doctrine of election has had the tendency to make its claims on humanity less than intelligible not only to the world but most significantly to the church as she seeks to speak to the world? How does one make election the concern of humanity, of the world? Or could it be that election perhaps already is a human concern in some way?

II. A Basic Human Problem: Broadening and Deepening the Scope of Justification

When the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), Oswald Bayer argued that both churches had missed the fundamental “ontological significance” of justification.⁹ By treating justification merely as a doctrine, a matter of old Roman Catholic-Lutheran polemics which could be overcome by a new consensus on basic truths, the signers of the JDDJ had capitulated to the notion that justification must be seen as one among many articles of faith—even if a central one upon which the church stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). What the JDDJ lacked was a truly profound sense that justification is nothing less than a basic human problem, a fundamental human reality and need, and one that only God by His fatherly goodness and mercy can deal with through His creative Word.

In Lutheran congregations, the courtroom has traditionally become the predominant image pastors and teachers use for explaining the doctrine of justification. Human beings are portrayed

⁸ Pieper, for example, understandably begins his treatment by locating election within ecclesiology: “We place the doctrine of election after the doctrine of the Church because Scripture addresses those by faith have become members of the Christian Church as the elect.” *Christian Dogmatics*, 473.

⁹ Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), xi-xiv.

as guilty defendants who stand before a righteous Judge and deserve death as the punishment for their sin or unrighteousness. Jesus, the innocent one who has no sin, steps in to take the place of the guilty and suffers the punishment for our sin. Christ becomes our righteousness, the righteous dies for the unrighteous. On account of Jesus, God the Judge now looks upon the sinner in a favorable light and declares him not guilty, righteous in His sight, justified before God (*coram deo*). The courtroom image carries well the forensic and thus Word-centered sense of justification as a spoken declaration of forgiveness from God to the sinful creature that actually creates anew, out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), making the unjust “just” in God’s eyes.

Though helpful, the Pauline image tends to be applied to and understood by everyday North American Christians in an individualistic (or at least, individualized) way. Each person repents of his guilt, is clothed with the righteousness of Christ, and is declared righteous before the Judge. While there is nothing wrong with the personal appropriation of God’s declaration of forgiveness “for me,” one tends to lose the broader communal significance of the image. To illustrate the ontological significance of justification, Bayer puts the courtroom language back in its broader anthropological context.¹⁰ Everyone’s life involves judging and being judged. All people want to justify their life in some way. The world is nothing less than a big courtroom!¹¹

Rather than reducing justification to an individually appropriated ecclesial reality, Bayer offers a sweeping cosmic account of justification as a central and constitutive dimension of created life, part of the very fabric of creation, of being creature. All humans, either personally or collectively, want to be justified by others, justify others, or justify themselves. Such a basic human need arises from our creatureliness. We were created to be addressed by others and address others. The human need for judging and being judged, for self-justification or the justification of others reveals our need to be acknowledged, deemed worthy, recognized as somebody whose existence in the world matters. Bayer would argue that even the claim

¹⁰ Ibid, 1-8.

¹¹ “The world of the court is not a special world of its own, but just a particular instance—a very striking one—of what is being done always and everywhere.” Ibid. 1; “Our whole life histories are placed before a permanent tribunal in which we act as accused, prosecutor, and judge.” Ibid., 2.

that I need to be justified by no one can be construed as a human attempt at justification. In the world, therefore, one encounters persons who are asking these kinds of “Who am I?” questions—whether they are Christians or not. Seen from a broader angle, justification will interpret the human person, the human creature, as a forensic reality. As Bayer puts it: “It is not true that judgment is an addition to being. What I am, I am in my judgment about myself, intertwined with the judgment made of me by others.”¹² I am; therefore, I judge and am judged.

Bayer moves on to show that the world typically seeks justification through morality and metaphysics, or in more plain terms through works and reason.¹³ Which is to say that the ultimate value of and justification for human life can be measured by the quality or intensity of one’s praxis or performance, as well as by the capacity of human reason or logic to make sense of and perhaps overcome a tragic world. However, such attempts at justification through utopian visions of progress or theodicies of various sorts fall short in the face of a world where human depravity can and will often show its ugly face. Evil, injustice, and death are the order of the day. Terrorism. War. Sex trafficking. AIDS epidemic. Ethnic cleansing. Economic woes. Poverty. Discrimination. No matter how hard one performs to make the world a better place or tries to make a suffering world intelligible and palatable, we are still faced with the crude fact that tragedy happens. Even the most optimistic people in the world know that death is part of the fabric of human life and are personally affected at the very least by the suffering of loved ones.

Worst of all, God seems to hide from us in the face of death. Where is your power, Oh Almighty One? Where is your good disposition, Oh Highest Good? Where is your justice, Oh Just One? Justification through praxis and theodicy cannot finally justify life in this world or justify (defend) God in this life. If we try, we will only experience life and God as law, as dead weight on our shoulders, as if the whole world depended on our moral efforts and free choices to make it through.¹⁴ More on attempts to justify God later.

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Ibid., 9-25.

¹⁴ “Can humanity survive except by an extreme and ultimate moral effort? An enormous burden is then laid upon us. This is the law under which we live. This law forces us to be the Atlas, who, like the [Footnote continued on next page ...]

To be harsh on human works and will is not to say that nothing should be done to make the world a better place for the sake of the neighbor. The existence of evil and suffering in a world created and preserved by God might be an unexplainable mystery, but not an excuse for apathy or negligence. The presence of liberation theologies in the two-thirds world has led the church catholic to advocate for justice on behalf of poor and oppressed peoples and to call to repentance sectors of oppressive societies where governments have failed to do so. However, Bayer reminds us that such efforts should be concerned with “doing what lies at hand” in the context of concrete vocations and neighbors, and should not involve some kind of “metaphysical pressure” to save humanity or the world through progress.¹⁵ Even those who are committed or at least sympathetic to concerns for justice are well aware of how depraved humanity can be and do not easily hold to romantic visions of the kingdom on earth even when they speak of somehow building it.

Bayer dares to make a comprehensive claim about the significance of justification for the world. His arguments against “justifying thinking” and “justifying doing” are not meant to do away with works and reason, but rather to redirect them to faith and trust in the God who alone can bring to rest all human attempts at justification through His own creative Word of promise and acceptance. The human “Who am I?” is met by the divine “You are my child!”¹⁶ God’s Word of justification for me leads to the confession that the same God has

figure of the Greek myth, bears the whole weight of the world on his shoulders. Jean Paul Sartre says, ‘we are condemned to be free.’ In this freedom to which we are condemned we have to be like Atlas. We cannot remove the burden. Must we not break under it?” Ibid. 18.

¹⁵ Ibid., 58-68, cf. 34-41. “Progress is, to be sure, made in the ethical sphere, in the area of works, in our actions, in our political involvement. But it is not absolute progress. It is ethical progress without metaphysical pressure. We do not merit the kingdom of God by working for it. It has long since been prepared. The progress of concept is no longer a salvation concept...As ethical progress, progress divorced from the question of salvation is really secular progress. It is never absolute and total. Instead, it takes place in small but definite steps. A truly secular progress is ‘satisfied in doing what lies at hand.’ It never tries to ‘master and control the future’ of things and relationships in a final way.” Ibid. 65-66.

¹⁶ “In that God does what is decisive in us, we may live outside ourselves and totally in him. Thus, we are hidden from ourselves, and removed from the judgment of others and the judgment of ourselves about ourselves as a final judgment. ‘Who am I?’ Such self-reflection never finds peace in itself. Resolution comes only in the prayer to which Bonhoeffer surrendered it and in which he was content to leave it. ‘Who am I? Thou knowest me. I am thine, O God!’” Ibid., 25; “The Old Adam within us wants to find meaning in the whole; he is concerned to assure himself about the meaning of the whole. Faith frees us from this concern...We can accept our finitude, yet still with sorrow and melancholy, lamenting our transitoriness.” Ibid. 35.

made and preserves me and all things, and that He shall raise me from the dead even as He renews all things in the new heavens and the new earth.¹⁷

Luther's experience of the passive righteousness of faith he rediscovered in his study of Romans—his being altogether born again, his entering paradise itself through open gates—is not just for Lutherans or other Protestants who have a guilt problem. More fundamentally, such experience is an instance in history of a broader anthropological concern for seeking worth before the Creator God and finding such worth in God's yes to us in and through Jesus Christ. Such acceptance frees one from the need to save or be saved by/in the world, to judge or be judged ultimately by/in the world, but then also frees one to serve the neighbor in the world.

III. A Basic God Problem: Broadening and Deepening the Scope of Election

What if Bayer's anthropological approach to the universal reality of justification could not be understood apart from the fundamental human need for ascertaining one's "election"? Even if we admit that most of the world cannot associate the term "election" with a theological or religious meaning, one can still argue that human beings ask existential questions that refer them to such a reality. A tragedy strikes, massive loss of life happens, but there are some unlikely survivors. Some make it alive, some never see the light of day again. We ask: Why (are) some (saved) and not others? This is nothing less than the election question in its existential here-and-now temporal form. We are not dealing merely with a Christian question. This is a universal question. The matter of eternal salvation *coram deo* might not be in view yet for every person who asks it, but there is nevertheless an interest in the inscrutable question: Why are some in this world elected unto life and others unto death? We have the *crux theologorum* in our hands and the question is not simply one for armchair academic theologians, or for professional theologians such as pastors and bishops, or even for all the baptized Christians who can collectively be called lay theologians. The election question reaches every human being.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27-34, 42-57, 80.

Although the professionalism of contemporary society and the growing separation of church and academy have made theologians an elite of sorts, the broader reality is that all human beings act as theologians. All people have some *theos*, a point of reference, from whom (or from which) they seek to draw meaning for living and/or answers to life's questions. They make judgments about the world and their own lives in light of some *theos*. That becomes their worldview. If things go well, we bless *theos*; if things do not go so well, we damn *theos*. In his Large Catechism, Luther understood trust in God as the foundational orientation of the human creature and idolatry as the creature's fundamental rebellion against such divinely ordained relationship.¹⁸ Idolatry becomes the search for a *theos* other than the one true God who can save us. Every human being has a "god" from whom s/he expects to receive all things in life: "All people have set up their own god, to whom they looked for blessings, help, and comfort."¹⁹ That Luther sees this orientation to G/god as part of the very fabric of creaturely life comes through when he points out that no human is so depraved so as not to institute some kind of worship, some kind of *theos*.²⁰ Human depravity does turn the sinner to idols, but the human creature has been made for the true God. Not surprisingly, as theologians, creatures ask where their G/god is when blessings do not seem to be coming their way, that is to say, when evil, suffering, and death are all around them. Why me, O God? (Or why not me, O God?)

As we often tell students in our Lutheran Mind class at the Seminary, the question then is not whether one is a theologian, but rather how one thinks and acts as a theologian—what kind of theologian one is, as it were. Drawing on Luther's acknowledgment of the hidden God (*deus absconditus*), Forde shows how humans struggle with the idea of a transcendent, omnipotent God out there who chooses or elects to do and leave undone without ever consulting

¹⁸ "A 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust of the heart alone that make both God and an idol...Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God." See Large Catechism (LC), "Ten Commandments," 2-3, in *The Book of Concord*, 386.

¹⁹ LC, "Ten Commandments," 17, p. 388.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

us.²¹ An electing God puts God, not us, in control. Being theologians of some sort, creatures often attempt to get this electing God off their backs through reasonable explanations. They might use a variety of strategies or moves—what Forde calls “shuffling the masks” of God—to have a say in answering the question, “why some (are chosen) and not others?” According to Forde, theological moves such as universalism (God chooses everyone), freedom of the will (you chose God), or even double predestination (God chooses who to save and damn in eternity) are ultimately abstract answers that seek to pin the hidden God down as to what He is really up to without any reference to God’s promises for us in Christ in the here and now.²² Apart from the revealed God (*deus revelatus*), apart from God’s disposition to justify and elect in Christ through the preached Gospel, God is an abstraction that hunts us down and is experienced as law. To use Forde’s language again, God is on our backs!

Such moves to pin an electing God down are not limited to Christians. Theodicy is everyone’s business. The old question is whether God can still be said to be good and powerful in spite of evil and tragedy. Most attempt to justify God or make Him look good in the face of evil. Why are some spared and others not? A possible answer is atheism: There is no God! Protest atheism, for example, might be said to be in an odd sort of way an attempt to preserve the goodness of God. It is better to be realistic about our tragic world than to believe in the existence of some God who allows innocent people to go hungry and die.²³ Darwin’s naturalistic (or more contemporary theistic) explanations of the origins and evolution of the species could also be construed as attempts to justify God’s goodness in the face of a world where children are born with defects and species fight to the death for survival.²⁴ It might be better to think of a world where such

²¹ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 13-37.

²² *Ibid.*, 33-35.

²³ Atheism can be advanced in the name of human freedom, of enlightened man. Protest atheism is argued in reaction to life in a tragic world and may lead negatively to resignation or positively to utopian projects. See John J. O’Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1989), 11-15.

²⁴ Herman Bavinck, a Dutch theologian, once observed: “Darwin was led to his agnostic naturalism as much by the misery which he observed in the world as by the facts which scientific investigation brought under his notice. There was too much strife and injustice in the world for him to believe in providence and a predetermined goal. A world so full of cruelty and pain he could not reconcile with the omniscience, omnipotence, the goodness of God...The discovery of the so-called law [Footnote continued on next page ...]

things happen by chance and natural selection processes than to believe in a God who allows this stuff to happen! In short, philosophical or practical atheism becomes a way to deal with a God who elects to do some things and not others in the face of suffering.

Even though, theologically speaking, Christians think of election as predestination to eternal salvation, election-type questions are asked everyday by people who might not necessarily be thinking of “then and there.” They are primarily concerned with the “here and now.” As a response to suffering, for example, the statement “God loves everyone” (universalism) can raise both temporal and eternal questions. Some might wonder, “If God loves everyone, why are innocent people dying every single day in this world?” Here God is asked to justify Himself in matters temporal. Others might ask, “Why are sinners dying spiritually everyday without Christ?” Here God is asked to justify Himself in matters eternal. In either case, whether one is dealing with matters eternal or temporal, universalism leaves us with the same puzzling question: What kind of a loving God is one who allows people to die in this life or the life of the world to come? So much for Luther’s God who “daily guards and defends us against every evil and misfortune, warding off all sorts of danger and disaster...out of pure love and goodness...as a kind father who cares for us so that no evil may befall us.”²⁵ Ironically, universalism tries to defend the hidden God’s benevolence but ends up putting into question His love and goodness.

To say that humans are ultimately responsible for their fate because they have made either right or wrong choices does not instill much confidence or hope either. We could attempt to excuse God from the sorry state of this world by focusing on good or bad moral choices. However, here we are reminded of Job’s theologian friends and their attempts to find in Job’s own righteousness (or lack thereof) the reason for the man’s almost unimaginable tragedy. Through the story of Job, God ends up warning those theologians, but also theologians of all ages, against peeking into God’s inscrutable

of ‘natural selection’ brought him accordingly a real feeling of relief, for by it he escaped the necessity of assuming a conscious plan and purpose in creation. Whether God existed or not, in either case he was blameless. The immutable laws of nature, imperfect in all their operations, bore the blame for everything.” Cited in Cornelius G. Hunter, *Darwin’s Proof: The Triumph of Religion over Science* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press), 81.

²⁵ LC, “The Creed,” 17-18, p. 433.

mystery in the face of evil and suffering (42:7-9). God will not be straitjacketed.

Job's friends come to us in many forms today. One often hears overzealous preachers blame local or national tragedies on human depravity. "If only we were a more upright people and make the right moral choices, God would not punish us through terrorist attacks or tsunamis!" Others might argue that immoral people are the driving forces behind such destructive events. God is taken out of the picture altogether, perhaps to make Him look good again. But these explanations raise other questions: If everything is up to humans, their righteousness, and their moral decisions, does God have the power to intervene in our affairs or change our condition from worse to better? Does God really care? Can God help? If the problem is human depravity, is God mighty enough to turn sinful hearts to Himself?

Instead of justifying or defending God, free will ends up putting into question God's omnipotence. No amount of theologizing can make us certain that God is for us. Instead, God appears to be against us. We have an electing God problem in our hands or, to cite Forde again, we have God on our backs. What is key to remember is that such a God problem has never been unique to church-going people. All human beings are and act as *theologians*. They ask questions about their *theos* and do theodicy or theologize about the justice of G/god when faced with the world's woes. People everywhere, in one way or another, are faced with election-type questions that deal with matters of life and death both in the life of this world and in the life of the world to come.

IV. Running from the Hidden to the Revealed God: A Gift to a Hurting World

Reformed theologians of the Calvinist tradition tend to have a warm spot in their hearts for Luther's views on the bondage of the will in the face of the hidden or naked God. Luther's thorough criticism of Erasmus's semi-Pelagian position on the freedom of the will appears to support divine double predestination as the answer to the question, "why some (are elected) and not others?" Erasmus answers the *crux theologorum* by arguing for the capacity of the human will to put itself in a position to receive or merit God's grace.

Luther counters that, in the strict sense, God alone has free will.²⁶ The human will, on the other hand, is bound, a captive or slave to either the will of God or Satan.²⁷ God alone chooses man's destiny and man has no choice in spiritual matters. Although man could be said to have free will "in respect...of what is below him" (e.g., the use of his money and possessions), he cannot persuade that God "above him" in matters related to his salvation or damnation.²⁸

Luther lets the hidden God be. He will not let the God who alone has free will to save and damn disappear. Our will is bound to what this God necessarily does. Paradoxically, however, for Luther, the bondage of the human will makes room for grace and faith. On the one hand, the teaching allows for grace alone (*sola gratia*) because "a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realises that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the choice, will, counsel, pleasure, and work of Another—God alone."²⁹ On the other hand, the teaching fosters faith alone (*sola fide*) that trusts in God even though His love and power seem to be put into question by the fact that "many are called but few chosen." Faith trusts that the God who is often experienced as law in this tragic world, is also somehow hidden under such wrath as the merciful God who has the power to deliver us in His own time.³⁰

However, Luther also understands that the God who alone saves and damns can only be experienced as a judge of wrath. How do I

²⁶ "It follows, therefore, that 'free-will' is obviously a term applicable only to the Divine Majesty; for only He can do, and does (as the Psalmist sings) 'whatever he wills in heaven and earth' (Ps. 135.6). If 'free-will' is ascribed to men, it is ascribed with no more propriety than divinity itself would be—and no blasphemy could exceed that! So it befits theologians to refrain from using the term when they want to speak of human ability, and to leave it to be applied to God only. They would do well also to take the term out of men's mouths and speech, and to claim it for their God, as if it were His own holy and awful Name." *The Bondage of the Will*, 105.

²⁷ "So man's will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God wills: as the Psalm says, 'I am become as a beast before thee, and I am ever with thee (Ps. 73.22-3). If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it." *Ibid.*, 103-104.

²⁸ "However, with regard to God, and in all that bears on salvation or damnation, he has no 'free-will,' but is a captive, prisoner and bondslave, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan." *Ibid.* 107.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁰ "When God quickens, He does so by killing; when he justifies, He does so by pronouncing guilty; when He carries up to heaven, He does so by bringing down to hell. As Scripture says in I Kings 2, 'The Lord killeth and maketh alive'; He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up' (I Sam. 2.6)...If I could by any means comprehend how this same God, who makes such a show of wrath and unrighteousness, can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith." *Ibid.*, 101.

know I am one of the saved? Perhaps I am one of the damned. Who knows? Here we have Forde's "God on our backs" again! That electing God no one can mess with and figure out. Luther understands the foolishness of dealing with this hidden God, the Divine Majesty in His unfathomable and scary glory. The *deus absconditus* (also known as God not preached) points us to the "dreaded hidden will of God, Who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partake of the mercy preached and offered."³¹ Is this double predestination language? It is hidden God language, for sure. But to be fair, Luther's main concern in his *De servo arbitrio* is to destroy the claim for the freedom of the will in response to Erasmus, not to provide an abstract theory or metaphysics of divine necessity that might destroy the *crux theologorum*. The God not preached is to be dreaded, not explained.

Therefore, "God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with Him, nor does he wish us to be with him."³² Luther mentions and fully acknowledges the hidden God, but he does so in order to run away from His wrath and make room for the revealed God, the God preached. The *deus revelatus* wants us to deal with Him "as clothed and displayed in His Word, by which He presents Himself to us."³³ Apart from the revealed God, the preached God who speaks his Word of Gospel and forgiveness to us today, we can only experience God as law, as an arbitrary judge, as weight on our backs, as one who damns some and chooses few.

The solution to human questions about election does not come about by answering the *crux theologorum*, "why some and not others?" Doing so gets one in trouble. We know that our loving God in heaven does not desire the death of the sinner but rather his/her salvation. Yet the human person is also bound to say no to God and His salvation. Does that seem fair to anybody? Luther answers his own question: "But why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man (for it is not in the power of man to do it), or why he lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot

³¹ Ibid., 169.

³² Ibid., 170.

³³ Ibid.

avoid it, it is not lawful to ask.”³⁴ God will not be figured out in His nakedness. The faithful Job-like theologian can only respond with a holy silence in the face of the hidden God.

What then is the solution to the God problem? Good works, free will, and theodicies will not solve the problem, but only make God less and less “the Father Almighty” who is both merciful and powerful to help us. So God Himself has to come to us clothed, in His Christ, in His proclamation. As the Lutheran confessors put it: “This election is not to be probed in the secret counsel of God but rather it is to be sought in the Word, where it has also been revealed. However, the Word of God leads us to Christ, who is the “Book Life”...in whom are inscribed and chosen all who shall be eternally saved...Thus Christ calls all sinners to himself and promises them refreshment.”³⁵ One might say that the Lutheran confessors interpret what is called “divine monergism” (God alone saves) through the lens of the revealed God. In other words, there is no access to God’s eternal decree apart from the merits of Christ who dies for the whole world. Consequently, faith that justifies before God (*coram deo*) does not look up to the heavens out there or to itself (i.e., to the believing person down here) for the certainty of divine election. Justifying faith looks to Christ alone for such assurance. The merits of Christ settle the matter.

What then does the church look like that believes in the priority of the revealed God over the hidden God? First, such church will fully acknowledge, as a retired professor at the Seminary once said, that we know precious little about God [i.e., in His hiddenness] but the little we know [i.e., God in His self-revelation] is precious. This means, on the one hand, that God cannot be reduced to His Word. On the other hand, the affirmation also means that God wants to deal with us (call us to Himself) through His Word. Second, and related to the last point, such church will also operate in ways that are faithful to directing humans, whose “justifying doing” and “justifying thinking” (Bayer’s terms) have provided them no comfort or help for dealing with life’s tragedies, to God’s justifying Word for them. For Forde, the only move left for the church that takes seriously the *deus*

³⁴ Ibid., 171.

³⁵ FC, Epitome, 5-7, in *Book of Concord*, 517.

revelatus is simply to go out and do the electing, act in God's name, and proclaim justification to a hurting world.³⁶ "Your sins are forgiven!" "You are God's chosen child!" "You are the elect!" "Neither life nor death can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus!" The crucial issue is whether election (or the electing God) should be talked about or whether it should actually be done to people now in the name of Christ by forgiving their sins and declaring them justified in God's sight on account of the merits of Christ.

Conclusion

By interacting with Bayer and Forde on Luther's theological method, I hope to have shown readers the wider anthropological significance of traditional church doctrines such as justification and election. All humans want to justify their own or others' existence in this world. Moreover, all humans suffer and attempt to justify the hidden God who elects to do some things and not others. Theodicy becomes a typical way in which humans try to make sense of their place and even God's place in a tragic world. However, God remains hidden from us in such attempts and we can only experience Him as a judge full of wrath. While acknowledging the hidden God in His unfathomable mystery, Luther directs us to the revealed God in Christ and His Word for the assurance of divine grace.

The revealed God is the Father who justifies the ungodly, the unrighteous, the sinner. The Father justifies our existence through His Son who comes to us in His Spirit-breathed word of forgiveness. By making us righteous in His sight through the proclamation of the Gospel that points to Christ, God the Father is electing us as His children and making us His own now and forever. Such a Trinitarian message of divine grace cannot and must not be hidden in the printed word of theology textbooks or reduced to ecclesial polemics. It must be spoken publicly from the rooftops to every single human being.

³⁶ "What is to be done about an electing God? Our only recourse is to make the move to proclamation. We are not, of course, to proclaim that God is an electing God; everybody knows that already and is scared to death by it. Rather, we must do the electing ourselves. One must have the nerve—or better, the Spirit—to do the unheard-of thing and say to those listening "You are the elect!" or "You are the one" . . . The point is that since God is an electing God, the only real solution to the problem of being unreconciled to the Gos not preached is to do the deed of the preached God: 'Once you were lost but now you are found.'" *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 33, cf. 35-37.

Forde argues that theology falsifies itself when it only talks about God (explanation) but does not have God talk to us (proclamation). Bayer reminds us that theology has a claim on all life, not only on Christians. When theology becomes only dialogue (or worse yet, monologue) within the church, it will almost always fail to communicate to the world the life-giving Word of life. By interacting with Bayer and Forde, I hope to have fostered a greater desire for re-thinking other traditional doctrines in terms of their broader anthropological foundations, trajectories, implications, or applications. I also hope to have shown how such a move can foster care and concern for all humans who seek after some *theos* today in search for acknowledgment, fulfillment, meaning, worth, justification, election, and salvation.