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CAN GOD BE PERSUADED?
A DISCUSSION OF THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD
IN LUTHER'S CATECHESIS ON PRAYER

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Timothy William Roser
May, 2005

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To the Glory of God in memory of
Dr. Walter Jennrich, my Latin and Greek professor,
whose enthusiasm for scholarship and gentle guidance first sent me to study
at his alma mater, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis; and

Dr. H. Armin (“Red”) Moellering, my “eclectic” professor,
whose diverse interests and provocative conversations
kept me conscious of the importance of prayer and the devotional life
for pastors and lay people; and

Dr. Wayne Schmidt, my liturgics professor and first graduate advisor,
who taught me that there is meaning behind the rubrics
and who set me on the course of advanced studies in theology,
all the while recognizing that a pastor’s heart keeps such things practical for his people.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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The subject of prayer is a potent and pertinent one for our day. Though we might wish to focus on prayer alone, that cannot be done without learning more about the One to whom we are praying. Setting about such studies takes enormous time and energy, along with the resources graciously provided by God through many people.

I humbly offer my profound thanks to my dear wife, Ann, and to my children, Sarah, Rebekah, Andrew, and Rachel, who have so lovingly and patiently tolerated my studies throughout these past years.

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ABSTRACT

Roser, Timothy, W. "Can God Be Persuaded? A Discussion of the Immutability of God in Luther's Catechesis on Prayer." Ph.D. Diss., St. Louis, MO: Concordia Seminary, 2005. 197pp.

Different doctrines of God bring different understandings of Christian prayer. Open theism teaches a mutable God who can be persuaded by our prayer, that is, have human will imposed upon His choice and course of action. This study responds with Martin Luther's unique defense of the immutability of God and his perspective on human will's place in Christian prayer.

Chapter one reviews the teachings of open theism involving divine mutability and the consequent practice of prayer. While many modern classical theists have objected and asserted God's immutability, their responses tend toward fatalism.

Chapter two shows that Luther inherited much from classical theism, particularly via his nominalist education, his studies in Augustine, and his familiarity with medieval catechetics. Examination of Luther's historical context unveils a premodernist/post-scholastic perspective emerging in Luther that informs this issue.

Chapter three examines Erasmus' assertions regarding human free will (similar to those of open theism) which led to Luther's response in *De servo arbitrio*. An examination of *De servo arbitrio* reveals Luther's defense of divine immutability through the Biblical and paradoxical tension between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*.

Chapters four and five test Luther's expression of divine immutability by examining his practice of prayer. These chapters consider his *Catechisms*, *A Simple Way to Pray*, and anecdotal evidence regarding Luther's personal prayer life.

Conclusions: Open theism does not present a viable alternative understanding of God for those who wish to remain faithful to the entire witness of Scripture. Luther, by contrast, posited an unlimited immutability in God in both essence and attributes. This radical position avoided fatalism by recognizing the distinction between the revealed and hidden God, the key to Luther's doctrine of immutability. The preaching of Law and Gospel does not express a change in God, but Law and Gospel are twin operations of an immutable God. For Luther, prayer was not man's opportunity to impose his human will upon and "persuade" God, but a divinely given opportunity to put faith into action and entrust oneself to God's revelation.

INTRODUCTION

Can God be persuaded? This question is not primarily a dogmatic or systematic one, but one that arises out of Christian catechesis and experiential concerns. Can man approach God in prayer in such a way that man is able to impose his will upon God and somehow change God's course and plan? A proper answer for this question should be sought within the sphere of systematic theology, where "God," "persuasion," and their mutual relationships and implications can be clearly defined and discussed. Such a question and answer then needs to return to the realm of catechesis for the instruction and guidance of the faithful.

This dissertation arises out of a great concern over the competing and often conflicting theologies and practices of prayer within the Christian church today. Numerous books are published annually that either discuss prayers or offer collections of prayers for use and guidance. For instance, *The Prayer of Jabez*¹ became a best-seller in Christian book stores not long ago, spawning numerous sequels and supplemental volumes around a specific attitude and approach to prayer.

Because of these numerous influences, expectations vary widely regarding what will happen to or for the person who prays. As prayer techniques of every stripe are brought into the church from Christian and non-Christian traditions alike, many people understand them as equally acceptable means to gain the desired end: persuading or convincing God to do what we ask of him.

¹Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2000).

Scratching the surface of this diversity exposes a deeply theological question: who is this ‘God’ to whom are praying? One attribute of God in particular seems to stand at the crossroads of several paths of theological discourse: God’s immutability. This attribute has been challenged, discussed, revised, and in some cases completely rewritten by participants in recent theological discussions. This dissertation, therefore, will attempt to deal with the intersection of the doctrine of God and the practice of prayer in the Christian church.

This author is unapologetically a Lutheran, formed by and instructed in the *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism* of Dr. Martin Luther. Yet in examining the current debate regarding God’s immutability, it seems that Luther, though a powerful proponent of God’s immutability, has been woefully neglected. The question arises whether Luther’s writings, particularly Luther’s distinction between the hidden God and revealed God, may be helpful in today’s debates. This potentially fruitful field will be cultivated as this dissertation seeks to ascertain what “God is immutable” means for Luther, and what the significance of God’s immutability may be when it comes to Luther’s catechesis on prayer.

The Problem

Many different theologies of prayer have been promoted in the past century, each coming from a different understanding of God. Traditionally the Christian church has spoken of God as immutable, unchanging in his character, will, knowledge, and experience. In this view, commonly referred to as “classical theism,” God is usually understood to have total sovereignty over his universe, with full knowledge of and control over what is to come in the future.

It is easy enough to speak of the immutability of God when dealing with God in the abstract. Some argue that once God is brought into direct contact with human need, human suffering, and “real life,” then God’s immutability becomes a problem. Can requests be made of

an immutable God? Does he really answer us, or does he merely do what he was going to do all along? Can a personal, loving relationship exist with such a God?

Over the past century, theologians and philosophers have re-examined aspects of these questions. As philosophy has followed Nietzsche's prediction of the "death of God" and essentially marginalized all God-talk, theologians have struggled with the boundaries of legitimate conversation regarding the deity. Once widely-accepted attributes of God have been brought into serious question.

One particularly intense challenge to the traditional understandings of God's attributes has risen within the church. This challenge, commonly referred to as "open theism," has sought to revisit and rewrite the doctrine of God's immutability. Open theism claims that God gives up his total control over the universe to establish a give-and-take relationship with his creatures.² The open view of God re-defines God's attributes, seeing him as changeable in response to the will and experience of his creatures, and limiting God's knowledge of the future.

In classical theism, prayer to God has often been understood to involve changing the person praying rather than bringing about a change in God. Such prayer is "about our conforming our wills to God's will."³ By contrast, prayer to an "open" God is understood as the ability to persuade God regarding his course of action for the present and the future. Its intention is "to either change God's mind and/or move God's hand to alter circumstances or intervene in the processes of the world."⁴ Through prayer, individuals may influence and even guide God's choice of action on the basis of human knowledge, will, desire, and experience. Open theists

²As will be explained later, the definition of open theism varies even among open theists. The definition given here attempts to provide some of the common denominators among open theists.

³Amos Yong, "Divine Omniscience and Future Contingents: Weighing the Presuppositional Issues in the Contemporary Debate," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 26, no. 3 (July 2002): 262.

⁴Ibid.

have also challenged an apparent inadequacy and contradiction they see within classical theism: they claim that classical theists teach the immutability of God in their doctrine, yet pray to God as though he were mutable.

The views of open theism have grown out of Arminian theology, and most of their writings have been directed at Calvinist theologians. The particular views of theologians of other backgrounds, such as Luther, do not seem to have received thorough consideration by open theists at this time. In fact, instead of seriously considering the unique contributions of Luther, open theists have essentially dismissed him at the very point where Luther may offer a substantive answer to their questions: Luther's distinction between and discussion of the hidden and revealed God.⁵

Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to apply Luther's insights regarding the distinction between *deus absconditus* (God hidden) and *deus revelatus* (God revealed) to modern debates regarding the immutability of God and the consequent practice of prayer. This dissertation intends, in part, to respond to the assertions of open theism regarding classical theism in general and Luther's theism in particular on these issues. After presenting the current open theist debate, this dissertation will provide a description of Luther's teaching of the immutability of God and then focus on the relationship between that teaching and Luther's catechesis on prayer. It will further argue for the viability of Luther's perspectives in today's theological discussions and suggest areas of concern and study for the church today.

⁵Open theist John Sanders claims that Luther's "hidden" God makes Luther's theology impossible to harmonize. John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 154.

Open theism assumes and insists that God can be persuaded, that is, that the human will can impose itself upon God in such a way as to direct or at least modify God's course of action. Though it may sound appealing, modern open theism's attempts to re-define the attributes of God, particularly the doctrine of immutability, is not merely an issue of academic perspective. It has serious and potentially dangerous implications for the whole of theology and life of the Christian church. While classical theists in American Evangelicalism have attempted to address the challenge of open theism, they have not been able to bring to bear the tools provided by Martin Luther.

Luther's theology, particularly his distinction between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*, allows us to maintain the paradox presented to us in Scripture regarding God's immutability on the one hand and his genuine reception of our prayers on the other hand. In his catechesis, Luther also taught us how to pray to an immutable God without misunderstanding the nature and power of our prayers nor of our place before God.

These insights of Luther are not limited to a debate with open theism but can and should be applied to our doctrine and practice as a whole. Indeed, in the postmodern world of today, postmodernism itself may allow the modernist insistence upon logical conclusions to be overpowered by this Biblical paradox that was articulated by Luther centuries ago.

Literature

While the subjects of immutability and prayer have been studied independently, little has been written that directly brings them together until the advent of the open/classical theist debate. Even then, Luther's perspectives on the matter have been largely left out of the picture. The literature that touches on this area, however, is wide-ranging, and a sample of that literature is reviewed here.

Much of modern Western thinking has been completely secularized, dismissing serious talk about God. In reaction, Phillip Blond has argued that God can and should be reintroduced to today's philosophical formulations. In his *Post-Secular Philosophy*,⁶ Blond not only makes this argument but also offers a collection of essays that examine thinkers from Descartes to the present in an effort to show the inclusion of God in philosophical discussions is a viable alternative to the atheistic views current in philosophy today.

Representative of the theological front, Perry Le Fevre has surveyed many of the same philosophers and primary theologians of the twentieth century in his work *Modern Theologies of Prayer*.⁷ In this work, he notes the tendency to ignore the underlying theological assumptions involved in prayer. He offers an examination of the meaning of prayer based on the assumptions made by a variety of theologians, an approach not unrelated to the intent of this dissertation.

Do modern theologians accurately understand earlier, premodernist theologians? This is a fundamental question raised by William Placher⁸ and Kathryn Tanner⁹ in their respective works. They describe a modernist shift that has led to the misinterpretation of premodernist theology, a shift which must be considered in any discussion of or comparisons between theologians past and present. These works are helpful in alerting present-day scholars to some of the issues involved in faithful interpretation of ancient authors.

⁶Phillip Blond, ed., *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁷Perry Le Fevre, *Modern Theologies of Prayer* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1995).

⁸William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

⁹Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

Various authors have raised discussions about the mutability or immutability of God. A slightly older work, Isaak Dorner's three-part essay, *Divine Immutability*,¹⁰ treats the history and then-contemporary "reconstruction" of the doctrine under the aegis of "ethical immutability." Douglas Kennard argues for the classical theist position in *The Classical Christian God*,¹¹ while Henry Jansen examines the works of Moltman and Pannenberg in a search for a way to maintain the paradox between classical immutability and relationality in *Relationality and the Concept of God*.¹²

Open theists have expounded their positions in a number of relatively recent works. These include *The God Who Risks*¹³ by John Sanders, *The Case for Freewill Theism*¹⁴ by David Basinger, *God of the Possible*¹⁵ by Gregory Boyd, and *The Openness of God*¹⁶ by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, and others. Direct opposition to open theism has been voiced by John Frame in *No Other God*¹⁷ and by Bruce Ware in *God's Lesser Glory*.¹⁸

¹⁰Isaak August Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration*, translated by Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

¹¹Douglas Kennard, *The Classical Christian God* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

¹²Henry Jansen, *Relationality and the Concept of God. Currents of Encounter: Studies on the Contact Between Christianity and Other Religions, Beliefs, and Cultures*, ed. Rein Fernhout, et. al., Volume 10 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995).

¹³John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998).

¹⁴David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

¹⁵Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

¹⁶Clark Pinnock, et. al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

¹⁷John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2001).

¹⁸Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000).

Many modern Evangelical authors have directly addressed issues related to the positions taken by open theists, showing the wide range of thought in favor of and against the open theist position. Rem Edwards discusses “The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God,” rejecting the classical idea of the absolute unchangeableness of God because “it is incoherent, inconsistent, and irreverent.”¹⁹ Dr. Margaret Paton of the University of Edinburgh describes the paradox that arises when one asks, “How can an omniscient, omnipotent Being be deemed capable of forgetting?”²⁰ Richard Muller of Fuller Theological Seminary writes in support of “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism.”²¹ Open theist and philosopher David Basinger asks, “Why Petition an Omnipotent, Omniscient, Wholly Good God?”²² while Bruce Ware defends the classical position with his article, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God.”²³ Robert Chisolm of Dallas Theological Seminary asks, “Does God ‘Change His Mind’?” and answers his own question, “It all depends.”²⁴

Numerous works discuss Luther’s doctrine of God or his teachings on prayer but make no clear connection between the two. Included among these are Julius Köstlin’s *The Theology of*

¹⁹Rem B. Edwards, “The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God” *Religious Studies* 14 (1978): 313.

²⁰Margaret Paton, “Can God Forget?” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1982): 385.

²¹Richard A. Muller, “Incarnation, Immutability, and the Case for Classical Theism” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (Spring 1983): 22-40.

²²David Basinger, “Why Petition an Omnipotent, Omniscient, Wholly Good God?” *Religious Studies* 19 (1983): 25-41.

²³Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29/4 (December 1986): 431-446.

²⁴Robert B. Chisolm, “Does God ‘Change His Mind’?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October-December 1995): 387.

*Luther in Its Historical Development and Inner Harmony*²⁵ which deals with many areas of Luther's theology. In a series of articles for the 1938 *Concordia Theological Monthly* examining Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio*, T. Engelder describes Luther's attitudes toward reason, faith, and Scripture. In the course of this study, Engelder warns the reader that many "Lutheran" theologians since Luther have assumed they could turn to human reason and find the answer to the question *cur alii, alii non* ("why some, not others" are saved) in synergism.²⁶ This willingness to accept synergism may be part of a wider movement toward and acceptance of modern evangelicalism, leading to the loss of Luther's distinctive voice even within the Lutheran church.

John Dillenberger offers a thorough and valuable summary of various interpretations of Luther's *deus absconditus* in his *God Hidden and Revealed*.²⁷ Werner Elert also discusses the *deus absconditus* and its place in the doctrine of God in his *The Structure of Lutheranism*.²⁸

Turning more specifically to the subject of prayer, Gunnar Wertelius' *Oratio Continua*²⁹ describes the relationship between the Creed and the Lord's Prayer in Luther's theology, linking prayer to God's creation and the First Article. Martin E. Lehmann's *Luther and Prayer*³⁰ offers a summation of Luther's theology of prayer, but with little specific reference to Luther's doctrine

²⁵Julius Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther in Its Historical Development and Inner Harmony* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897).

²⁶T. Engelder, "A Course in Lutheran Theology" *Concordia Theological Monthly* Vol. IX (1938): 247-248, 407ff.

²⁷John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed: The Interpretation of Luther's Deus Absconditus and Its Significance for Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953).

²⁸Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism, Volume One*, translated by Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962).

²⁹Gunnar Wertelius, *Oratio Continua: Das Verhältnis zwischen Glaube und Gebet in der Theologie Martin Luthers* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1970).

³⁰Martin E. Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985).

of God. Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation*³¹ discusses Luther's connection between prayer and faith in his discussion on prayer as a part of one's vocation. Likewise, Adolf Köberle's *The Quest for Holiness*³² and James Manz's *Prayer and Sanctification*³³ deal with the relationship between prayer and the holy life, but not the connection between prayer and the doctrine of God.

Luther's catechesis has been examined by numerous authors over the centuries. Among these are the classic works by Theodosius Harnack, *Katechetik und Erklärung des kleinen Katechismus Dr. Martin Luthers*,³⁴ Johannes Meyer, *Historischer Kommentar zu Luthers Kleinem Katechismus*,³⁵ and, most recently, Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*.³⁶ Though helpful in understanding the texts of the Catechism and in dealing with other topics of theology, these works do not directly treat the subject matter of this dissertation.

Methodology and Scope

To accomplish its goals, this dissertation will begin with a brief survey, examination, and critique of the positions and issues raised by open theism. Drawing on several of the foremost writers in this field, chapter one will provide an overview of open theism's understandings of the doctrine of God's immutability. It will further note the consequent theology and practice of

³¹Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, translated by Carl Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

³²Adolf Koberle, *The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Investigation*, translated from the Third German Edition by John C. Mattes (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1936).

³³James Manz, *Prayer and Sanctification* (Thesis, S.T.D., Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1953).

³⁴Theodosius Harnack, *Katechetik und Erklärung des kleinen Katechismus Dr. Martin Luthers* (Erlangen, 1882).

³⁵Johannes Meyer, *Historischer Kommentar zu Luthers Kleinem Katechismus* (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1929).

³⁶Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen. Band 3: Das Vaterunser* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992).

prayer in open theism, highlighting the accusation of open theists that classical theists teach immutability yet pray to God as though he were mutable. Since other classical theists, especially those from a Calvinistic background, have already objected to open theism, their works will be cited to point out serious criticisms of open theism that must be recognized. It will also be noted that these classical theists do not themselves have adequate answers to the theological and practical questions posed by open theists.

In an effort to bring Luther to the table for this discussion, chapter two will begin by pointing out that open theism has rejected Luther's theism, particularly his doctrine of the hidden God. Recognizing that Martin Luther wrote not only in a different time but to a different age, this chapter will then prepare the foundation for a proper understanding of Luther's words by reviewing his historical context. Utilizing Placher's helpful discussions regarding premodernism and modernism, this will include a brief look at Luther's pre-modernist approach to theology and Luther's distinctiveness from other premodernist theologians. The influences of nominalism, the writings of Augustine, and medieval catechetics upon Luther's theology and practice will also be described briefly.

Chapter three will show that open theists have addressed and dismissed Luther's views on God's immutability only by virtue of a passing reference to one of the chief works of Luther's career: *De servo arbitrio*.³⁷ This chapter, therefore, will examine Luther's doctrine of God's immutability particularly as described in this work. To accomplish this, pertinent highlights from the *Diatribes* of Desiderius Erasmus (against which *De servo arbitrio* was written) will be reviewed. Comparisons will then be drawn between Erasmus' theology and modern open theism in an effort to show that Luther's comments to Erasmus also apply to our modern theological

³⁷Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 154.

debate. A direct study of Luther's doctrine of God's immutability as depicted in *De servo arbitrio* will follow, with a special focus on Luther's hidden and revealed God distinction.

Since *De servo arbitrio* was written in 1525, this work gives us a view of Luther's teaching on God's immutability during the time when he was developing his catechetical works. From the context of this work, chapter four will then describe Luther's doctrine of God's immutability as it appears in his catechesis on prayer. Exegetical works of Luther will be cited to further clarify or define Luther's position, but the focus will remain on Luther's *Small and Large Catechism*, as well as his earlier catechetical writings and sermons.³⁸ Particular attention will be given to open theism's accusation of "inconsistency" in regard to the practice of prayer.

Further evidence of Luther's doctrine of God's immutability expressed in his teachings on prayer will be examined in chapter five, which will focus on Luther's own practice of prayer. Particular attention will be given to Luther's book dedicated to Master Peter the Barber, entitled *A Simple Way to Pray*. To offer even more direct evidence of Luther's personal prayer practice, certain instances recorded in his "Table Talk" and letters will also be considered. Included among these will be Luther's prayers and comments regarding the death of his daughter, Magdalena, the illness and recovery of Philip Melancthon, and the illness and death of an unnamed woman for whom Luther had prayed.

Finally, summarizing, testing, and connecting Luther's teaching on prayer and his doctrine of God's immutability, this dissertation will argue for the viability of applying Luther's

³⁸Whereas a comprehensive study of Luther's commentaries on Scripture might prove helpful, it would also introduce many variables to the discussion, including various debates regarding Luther's approach to translation and interpretation (as well as the difficulty imposed by the fact that Luther never had to address open theism's concerns directly). Therefore, this dissertation does not intend to launch into a text-for-text exegetical debate between Luther and open theism. Likewise, issues surrounding the immutability of God and the incarnation of Christ are not directly discussed in *De servo arbitrio* or the catechisms, and those issues will not be direct subjects of this dissertation. The implications of this dissertation's conclusions, however, may lend themselves to dealing with such Christological issues.

insights today. When Luther is allowed to speak to our modern/postmodern world, his insights into the paradox of *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus* will offer us a way of addressing current discussions and debates over the question, “Can God be persuaded?”

CHAPTER ONE

OPEN THEISM

Introduction

The immutability of God has been widely taught throughout the history of the Christian Church. God has been depicted as absolute and unchangeable, foreknowing and foreordaining everything that will happen on earth. According to this “classical theist” view, God not only knows all that has happened and is happening, but God is also completely aware of the future and completely in control of that future. Man cannot “persuade,” impose his will on, or in any way influence such a God, for such a God is totally immutable.

Yet not all have understood God to be so unchangeable. Certain scholars, mostly within American Evangelicalism, have recently challenged and opposed the “classical theist” position. While their objections are directed primarily at the classical theism that is expounded in contemporary Calvinism,¹ their views and the issues they raise address the teachings of the whole Christian church. Seeking to reconsider and revise the church’s teaching on God’s immutability (and related issues), these scholars have promoted what they consider to be a relational model of God, commonly known as “open theism.”

The basic assumption of open theism is that God must either be affected by the thoughts, words, and deeds of his creatures and relates to them in a genuinely personal way (the “open”

¹Various figures in church history are cited by the open theists as examples of classical theism. Among them (and directly pertinent to this study) are St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. The majority of open theists, however, seem to direct their criticisms of “classical theism” specifically at a Calvinistic doctrine of God, and most of those who have written in opposition to open theism have done so from a Calvinistic theological background. Hence the lack of reference to Luther.

view), or else that God remain untouched by his creation and operates in a cold, distant fashion (presented as the “classical” view). Open theists insist that God is changeable and persuadable. Not only do they believe that God is open to a variety of possible courses of action, they also believe that God is subject to the influences of human persuasion in choosing what he will do.

Proponents of open theism argue that “most philosophers and theologians today reject the Calvinist account of absolute foreknowledge in favor of explanations that preserve a stronger sense of human freedom.”² Indeed, one of the great appeals of open theism involves the idea that we human beings can actually take control of and have some serious effect on our lives and our future before God.³ Some proponents refer to this teaching as “free will theism,” for according to their understanding, if man is truly to have “free will,” then God must be “open” to that will. On this basis, open theists claim to offer “a more coherent alternative to Calvinism than Arminians have presented before.”⁴

Admittedly, theologians who espouse open theism are not in full agreement with one another regarding the details of open theism. John Sanders describes the openness model as “one of several families making up the relational theism clan. And even within the openness model, family members are not identical. Proponents of openness, such as David Basinger, William Hasker, Gregory Boyd and myself, disagree at times regarding matters of emphasis, approach and

² Richard Rice, “Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism,” in *Grace of God, Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989), 123.

³This view of God is finding popularity among a broad range of theologians and theological backgrounds. One of open theism’s opponents, John Frame, notes that numerous “academic theologians” have an affinity with the teachings of open theism. “Sanders takes note of Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, for whom ‘Jesus reveals that God is involved in history and is willing to become vulnerable.’ He also mentions Emil Brunner, Hendrikus Berkhof, Eberhard Jungel, Colin Gunton, the Roman Catholic feminists Catherine LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson, and others who have an affinity with open theism.” John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2001), 38.

⁴Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), xii.

detail.”⁵ At times, this disagreement may make it difficult to definitively determine the precise boundaries of open theism’s teachings. It is safe to say, however, that sufficient agreement does remain among proponents of open theism to allow a thorough and systematic discussion of their theology of God.

In his book, *The God Who Risks*, John Sanders offers this definition of open or “relational” theism:

What I call “relational theism” affirms that God freely enters into reciprocal relations with creatures. There is significant diversity within this category, aside from a general agreement that God, though ontologically distinct from creation (contra process theology), enters into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures and is resourceful, creative and omniscient instead of all-determining and completely unconditioned by creatures. This has to be understood, however, as God’s free and sovereign choice to create this state of affairs. It is not forced on God, as in process thought. God has made significantly free creatures upon whom he conditions some of his actions. God is truly involved in human history, opening up new possibilities in overcoming sin.⁶

The open view of God “expresses two basic convictions: love is the most important quality we attribute to God, and love is more than care and commitment; it involves being sensitive and responsive as well.”⁷ This responsive love is seen in God’s interaction with his creatures, as God influences them and they influence God. “Thus history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do.”⁸

Open theism understands God’s knowledge of the world as one that is “receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world.”⁹ God is,

⁵John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 14.

⁶Ibid., 161-162. It should be noted that Sanders offers no Biblical support for his assertion that God exercised his “free and sovereign choice” and created this “state of affairs.”

⁷Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in Clark Pinnock et. al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 15.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 16.

therefore, dependent on his creation in his decisions and actions. Yet open theists do not see this dependence as detracting from God's greatness in any way. On the contrary, they say, God's dependence enhances his greatness, since it takes an even greater God to be able to risk and to grow along with his creatures. After all, as Gregory Boyd notes:

Isn't a God who is able to know perfectly these possibilities [of what could happen] wiser than a God who simply foreknows or predetermines one story line that the future will follow? And isn't a God who perfectly anticipates and wisely responds to everything a free agent *might* do more intelligent than a God who simply knows what a free agent *will* do? Anticipating and responding to possibilities takes problem-solving intelligence. Simply possessing a crystal ball vision of what's coming requires none.¹⁰

Boyd later returns to this thought:

If God is indeed the greatest conceivable being, why should we not conclude that God would have more possibilities open to him, would be more free, and would be more sensitive to change than we humans? The Platonic and classical Christian notion that God (and therefore God's knowledge) must be utterly unchanging contradicts this. Everything we read in Scripture and everything we observe in the world around us suggests that a God who is frozen in an eternity of perfectly certain facts is inferior to the God of the possible, who is capable of discovery, risk, novelty, and adventure.¹¹

Open theism thus raises a significant alternative to the classical doctrine of God's immutability. In order to explore and evaluate this alternative further, it is necessary to review some of the key areas of argument raised by open theists. Through this exploration, the classical theist position will also be carefully considered in an effort to identify questions that have been raised by this debate, particularly those involving the reconciliation of God's immutability with the theology and practice of prayer.

¹⁰Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 127-128.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 131.

Debating The Influence of Greek Philosophy

One of the arguments raised by open theists against the “classical” attributes of God is that they were not drawn from Scripture, but originated in Greek philosophy. This accusation is not unique among open theists. Sanders cites classical theist H. P. Owen, who said, “So far as the Western world is concerned theism has a double origin: the Bible and Greek philosophy.”¹²

Surveying Hellenistic rational theology, Sanders finds four tendencies that had a profound impact on Jewish and Christian thinking about the divine nature. (1) The Greek philosophers were looking for that which was stable and reliable in contrast to the earthly world of change. Something of this attitude had perhaps been anticipated in the myths where Chronos (time) devoured his children: time destroys what it creates. It seems an almost cultural value they shared that change and time denoted weakness and corruption while immutability and timelessness represented strength, immortality and perfection. (2) This leads to the distinction between being and becoming or reality and appearances. Appearance involves time and change while reality is timeless and immutable. (3) The “world” was understood as a “natural order,” a system of universal relations that implies an eternal, immutable order. (4) Above the personal gods exists the impersonal principle of sufficient reason, which is the ultimate explanation for why the world is the way it is. Deity, in this sense, is the universal principle of order presupposed to explain the natural order. God, then, is characterized by rationality, timelessness and immutability.¹³

Open theists claim that these philosophic influences, rather than the Bible, were key factors in determining and defining the attributes of God in Christian theology. They do acknowledge that some parallels may exist between philosophic thinking and Biblical revelation. It is, however, the virtual identification of philosophy and revelation that has led to a radically one-sided understanding of God: an over-emphasis on the transcendent God at the expense of the immanent (relational) God.

As Clark Pinnock has written:

¹²Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 141.

¹³John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Clark Pinnock and others, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 68-69.

Traditional theology has been biased in the direction of transcendence as the result of undue philosophical influences. Greek thinking located the ultimate and the perfect in the realm of the immutable and absolutely transcendent. This led early theologians (given that the biblical God is also transcendent) to experiment with equating the God of revelation with the Greek ideal of deity.¹⁴

Elsewhere, Pinnock further discusses the implications of

the influence of Hellenistic assumptions about the nature of divine perfection. I refer to the powerful tendency to place God as far away from and as high over us as possible. With all the talk about infinity, immutability, atemporality, impassibility, simplicity, omnipotence, omniscience, etc. does one not get the impression of a deity far away, aloof, and cold? We ought to be alarmed when Aquinas says that God cannot have real relations with the creature because of the immutability of his essence. . . . What astonishes me is that evangelicals, who make much out of their supposed faithfulness to the Bible, can so uncritically swallow the pagan legacy of the absolute immutability of God and let it wreak such havoc on the doctrine of God.¹⁵

While Pinnock may have unfairly represented Aquinas' position,¹⁶ it remains the opinion of open theists that Greek influence has drastically distorted the doctrine of God. This influence, has not, however, completely eliminated contact with those Bible passages that suggest a more personal, loving, mutable God.

Fortunately the tilt toward transcendence in traditional dogmatics was not always extreme. Christians did not consistently lose sight of the dynamic portrait of God in the Scriptures. It was present in hymns, sermons and liturgies, which tend to be more conservative in relation to biblical language. It was even present in theology, particularly in dealing with a subject like the incarnation. When contemplating this mystery, the same theologians would often admit that in becoming flesh the logos underwent change, because of God's desire to be gracious to humanity. The doctrine of the incarnation requires nuanced thinking about God's immutability, and this was not lost upon the fathers. Nevertheless,

¹⁴Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in Clark Pinnock and others, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 106.

¹⁵Clark Pinnock, "Response to Part 2" in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2000), 147-148.

¹⁶One can hardly imagine Aquinas understanding God as wholly "uninvolved in the world," for what then would the Incarnation mean? The real difference here involves the definition of "real relations," which open theists understand in human terms while Aquinas maintains a clear distinction between Creator and creation. Further inquiry into this matter belongs to students of Aquinas' writings.

the one-sided stress on God's transcendence (on God turned away from us, not toward us) would continue to distort Catholic and Protestant theology to the present time.¹⁷

While open theists continue to make strong assertions regarding Hellenistic influence on Christian doctrine, it must be noted that the actual degree of influence of pagan philosophy on Christian theology remains a subject of considerable debate. It is true that parallels have been recognized between philosophical categories and theological depictions of the attributes of God. It has also been recognized that theologians of the early church were very careful and conscientious regarding their use of anything philosophical.

This cautious attitude of the early church Fathers is noted by Douglas Kelly in his review of *The Openness of God*. Kelly writes, "In reality, a careful reading of the Fathers (such as Athanasius, for instance) would indicate the profound Christianization of Hellenistic terms and concepts. Though they began as Greek terms conveying pagan content, such concepts as *creation, being, logos, providence, and person* were thoroughly transformed during the first four or five centuries of the Christian era in the light of Old Testament prophecy and the apostolic testimony to Christ."¹⁸ Timothy George echoes these thoughts in his review of the same book: "To be sure, the church Fathers did use contemporary thought forms and even new words such as *Trinitas* and *homoousios*, but they did so precisely in order to be faithful to the living God of the Bible."¹⁹

¹⁷Ibid., 106-107. Regarding the idea that "the logos underwent change," Francis Pieper disagrees, writing, "Scripture teaches that the Son of God without any change in His deity has assumed into his Person the human nature from the Virgin Mary." Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Volume I* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 441.

¹⁸Douglas F. Kelly, "Afraid of Infinitude" in "Has God Been Held Hostage by Philosophy?" *Christianity Today*, January 9, 1995, 32.

¹⁹Timothy George, "A Transcendence-Starved Deity" in "Has God Been Held Hostage by Philosophy?" *Christianity Today*, January 9, 1995, 33.

In a further review and critique of open theism, specifically that of the work of Clark Pinnock, Patrick Richmond notices that even some open theist ideas have been postulated by ancient philosophers. According to his assessment of the matter:

Where an idea comes from does not determine its truth value. The fact that an idea has its origins in Hellenistic philosophy does not mean that it is false. As we have noted, Cicero argues, like Pinnock, that God could not foreknow future free choices. If the fact that an idea had a classical genesis ruled it out then this would be a serious problem for Pinnock himself! Therefore, rather than rooting about for the origins of ideas we must concentrate on whether the ideas themselves are any good. We must investigate whether there are any good arguments in favor of the traditional position, regardless of whether the tradition contains ideas present in Greek philosophy.²⁰

The debate of whether or not the classical attributes of God originated in Greek philosophy continues. Perhaps more critical than attempting to draw that debate to a conclusion is remembering that the terms we use must be defined and employed in ways that describe the doctrine of God faithfully and accurately according to the Scriptures.

Interpreting the Scriptures

In addition to their arguments against philosophical categories in classical theism, open theists also take issue with what they perceive as the “biblical-classical synthesis”²¹ that exists in theology. In their eyes, classical theism has become so commonly accepted that it is generally assumed to be the only theologically correct view. The resulting “biblical-classical synthesis” has served as a filter for the interpretation of biblical texts. In their judgment, this synthesis has not allowed a fair examination of texts that might offer a different perspective and understanding of God and his relationship to us.

²⁰Patrick Richmond, “Openness to the Bible? A Traditional Challenge to Pinnock’s Understanding of God,” in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2000), 95.

²¹Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 141.

Sanders writes about “control beliefs,” which he describes as “those ideas and values that are used as paradigms and ultimate presuppositions to interpret our experiences, recognize problems, and organize information.”²² These beliefs shape the way we gather information so that as we receive new information, we interpret it in ways to support the views we already hold. He notes that these beliefs may “revolve around or hinge on a few metaphors from the Bible that serve as keys to unlock the doors of interpretation to all other passages.”²³ The problem arises when one set of metaphors is adopted that excludes or overwhelms another equally valid set of metaphors. When that happens, one may inaccurately interpret or even lose understandings or perspectives about the things of the Bible.

Open theists argue that this is precisely what has happened in Biblical interpretation regarding the doctrine of God. “Many scholars, since the early Fathers, have tended to depreciate the anthropomorphic metaphors used of God in the Bible. . . . Without the biblical metaphors we would lose the divinely revealed nature of God.”²⁴ Open theists contend that numerous Bible passages have been unfairly interpreted or ignored because their interpretation has been unduly influenced by “the Greek philosophical way of speaking about God.”²⁵ They believe that the classical tradition has pushed aside texts that would support an open view of God, interpreting such texts figuratively while texts that support classical theism are interpreted literally.

For instance, Gregory Boyd argues:

Numerous times in Scripture we find that God changes his mind in response to events that transpire in history. By definition, one cannot change what is

²²John Sanders, “God As Personal” in *Grace of God, Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989), 168.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 169.

²⁵Ibid.

permanently fixed. Hence, every time the Bible teaches us that God changes his mind it is teaching us that God's mind is not permanently fixed. This directly contradicts the classical understanding of foreknowledge.²⁶

Boyd finds biblical support for this change of God's mind in passages such as the account of the potter in Jeremiah 18. He continues:

Classical theologians usually argue that texts that attribute change to God describe how he *appears* to us; they do not depict God as he really is. It *looks* like God changed his mind, but he really didn't.

Unfortunately for the classical interpretation, the text does not say, or remotely imply, that it looks like the Lord intended something and then changed his mind. Rather, the Lord himself tells us in the plainest terms possible that he intended one thing and then changed his mind and did something else. How can God's stated intention be explained as an appearance? There is simply no reason to interpret language about changeable aspects of God less literally than language about unchangeable aspects of God.²⁷

Various reinterpretations of Bible passages have been offered by open theists to show the possibility of biblical support for their position. Boyd goes into some detail describing God's "regrets" (Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:35), "surprise" (Isaiah 5), "frustration" at man's resistance to God (Exodus 4), and God's "testing" of people individually (Genesis 22; 2 Chronicles 32:31) and corporately (Deuteronomy 8:2, 13:1-3, Judges 2:22, 3:4; Exodus 16:4).²⁸

Richard Rice also outlines various passages that, in his opinion, give evidence for the openness of God. In a discussion of the Old Testament, for instance, he notes numerous passages that describe God's "feelings" (feelings of "delight" in Psalm 149:4, Deuteronomy 30:9, Jeremiah 9:24, et.al.). Rice further points out how the prophets use human relationships to

²⁶Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 75.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 77. Boyd's argument regarding God's "intention" fails to admit the possibility that God may be trying to alter man's course through this statement, deliberately leading to an action different from the one "intended." Consider the times God "intended" to wipe out the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings, prompting Moses to intercede and fulfilling God's intention to forgive and restore Israel and continue on with his plan and promise. Would this mean God was lying about his intention? No. According to his Law, he intended one thing and sought to drive them to his Gospel, in which he intended something else.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 55ff.

describe divine emotions, giving the examples of the husband and adulterous wife metaphors of Hosea and Jeremiah, and the parent-child metaphor of Hosea 11. He notes that “Whereas the metaphors of king and subject, judge and criminal emphasize power and punishment in God’s relation to his people, these family metaphors emphasize love and commitment.”²⁹ Rice claims that it becomes a question of which metaphors govern one’s interpretation.

In other places, open theists reinterpret passages that have been used to support classical theism, finding potential limitations on the scope of texts once interpreted more broadly. For example, Gregory Boyd examines Isaiah 48:3-5:

The former things I declared long ago,
they went out from my mouth and I made them known;
then suddenly I did them and they came to pass.
Because I know that you are obstinate,
and your neck is an iron sinew
and your forehead brass,
I declared them to you from long ago,
before they came to pass I announced them to you,
so that you would not say, “My idol did them,
my carved image and my cast image commanded them.”³⁰

The common understanding of this verse is that it represents God’s complete and certain knowledge of the future, but Boyd argues that while Isaiah 48 may speak of what God has determined, it does not necessarily support God’s exhaustive determination of the future.

The Lord is not appealing to information about the future he happens to possess; instead, he is appealing to *his own intentions* about the future. He foreknows that certain things are going to take place because he knows *his own purpose and intention* to bring these events about. As sovereign Lord of history, he has decided to settle *this much* about the future. . . . The verse doesn’t support the view that the future is exhaustively settled in reality, and thus exhaustively settled in God’s mind.³¹

²⁹Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God*, 25.

³⁰New Revised Standard Version, quoted in Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 25.

³¹Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 30, 31.

Boyd also looks to specific characters in the biblical narrative, such as Peter and Judas Iscariot. Rather than insisting these men did what was foretold of them, Boyd suggests that they were so predictable it was easy for Jesus to anticipate their actions. Boyd concludes:

we are far outrunning the evidence if we draw the conclusion from these episodes that everything about the future is eternally settled. While it may be difficult to imagine ourselves carrying out a providential plan so masterfully without a meticulous blueprint ahead of time, there is no reason to bring the Lord down to our level. If we grant that God is all-powerful and infinitely wise, we should have no trouble seeing how he could weave free agents into his plan while allowing them to resolve for themselves a partly open future.³²

As Boyd later states, “To confess that God can control whatever he wants to control leaves open the question of *how much* God actually does want to control. If Scripture warrants it, there is ‘room’ within this motif for the belief that some of the future is not determined, and thus not foreknown as settled by God.”³³ Thus, as Boyd concludes, “All the evidence indicates that the verses signifying divine openness should be interpreted every bit as literally as the verses signifying the settledness of the future. Only a preconception of what God can and can’t be would lead us to think otherwise.”³⁴

Open theism’s lack of continuity with the traditional interpretations of passages related to God’s immutability has upset many classical theists.³⁵ Open theists have cited classical theism’s failure to interpret key biblical texts in a “straightforward” manner, and classical theists have responded with a similar accusation. Where open theists have described classical theism’s biased

³²Ibid., 39.

³³Ibid., 51.

³⁴Ibid., 120.

³⁵The membership status of John Sanders and Clark Pinnock in the Evangelical Theology Society has been challenged because of their advocacy of open theism.

interpretations of texts that suggest God's mutability, so classical theists draw attention to open theism's biased interpretations of texts that suggest God's immutability.

Read "straightforwardly," many biblical metaphors or anthropomorphic expressions would yield false, even heretical, notions of God. . . . Free-will theists do not differ from classical theists in the use or nonuse of control beliefs or paradigms that affect the way they understand the biblical text, but they do differ in the content of those beliefs. Classical theists, convinced that other Scripture passages teach exhaustive divine foreknowledge and/or meticulous providence, reject the "straightforward" interpretation of verses that would imply divine ignorance. Free-will theists, convinced that genuine freedom is incompatible with determinism, reject the "straightforward" interpretation of verses that imply divine control.³⁶

A further and serious area of concern raised by classical theists involves the implications that open theism's reinterpretations have for all of theology. Along these lines, Daniel Strange has described Clark Pinnock (and the whole open theist debate) as a "case study" as to the nature of systematic theology how change and development in one area of doctrine impacts and influences every area; how the criteria of internal consistency and coherence shape our theological frameworks; how emotion, intuition and rationalism influence our theologizing; and how and why theologians feel forced at times to make paradigmatic shifts in their thinking."³⁷

The changes, developments, and shifts proposed by the presuppositions of open theism have serious negative ramifications. A critical example of this is noted by Pyne and Spencer, who recognize some of the soteriological implications of open theism's presuppositions:

The assumptions that are so central to free-will theism's doctrine of God will likely have a profound effect on one's doctrine of salvation. The implications go far beyond traditional distinctions between Arminianism and Calvinism. Different as those systems may be, they both affirm exhaustive divine foreknowledge and they both support an exclusivist understanding of world

³⁶Robert A. Pyne and Stephen R. Spencer, "A Critique of Free-Will Theism, Part One" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 158 (July-September 2001): 271.

³⁷Daniel Strange, "Biographical Essay: Clark H. Pinnock: The Evolution of an Evangelical" in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2000), 1-2.

evangelism. Free-will theism, as its more vocal advocates demonstrate, is more compatible with soteriological inclusivism.³⁸

Open theists have called for a serious reconsideration of textual interpretation and resulting dogma. Their classical theist opponents have objected to the open theism not only on the grounds of the interpretation of individual texts, but also because, when pushed to its conclusion, open theism would lead to denial of things clearly taught in Scripture. In recognizing that both open and classical theists are depending on “control beliefs and paradigms” to interpret the Scriptures, the question at issue shifts to the nature and appropriateness of those presuppositions.

Describing God’s Knowledge of the Future

As has been already suggested, one of the key components to open theism involves the nature of the future and God’s relationship to it. Classical theism has claimed that God is totally aware and in control of the past, the present, and the future. Open theists admit to God’s perfect knowledge of what has been and what is, but they deny that God has knowledge of what will be.

Open theists do have their differences in this regard. “They differ on the type of knowledge that God possesses and on the extent to which this knowledge enables him to control earthly affairs.”³⁹ In an effort to distinguish the divergent viewpoints, William Hasker has attempted to summarize five theories of God’s knowledge and action in the world.⁴⁰

The first of these is theological determinism (Calvinism), in which God has the greatest knowledge and control, determining everything that happens.

³⁸Pyne and Spencer, “A Critique of Free-Will Theism, Part Two,” 396.

³⁹David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 37.

⁴⁰William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in Clark Pinnock and others, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 134ff.

Second, he speaks of middle knowledge (Molinism), which “attributes libertarian (indeterministic) freedom to human beings and yet retains a strong doctrine of divine providential control.” In middle knowledge, “God knows exactly what choice would be made in any possible situation. This means that God can survey all the possible ways in which things might turn out—all the “feasible worlds,” as they have come to be called—and select the very one that most closely fits his desire and purpose for creation.”⁴¹

Third is simple foreknowledge, in which God has complete knowledge of the future but not the knowledge of all possibilities of the future, as in Molinism. In this view, God sees events in the future as though through a telescope or in a “crystal ball.”⁴²

The fourth theory of God’s knowledge is that of open theism. Open theism accepts “some logical limitations on God’s knowledge of the future.”⁴³ God knows all that can logically be known, but even though he can predict what will happen more accurately than anyone else, he cannot know the future. Indeed, “God knows an immense amount about each one of us—far more, in fact, than we know about ourselves—but he does not, because he cannot, plan his actions toward us on the basis of a prior knowledge of how we will respond.”⁴⁴

The fifth theory of God’s knowledge is that held by process theology. Process theology “not only holds many aspects of the future are inherently unknowable but also imposes some very stringent inherent limitations on the way in which God is able to act in the world.”⁴⁵

⁴¹Ibid., 144.

⁴²Ibid., 147.

⁴³Ibid., 135.

⁴⁴Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 115.

⁴⁵Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 135.

Although some classical theists initially attempted to equate open theism and process theology, it has become clear that these are two distinctly different ways of understanding God.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, open theists find Hasker's first three theories of God's knowledge limiting to human freedom and personal involvement with God:

The idea, roughly, is this: If God knows already what will happen in the future, then God's knowing this is part of the past and is now fixed, impossible to change. And since God is infallible, it is completely impossible that things will turn out differently than God expects them to. But this means that the future event God knows is also fixed and unalterable, and it cannot be true of any human beings that they are both able to perform a certain action and able not to perform that action. If God knows that a person is going to perform it, then it is impossible that the person fail to perform it—so one does not have a free choice whether or not to perform it.⁴⁷

It is this logical limitation on human free choice that has led to the development of open theism. Open theists “deny that a person can ever be said to have chosen voluntarily if God has influenced this person's decision-making process itself in such a way that he has ensured (determined) that the choice he would have her make has in fact been made.”⁴⁸ Essentially, then, open theists claim that since the future has not yet happened it is not knowable by anyone, not even God.

Clark Pinnock defends this view:

It is not dishonoring to say that God does not know every detail of the future. To say God cannot know the unknowable is not different from saying that God cannot do the undo-able. Insofar as the future is unsettled and not yet entirely definite, God knows it truly—that is, God knows it as unsettled and not yet definite. If God knew the future as completely settled, when it is not, he would not know it truly. The issue here is not about God's knowledge as much as it is about the nature of the future itself. The past is definite and settled but the future

⁴⁶For a full discussion of the similarities and differences between open theism and process theology, see John B. Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock, eds. *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁴⁷Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” 147.

⁴⁸Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism*, 32.

is not. The future contains both definite things (like the things God pledges to do) and possible things (like how many will respond to the gospel). Some things may go one way or the other and God is well aware of that. If God does not know something in the future, it is not because his knowledge is deficient but because there is nothing to be known as yet about that something. The key question really is: has the future been exhaustively settled from all eternity or is it partly open?⁴⁹

Richard Rice also writes:

It is evident, then, that a consistently Arminian concept of God's relation to the future has a lot more going for it than the fact that it resolves the old problem of freedom and foreknowledge. It is part of a comprehensive view of God that is essentially positive rather than negative. Instead of removing from God's experience something that conceivably belongs there, it attributes to God a range of experience that absolute foreknowledge excludes. When we cease to insist that God already knows the entire course of the future, we can affirm God's genuine interaction with the creaturely world. And the dynamic view of God that emerges is superior to the traditional view by every relevant criterion. It renders more faithfully the biblical descriptions of God, it makes more sense logically, and it meets the needs of personal religious experience."⁵⁰

By taking this position, open theists remove God from totally controlling the actions of man and they recognize the power and influence of human freedom. This also leads them to significant conclusions regarding the nature and activity of God. Basinger says, "Since freewill theists believe that God has chosen to create a world in which humans have been granted the power to exercise pervasive, morally significant freedom of choice (and thus action) and that God cannot unilaterally ensure that humans exercising free choice will make the decisions he would have them make (and thus act as he would have them act), freewill theists conclude that God does not exercise unilateral control over many important aspects of what occurs in our earthly realm."⁵¹

⁴⁹Clark Pinnock, "Response to Part 1" in *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*, ed. Tony Gray and Christopher Sinkinson (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2000), 86.

⁵⁰Rice, "Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism," 136-137.

⁵¹Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism*, 36.

The result of this argument is not, therefore, merely that man has a greater involvement in the workings of this world, but that God surrenders his absolute authority. “Consequently, it should not be surprising that, unlike theological determinists and limited compatibilists, freewill theists maintain that *to the extent that God grants individuals freedom, he gives up complete control over the decisions that are made.*”⁵²

While these arguments of open theists may seem logical on the surface, Bruce Ware strives to undermine them based on the witness of Scripture. Ware argues:

Open theism collapses as a comprehensive model of divine providence if it can be demonstrated that God does in fact know all of the future, including all future contingencies and all future free choices and actions of his moral creatures. If it can be established that the openness denial of God’s comprehensive foreknowledge is dubious while the case for affirming exhaustive divine foreknowledge is strong, then it renders the open view position untenable.⁵³

Ware goes on to cite numerous authors of both Calvinist and Arminian background who support comprehensive divine foreknowledge. In an effort to bolster his case, Ware also cites the work of Steve Roy, a doctoral student and faculty member at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Roy surveyed passages relating to divine foreknowledge and reported the following statistics:

As categorized, the summary of results is as follows: 164 texts explicitly teach/affirm God’s foreknowledge; 271 texts explicitly teach/affirm other aspects of God’s omniscience (e.g., God’s knowledge of past or present or possible states of affairs); 128 texts offer predictions of what God will do through nature; 1,893 texts state predictively that God will do something or other in or through human beings; 1,474 texts state predictively what human beings will do, apart from God directly acting in or through them; 622 texts state predictively what unbelievers will do or have happen to them; 143 texts affirm God’s sovereign control of human choices; 105 texts of apparent counter-evidence.⁵⁴

⁵²Ibid., 33, emphasis original.

⁵³Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 99.

⁵⁴Ibid., 100.

While the weight of this evidence is impressive, the textual debate rages on, each side seeing the Scriptures through its own interpretative filters. Classical theists continue to insist that God knows all things perfectly, including every detail of the future. Open theists continue to state that the future is unknowable, even by God, thus opening the door for man's involvement in determining the course of that future.

Dealing with the Problem of Evil

One factor that has strongly motivated theologians to understand God better is the problem of evil. Philosophically speaking, the fact that evil exists in the world pushes us to one of two logical conclusions: either God is not good, or God is not all-powerful. If God were good (so the logic goes), he would not want evil to exist and would eradicate it. If God were all-powerful, he would be able to eradicate evil. Clearly, evil exists. This leads some to conclude that, "either God is not good, or he is not all-powerful, or he does not exist at all."⁵⁵

While evil is never claimed to be a characteristic of God, the way in which one discusses and attempts to resolve the problem of evil does reveal how one understands God. The classical theist posits a wholly good, all-powerful God who has determined all things in this world. This position is considered insufficient by some, however, for logic then allows God to be blamed for the evil that is in the world.

For the open theist, God does exist and he is good. God is also powerful, except with respect to his knowledge of the future, which is limited. Because of this limitation, "God did not foreknow that we would actually sin, only that it was possible; thus he cannot be held morally

⁵⁵Frame, *No Other God*, 134.

culpable.”⁵⁶ Open theism argues that free creatures through their free choices brought evil into the world. This means that, in their view, God has nothing to do with our suffering.⁵⁷

Some opponents of open theism have readily admitted that this libertarian line of thinking appears to offer a ready solution to the problem of evil. That does not mean classical theists have surrendered the field to open theists. Though open theism’s perspective seems simple, direct, and perhaps even appealing, the question remains: is it right?⁵⁸

John Frame argues that the open theist perspective does not exonerate God from blame in regard to evil. Assume for a moment that God did give libertarian freedom to his creatures without knowing what they would do. If that were the case, Frame says, that would make God guilty of reckless endangerment. Furthermore, he asks, “does God really care more about libertarian freedom than he does about goodness, righteousness, truth, and holiness?” If God is willing to sacrifice good in the world just to give man free will, does that not agree with the unbeliever who says God does not care enough about goodness to prevent evil?⁵⁹ Eventually, logically-bound libertarian answers return to the same, unsatisfying either-or faced by classical theism: either God is not good, or he is not all-powerful.

Frame admits he cannot provide a satisfying answer either. He considers the problem of evil to be one of the insoluble mysteries of God, suggesting we remain silent and take God at his word rather than trying to solve the unsolvable.⁶⁰

⁵⁶John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 259.

⁵⁷Frame, *No Other God*, 134-135.

⁵⁸Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 191.

⁵⁹Frame, *No Other God*, 136.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 137ff.

Thus it would seem we have returned to the place where we started. Yet, given the two “logical” alternatives, a new question may be introduced: is logic to govern these matters? Is there another kind of conclusion which deals with the problem of evil?

Frame raises the subject of God’s “transcendence” as part of the Bible’s significant response to the problem of evil.⁶¹ While this may be a potentially fruitful direction for this discussion, Frame fails to develop his suggestion further. As we shall see, looking to God’s transcendence in a different light, Luther answered the problem of evil by confessing God’s goodness and omnipotence, yet refusing to blame God in any way for the existence of evil. Since the Scriptures do not provide a logical answer to problem of evil, Luther left such unrevealed matters to the “hidden” God.

Applying the Theory: The Practice of Prayer

Two views present themselves in this dispute between open and classical theism. The differences between these two views is highlighted further when their implications for the Christian life of prayer is considered. If the future is not wholly determined by God, as open theists teach, then God can be persuaded. Indeed, they say, this is the kind of God we have, one who is not just affected by our appeals and prayers, but who changes to shape the future with us. This, according to open theism, is how our prayers make a real difference.

If, on the other hand, God knows the future in its entirety, as classical theists argue, then all things have been determined from eternity. Such a God would be unpersuadable, for what God foreknows must happen. The question then arises: what is the point and purpose to our prayers?

⁶¹Ibid., 138.

Open theism teaches that human beings have the ability to impose their will upon God in such a way as to direct or at least modify God's course of action. The instrument through which human will exerts this influence (and thus "persuades") God is prayer. "In the open view, God has sovereignly ordained that prayer be one of our central means of influencing what transpires in history."⁶² Boyd is adamant on this point, as he further writes, "the open view is able to declare, without qualification or inconsistency, that some of the future genuinely depends on prayer."⁶³

God, according to open theists, "graciously grants us the ability to significantly affect him. . . . He enlists our input, not because he needs it, but because he desires to have an authentic, dynamic relationship with us as real, empowered persons. Like a loving parent or spouse, he wants not only to influence us, but to be influenced by us."⁶⁴ Pointing to numerous biblical examples, Sanders writes, "Our prayers make a difference to God because of the personal relationship God enters into with us."⁶⁵ Clark Pinnock also states that "Prayer highlights the fact that God does not choose to rule the world without our input. It also suggests that the future has not been exhaustively settled."⁶⁶ Pinnock goes on to elaborate his point:

Prayer indicates the dialogical nature of the divine-human relationship. It speaks of a dialogue of faith in which God and humanity work in partnership to maintain the covenant relationship. Prayer is an activity that brings new possibilities into existence for God and us. It does not suggest a fixed world and prescribed calm, relationships. It indicates a relationship of reciprocity in which God speaks, acts and listens, while believers speak, act and listen in response to God. In prayer, God is revealed as willing, purposeful and above all personal. Prayer involves the mutual participation of divine and human partners in the tasks

⁶²Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 97.

⁶³Ibid., 95.

⁶⁴Ibid., 96.

⁶⁵Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 271.

⁶⁶Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 42.

of living. In prayer humanity's status is lifted to the high level of partnership with God. Both have voice and the two are bound together in relationship.⁶⁷

In arguing their point, open theists repeatedly point to God's Scriptural commands to pray. These commands, they say, are plainly worded and imply that our prayers will affect our blessings (or lack thereof) from God. According to open theists, if God insists on our prayers, yet those prayers make no real difference to him, then he is (effectively) lying about the 'asking power' of our prayers.

This directly opposes classical theism in which, according to the understanding of open theists, God's 'answers' to our prayers and even our prayers themselves were all programmed in advance. The classical view allows no freedom before God, no opportunity for our prayers to make a real impact on God as his appeals for prayer in Scripture might suggest. Open theists argue that if one follows classical theism, "The common saying that 'prayer changes us, not God' simply doesn't reflect the purpose or the urgency that Scripture gives to petitionary prayer."⁶⁸

Sanders raises a further accusation against classical theists:

It comes as little surprise that Calvin believes God incapable of changing his mind. Repentance of any decision would contradict God's immutable and impassible will, as well as his foreknowledge. . . . An interesting tension in Calvin's thought, of which he was apparently unaware, is that when he discusses the nature and value of prayer he speaks a very different language, as though God does, in fact, respond to our prayers, is receptive and enters into reciprocal relationships with his creatures.⁶⁹

Sanders thus sees Calvin as teaching God as immutable, yet praying to him as though God were mutable.

⁶⁷Ibid., 46.

⁶⁸Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 95.

⁶⁹Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 156-157.

Bruce Ware answers by acknowledging this tension. “Open theists are certainly right to seek to ground and embrace the *real relationship* between God and his human creatures, particularly his own people. Classical theism is vulnerable at this point and is in need of some correctives.”⁷⁰ At the same time, Ware does not want to discard the whole of classical theism. These “correctives,” Ware insists, can be found within modifications of the classical model rather than by a radical departure to open or freewill theism.

Ware proposes a “relational mutability” in God. Maintaining an ontological and ethical immutability in God, Ware states:

the dominant purpose of God with regard to his fallen human creatures has been to restore his personal relationship with them, which he intended from the beginning.

That God changes in his relationship with others is abundantly clear from Scripture, and therefore this relational mutability of God is upheld while at the same time it is denied that such relational changes in any way threaten or endanger the immutability of his intrinsic nature or freely spoken word.⁷¹

He anchors this argument in the observation of Anselm, who said “that one’s essence need not change as a result of changing relationships with others.”⁷² This, Ware continues, is congruent with Barth’s discussion of a “‘holy mutability of God’ whereby God is understood to change in his attitudes, conduct and relationships with humans in ways that both accord with his changeless intrinsic moral nature and properly confront the human moral situation.”⁷³ Such a mutability would allow God’s relationship to man to change “in ways that are appropriate to the human

⁷⁰Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 164.

⁷¹Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 4 (December 1986): 439.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid., 440.

moral state of the moment.”⁷⁴ Though he does not directly make the connection, one must assume that these changes could also be evident in the ways in which God chooses to answer the prayers of man.

In the meantime, Ware points out that the openness model suffers from some very specific difficulties. He notes that, “*it is strictly speaking impossible for human beings to inform God of their thoughts, concerns, longings, feelings, and requests.*”⁷⁵ To suggest that we can inform God of anything would mean that God does not know what we are thinking. This not only conflicts with classical theism’s insistence on God’s complete knowledge of past, present, and future, but it also conflicts with the teaching of most open theists that God knows the past and present perfectly.

If all this is true, what function does prayer really have? The answer to this question is crucial. Notice that, in open theism, prayer *can* function to foster a deeper relationship with God, it can bind us closer to God, and it can even reinforce the urgency or importance we attach to the requests we bring to him in prayer. But what prayer *cannot* do is instruct or inform God. . . . hence our prayers, quite literally, can never be a basis by which God would learn something new from us and so change his mind.⁷⁶

The openness model has not just highlighted a uniquely personal relationship between God and man; it has redefined that relationship in human terms. As Ware puts it, open theism involves a “*largely human model of personal relationship . . . in which God is brought down increasingly to our level. In response, we must say, let God be God, and may our relationship with him, including our relationship in prayer, be the distinctive God-human relationship he so designed.*”⁷⁷

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 165, emphasis original.

⁷⁶Ibid., 166.

⁷⁷Ibid., 167, emphasis original.

What, then, does prayer do? Ware very clearly points out that “we pray not to contribute to the shaping of an evolving divine will but to align ourselves with the purposes and directives of a will so perfect and wise and fully informed that we would be fools to attempt to alter it, were that even possible. The presupposition of all healthy, humble, God-honoring petitionary prayer is not ‘Your will be *formed*,’ but, ‘Your will be *done*.’”⁷⁸

Beyond this, Ware does not directly apply his “relational mutability” to the subject of prayer. Meanwhile, whatever conclusions may be drawn regarding other points made by open theism, fundamental questions regarding prayer remain difficult to answer: To what kind of God do we pray, mutable or immutable? What can we expect of him in our prayers? Is God to be persuaded by our prayers, or do we pray with some other goal in mind?

Differing Presuppositions

Throughout these debates between open and classical theists, it becomes evident that there is a fundamental difference in their presuppositions. Open theists seem to have a penchant for discussing God in human terms. If things about God cannot be understood, then they just cannot be. Classical theists, on the other hand, draw a clear distinction between God and man, Creator and creation. They clearly recognize the transcendence of God over his creatures.

John Sanders notes this contrast when he describes how some evangelicals

tend to claim not that everything about God is beyond us but only that *some* aspects of deity or the God-human relationship transcend human intelligibility. Regarding the topic of providence, such thinkers sometimes dismiss attempts to elucidate the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, claiming that it is simply a “mystery beyond human understanding.” The subject simply transcends human reason.⁷⁹

⁷⁸Ibid., 170.

⁷⁹Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 35.

Apparently, Sanders has difficulty allowing anything humanly unintelligible to be allowed into theological discussion. This becomes evident as Sanders distinguishes between paradox, mystery, and antinomy:

Paradoxes are puzzling remarks that go against our normal way of thinking, and mysteries are notions that are beyond our ability to fully comprehend. Yet neither paradox nor mystery is nonsense or self-contradictory. Antinomies, however, are statements that are either self-contradictory or inconsistent when taken together with other claims.⁸⁰

While paradox and mystery are not self-contradictory, antinomy is. Sanders objects to theologians who, he says, “claim that although antinomies are contradictions for us, they are not for God.”⁸¹ “Logic,” says Sanders, “is the standard for our meaningful discourse about God.”⁸² That which cannot be understood (i.e., is not intelligible), apparently should not be part of our theological discussions. Sanders claims that he does not want logic to rule above God, but “if God desires to communicate meaningfully with us, then he will have to do so within the conditions of his own creation. One of these conditions is that intelligibility excludes antinomies.”⁸³

John Frame objects to Sanders’ line of argument, finding Sanders’ discussion of logic “confused.” He knows of no traditional theist who speaks of doctrines being “genuine contradictions for us but not for God,” as Sanders claims, though “some have spoken of ‘apparent contradictions.’” Frame finds these abstract discussions and concepts of apparent

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid., 37.

⁸³Ibid.

contradiction to be “less important than the open theists’ substantive claims that contradictions exist in traditional theology.”⁸⁴ As Frame points out,

The law of noncontradiction says that A is never not-A at the same time and in the same respect. The “same respect” qualification implies that we must understand the meanings of terms before we can judge expressions to be contradictory. We must not judge statements to be contradictory simply because they look contradictory at first glance. So the issue is not really logic, but theological substance.⁸⁵

Frame, however, recognizes Sanders’ accusation that traditional theology has not been intellectually honest because it allows genuine contradictions to stand. His counter argument is that classical theologians do discuss “apparent” contradictions rather than “genuine” ones. Sanders’ assumptions that genuine contradictions are at issue exposes his underlying desire to limit talk about God to that which can be humanly and rationally comprehended. Given Sanders’ insistence that theological discourse must be bounded by logic, even true biblical paradoxes and mysteries may have a difficult time finding a place in the logical consistency of open theism.

Conclusion

Open theism holds a basic belief in libertarian human freedom. No doubt this comes from its fundamentally Arminian theological source, but open theists take their concept of freedom further than Arminians have before. They do not simply offer an alternative to Calvinism and classical theism, but directly challenge classical theism on several points in an effort to defend and promote their concept of freedom.

In the course of this challenge, open theists propose alterations in the doctrine of God. Specifically, they deny the immutability of God in order to allow space for man’s free will to

⁸⁴Frame, *No Other God*, 43.

⁸⁵Ibid., 44-45.

work. If God is mutable and persuadable, changing to be directed by man's will as open theists contend, then free will makes sense. If God is immutable, however, there is no point to libertarian human freedom, because such freedom can have no impact on an immutable God. Everything we do would be God's choice and action, not our choice, for we would be carrying out the course God set down for us.

An examination of the arguments of open theism reveals an attempt to undermine the doctrine of immutability by claiming that immutability has its source in pagan Greek philosophy. As noted above, this has been and remains a much-debated topic of discussion. In this, Patrick Richmond's assessment⁸⁶ stands as a reasonable initial response to the argument: the origin of an idea is not the issue, for similar ideas may have had their genesis in drastically different sources. At the same time, words and concepts come from a variety of origins, and we must be aware of these and be clear in our own meaning lest our terminology imply things unintended. The real issue is whether or not a specific idea is a faithful and accurate expression of that which is taught in the Scriptures. Thus one must consider the question of God's immutability based on the Bible, not on Greek philosophy, the works of the church Fathers, or human reason and logic.

By attempting to introduce an element of uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of the doctrine of immutability, open theists try to open the door for a reconsideration and re-evaluation of Bible passages that might allow for or indicate the mutability of God. They put forth Bible texts that have been used to support the immutability of God and suggest that those texts might not actually teach immutability as previously assumed. Further, they focus attention on other texts which, they say, have been interpreted by classical theists in a "figurative" or "metaphorical" manner in order to maintain the doctrine of God's immutability. Open theists

⁸⁶Richmond, "Openness to the Bible?" 95.

contend that if these texts were taken as literally as the others, the classical doctrine of God's immutability would collapse.

Classical theists have countered by suggesting that open theists do not themselves read the Scriptures in a "straightforward" manner. According to classical theists, the majority of Scripture texts favor the doctrine of God's immutability. Other passages thought to challenge that immutability must be interpreted "figuratively" to remain consistent with the whole of the Bible's teachings. At the same time, classical theists themselves struggle to explain and expound certain passages raised by open theists, for many of those passages do raise questions about the immutability of God.

Open theism seeks to resolve some of these questions by re-conceiving our understanding of God's knowledge of the future. Their suggestion that God does not know what is yet to happen, or that his knowledge in this regard is somehow limited, marks open theism's shift from the historical church's theological position. This is a necessary move to maintain the logic of open theism. Open theists argue that for man's will to be truly free, God cannot know the future; otherwise, what he knows is known perfectly, what he knows perfectly cannot be changed, and thus man is deprived of free will.

Classical theists generally argue that God foreknows and foreordains all things. Indeed, the weight of biblical evidence supporting God's complete knowledge of the future is considerable. Yet this position has often been connected to the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, which is essentially a form of fatalism that denies the Scripture that tells us "God wants all men to be saved." In their debates with open theists, most Calvinist authors have studiously avoided raising the issue of predestination, perhaps because it highlights open theism's objections to fatalism.

This question of whether or not God knows the future leads to a great conflict between open theists who advocate libertarian free will at one extreme, and classical theists who risk running into fatalism at the other extreme. While classical theists must be cautious to avoid falling into the fatalism trap, open theism raises serious questions in other areas of theology. If God cannot know the future, then is time itself is a creation of God or does time somehow stand over the Creator? Is the universe to be divided between Creator and creation, or is there a third entity or authority to which the Creator must answer? What are the implications of these points for our understanding of God's eternity, omnipotence, omnipresence, and other attributes?

One practical application of these teachings appears when one considers the problem of evil. Open theists here place limitations on God, specifically those regarding God's knowledge of the future. They ascribe the evil in the world to free creatures who made free choices for evil. Classical theists have responded that such logic would make God guilty of reckless endangerment. More to the point, the limitations open theists impose on God reveal open theists to be conceding that God is not all-powerful. Classical theism has no solid answer to this question except to point to the insoluble mysteries of God. As we shall see, Luther (in a similar vein) left such matters to the hiddenness of God.

When it comes to applying the doctrine of God to the practice of prayer, open theists identify what they consider a key weakness in Calvinistic classical theism: the inconsistency between classical theism's doctrine of an immutable God and its practice of prayer which at times treats God as mutable. Here, classical theists still struggle. Though they successfully challenge the positions taken by open theists, some classical theists will admit that something is lacking in their own manner of expressing God's immutability.

To meet this need, Bruce Ware has proposed modifications to the classical theist position regarding God's immutability. Ware has suggested that while God's ontological and ethical immutability must be defended, God may be considered to have a "relational mutability."⁸⁷ This mutability, he claims, allows for a discussion of God's changing relationship with man without changing the essence or faithfulness of God. According to relational mutability, changes in God take place because of God's "appropriate response to the human moral situation."⁸⁸ This implies that the human moral situation changes, although Ware does not explain the cause or motivation for such a change, whether it is driven by divine action or libertarian free will. Nor has Ware detailed the nature of the "change" in God that allows his essence and faithfulness to remain immutable.

In examining Ware's modifications, the question must also be raised whether it is God's relationship to man that is to be changed or rather man's relationship to God that is to be changed. This is not merely a matter of semantics but a subtle yet profound distinction that needs to be drawn. Ware rightly notes that God is at work to restore the broken relationship between God and man, but he neglects to note that it is man who is "broken" in this relationship, not God. That being the case, it seems inappropriate to advocate for a "change" in God when it is man who needs to be changed.

As we will see, Luther admitted no change in God. The reality of man's situation is a desperate one, as he is sinful and depraved, spiritually blind, dead, and an enemy of God. God operates through Law and Gospel (which Ware comes close to distinguishing, yet finally misses) to change us, not Himself. A two-fold attitude thus persists in God: the most holy God

⁸⁷Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation," 438.

⁸⁸Ibid., 443.

condemns sin, and yet the merciful and loving God “desires all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4). How these resolve themselves in God is not revealed to us. Luther understood these things as under the *deus absconditus*, the “hidden” God, discussed further in chapter three.

Open theists attempt to offer a new perspective on God’s relationship to man, specifically regarding God’s immutability. They do so insisting that all discussion take place within the bounds of human logic; they presuppose that God can and should be discussed and defined in what amount to essentially human terms. Classical theists have offered counter-arguments, undermining positions taken by open theists. Their stance is based on a clear distinction between God and man, Creator and creation, which allows for the paradoxical and mysterious to hold central positions in discussions of God and his immutability.

On the whole, classical theists have been rather successful in pointing out the weaknesses, flaws, and errors of open theism. They have not been as successful in offering alternatives. Questions raised by open theism remain as classical theists struggle to articulate a biblical doctrine of the immutability of God that can be consistent and faithfully expressed in their practice of prayer.

In light of the ongoing dispute between open and classical theists, the Christian church needs to expound what the Scriptures reveal about God with respect to his mutability or immutability. This exposition must not only be faithful to the Scriptures, but also be done in a way that expresses this doctrine faithfully in a consistent practice of Christian prayer. For such an exposition, we now turn to the writings of Martin Luther.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT ABOUT LUTHER?

Introduction

Most of open theism's description of and debate against classical theism has involved the doctrines of Calvinism. While open theists have, at times, mentioned Martin Luther as a proponent of classical theism (listing him between Augustine and Calvin), very little recognition has been given to Luther's writings related to this discussion. To a degree, it might be fair to classify Luther initially as a classical theist, especially if one considers his theological pedigree. Yet Luther also distinctly departed from what had been considered the 'classical' theological position of his day, and his unique contributions should not be ignored.

In his critique of *The Openness of God*, Alister E. McGrath notes with some dismay the way in which open theists have failed to consider Luther. Responding to the attempts of Sanders and others to deal with questions about the nature of God, McGrath writes, "A quick read of this volume, however, showed that the contributors seem not to realize that Luther has been down their road long before them. This alarmed me. Why should we trust clarion calls to modify the evangelical tradition if the critics are not familiar with it?"¹

The only specific discussion of Luther's writings by open theists is offered by John Sanders who refers very briefly to Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio*. He notes Luther's distinction

¹Alister E. McGrath, "Whatever Happened to Luther?" in "Has God Been Held Hostage by Philosophy?" *Christianity Today*, January 9, 1995, 34.

between the God revealed in Jesus Christ and the “hiddenness of God” found behind that revelation. Sanders sees this distinction as a problem:

Luther wanted to prevent any notion of human merit from creeping into his soteriology and may have overstated himself in doing so. He rightfully sought to claim that there is more to God than we can know. Nevertheless, there remains a tension, if not a contradiction, in the heart of Luther’s theology. Whereas he began by claiming that there is no knowledge of God apart from that revealed in Jesus, he proceeds to inform us that there is a God behind this God whose inscrutable will overturns statements about God’s universal salvific will in Scripture. Is Jesus actually God’s final word on anything or not?²

Sanders continues by citing Brian Gerish, “who claims that we witness ‘the collapse of Luther’s doctrine of God at this point. . . . Granted that Christ speaks nothing but comfort to the troubled conscience, who knows how it stands between me and *God in heaven?*’”³ Clearly, Sanders is inclined to dismiss Luther because of this seemingly unanswerable question.

It should be noted that Gerish’s article does elaborate further on the relationship between the hidden and revealed God. Gerish points out that the uncertainty about “how it stands between me and *God in heaven?*” is, for Luther, put to rest only through the contemplation of Christ. There, in the revealed God, faith is renewed and one “can vanquish one’s anxieties concerning his own standing before God. . . . Awareness of the Hidden God, therefore, qualifies faith in Christ.”⁴

Sanders’ critique of Luther continues as he next cites Alister McGrath. “According to Alister McGrath, Luther’s appeal to a hidden will of God behind the will revealed in Jesus and Scripture ‘makes theology an irrelevancy.’”⁵ Theology is irrelevant, according to McGrath, “if

²John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 154.

³Ibid.

⁴B. A. Gerrish, “To the Unknown God” *The Journal of Religion* 53:3 (July 1973): 275. This discussion will be taken up at greater length in chapter three.

⁵John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 154.

any statements which can be made on the basis of divine revelation may be refuted by appealing to a hidden and inscrutable God, whose will probably contradicts that of the revealed God.”⁶

In describing and dealing with the tension between *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus*, McGrath observes that Luther did not here fall in line with the common theological approach of his time, the *via moderna*. According to the *via moderna*, there is only one will and one power within God, and these must be logically unified. Instead, Luther created his own “problem” when he failed to resolve this tension in *De Servo Arbitrio*. McGrath calls that failure “an indictment of his abandonment of Luther’s own principle: *Crux sola est nostra theologia!*”⁷

But does this tension in Luther’s works remain unresolved for a reason? McGrath goes on to say, “Luther insists that faith is characterised by its ability to see past *visibilia* and recognise the *invisibilia* which lie behind them.” Where we cannot know God through the unaided power of reason, “It is through faith alone that the invisible things about Christ, which distinguish him from all other men, can be discerned.” So, while the existence of a hidden God is recognized, “Luther’s doctrine of faith does not concern a hidden metaphysical realm concealed under that of the senses, but concerns the manner in which God is at work in his world, which is crystallised, concentrated, and focused on the death of Christ on the cross.”⁸ On this basis, McGrath recognizes that “it will be clear that the Christian life is characterised by the unending tension between faith and experience. For Luther, experience can only stand in contradiction to faith, in that revealed truth must be revealed under its opposite form.”⁹

⁶Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985), 167.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 168.

⁹Ibid., 168-169.

Thus there appears to be something more to Luther's thought which Sanders has not explored, a tension which must be maintained. Sanders himself touches on that tension when he writes, "Though Luther often spoke of God's fatherly relationship with us and could, on occasion, speak as though God entered into give-and-take relations with creatures, there remains the other side of his thought, which seems to rule out reciprocal relationships with God."¹⁰ In his final judgment, however, Sanders concludes with Gerrish that these various strands of Luther's thought "cannot be fully harmonized." On that basis, Sanders moves on from Luther and enters upon a discussion of Calvin's doctrinal position.

Has Sanders unfairly hastened past Luther, and thus missed Luther's unique contributions to these theological issues? In order to better understand the genius of Luther's theology at this point, it is helpful first to become better acquainted with Luther's historical and theological context, first in general terms regarding his era, and then in more specific terms of Luther's personal background and training. This will provide us with an accurate context in which to study and discuss Luther's doctrine of God and practice of prayer in subsequent chapters.

Premodern and Modern Worlds

The people of Martin Luther's day lived with a different mindset from the world of today. This different setting, though difficult to define, must be recognized in order to interpret Luther fairly for a 21st century world.

Scholars commonly describe distinctions between ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Historian and theologian Bernhard Lohse has also raised this distinction, but discusses it with caution. He notes that the boundaries of such periods are usually determined by the viewpoint of the scholar and the type of history being studied. "Whatever position we take, we should assume

¹⁰John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 154.

from the very beginning that there is no abrupt transition from one age to another.”¹¹ Ultimately, he offers a fair warning: we should not overlook the fact that we can never do full justice to the particularity and uniqueness of any historical personage by merely defining this person’s place in the flow of history.¹²

In an attempt, therefore, to do justice to Luther’s “particularity and uniqueness,” the customary historical distinctions may be supplemented by considering the sociological distinctions that have recently been drawn between “premodern” and “modern” societies. James Hunter offers definitions of premodernism and modernism. In so doing, Hunter (like Lohse above) notes that these theoretical categories may lead to a distortion of history, for they do not encompass the wide-ranging variations that exist in real life. It is true that some social scientists see the flaws as sufficient cause to abandon the paradigm, but Hunter suggests we recognize the shortcomings of the paradigm and make the best use of it that we can.¹³

Typologically, premodern societies are generally characterized by a population which is diffused throughout numerous, small, and isolated pockets in rural or quasi-rural settings. There is little technological sophistication and little division of labor. Social relationships are personal, intimate, and essential, with the relations and institutions of kinship at the core of individual and social experience. Political hegemony is maintained by elites whose authority is based upon traditional sanctions. The culture of the community, *gemeinschaft*, is typically homogeneous. Consequently, social solidarity is based upon similarity of roles and of worldviews. All spheres of human life are bound by deeply rooted traditional modes of thought and behavior that are almost without exception, religious or sacred in character.

By contrast, modern societies are characterized by a population concentration in centralized urban areas. There is a highly intensified division of labor as well as a high degree of institutional specialization and segmentation. The economic sphere, but the production apparatus in particular, is based upon a highly sophisticated technology. Social relationships are largely impersonal and

¹¹Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (translated by Robert C. Schultz. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 17.

¹²*Ibid.*, 18.

¹³*Ibid.*, 16.

arbitrary with the primary mode of social organization in all spheres being bureaucratic. Political power is, at least ideologically, based in the populace. The society, *gesellschaft*, is further characterized by socio-cultural pluralism, a curious admixture of social and cultural worlds in various degrees of contact with one another. The worldview of modern man is typically rational and secular, not bound by traditional sanctions but critical and open to innovation and experimentation. Solidarity in modern society is based upon the interdependence which is fostered by role and institutional differentiation.¹⁴

Thus the foundation of the premodern world of thought was, in a sense, theological in nature. Traditions were maintained because they were religiously grounded, and thus part of the fundamental fabric of premodern life. Modernism, by contrast, is rationalistic in nature. It critically evaluates all matters that come under consideration and seeks to comprehend all things logically.

Needless to say, these basic societal distinctions impacted the attitudes and work of theologians. Premodern theologians were deeply rooted in the traditional modes of thought and behavior of the church. Holding the position of caretakers of that tradition, they saw themselves as humble servants of God, working within the context of their society. Within this attitude of humility, William Placher notes, “premodern theologies generally did also keep in mind how little they could understand about God. It was only in the modern era, with the emergence of theodicies, that regrettable claims to explain too much turned from being the exception to being the rule.”¹⁵

¹⁴James D. Hunter, “What is Modernity? Historical Roots and Contemporary Features,” in *Faith and Modernity*, eds. Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Oxford, Regnum Books International, 1994), 14-15.

¹⁵William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 211-212.

Kathryn Tanner has pointed out that modernism has attempted to “decontextualize” its inquiry, seeking truth “by holding in abeyance the prejudices of place, the traditions of the past, and the authority of books.”¹⁶ This has led to a condition in which

The complex and multifarious connections that phenomena of the natural and human world exhibit within a context tend to be dissolved. A modern preoccupation with certainty, clarity and linear order sets these aside. The moderns quarrel with the Ancients because of what now seems to be the latter’s intolerable and offensive penchant for the dark density of ambiguous and polysemous discourse, for the concentric circularity and random inclusiveness of orderings according to resemblance. In the search for truth, the modern investigator must favour, on the contrary, the simple and transparently unequivocal, those clear distinctions of identity and difference which can be made linearly syntactic along a single horizontal plane.¹⁷

Placher argues that a modern misunderstanding of premodern theology has led to false definitions of “classical theology.” During years of intense religious conflict, particularly in the post-Reformation era, “the resulting concern for clear ideas and tight arguments, when applied to talk about God, moved Protestant theology away from some of the insights of the Reformation.”¹⁸ This modernist drift in theological language led to what Placher calls “the domestication of transcendence.”

In this course of this modernist drift, many seventeenth-century theologians came to understand God as a being who is not “utterly different from us. God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and infinite goodness are the same sorts of qualities we have, differing only in degree—otherwise we would not be able to analyze them well enough to see their mutual coherence.”¹⁹ This understanding of God contrasted with premodernists such as Luther, Aquinas,

¹⁶Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 124.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁸William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, 76.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 87.

and Calvin, who lived in humble awe of God's transcendence. Premodernists believed that "the words appropriately used about God apply best of all to God, but in a way that none of us can understand."²⁰

Placher describes the paradoxical perspective maintained by the premodernist view:

But if we ask Aquinas or Luther or Calvin, Where is God? or, concerning the tornado or the rain that broke the drought, the airplane crash or our neighbor's act of kindness, Who did it? God or some other agent? they refuse to answer the question posed in those terms. They say that God is present in the world but not contained in it. They sort out actions in terms of those done by human agents, those that follow necessarily from natural causes, the results of chance, and some actions that occur by direct divine intervention. But they also say, with only limited qualifications, that God causes *all* these events.²¹

In other words, where modernists insist on an "either/or" answer to questions such as these, premodernists were willing to embrace a "both/and" answer.

Such a premodernist understanding of God and his transcendence was evident in Luther's teaching:

Luther regards all created things as *larvae* or "masks" of God. The doctrine of divine transcendence does not mean that God is removed from creation. Indeed, Luther stresses the immanence of God in the world in such strong and unguarded language that he sounds at times almost pantheistic. God is not merely present in eucharistic bread; he is present in all common bread and in the wheat from which bread is made. The transcendence of God is not equivalent to his absence. On the contrary, transcendence means that, while God is present in every creature that surrounds me, his presence is inaccessible to me apart from his Word.²²

To a degree, then, Luther should be understood as a premodernist whose perspective of God was distinctly different from modernist views.

²⁰Ibid., 86.

²¹Ibid., 112.

²²David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd Edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 24.

At the same time, Luther's views were also radically different from his premodernist contemporaries. While Placher's distinctions between premodernism and modernism are helpful in their own right, there is nothing in Placher's approach to suggest any vital distinctions between Luther, Aquinas, and Calvin (even though the world went to war over the differences between them). As we will see, Luther transcended the absolute categories about God that were developed and argued by scholasticism. While the followers of Aquinas and the followers of Calvin were further developing definitions and parameters regarding the attributes of God, Luther held to Scripture alone. He rejected Western Aristotelianism in favor of a biblical way of thinking. In this light, perhaps Luther should not be seen so much as a "premodernist" but understood more as a "post-scholastic."

This places Luther in a unique theological position, distinct from that of other premodernists. An awareness of this position is necessary for a full and fair understanding of Luther's writings.

Martin Luther's Early Life and Influences

Born in Eisleben in 1483, Martin Luther was a descendant of farmers who lived on the west side of the Thuringian forest. Martin's parents, Hans and Margarethe Luder, were hard-working and ambitious. They had moved to Eisleben to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the mining industry. In 1484, the family moved to Mansfeld, the heart of the copper mining region, where their reputation "seems to be that of a rather thrifty, steadily rising young couple, respected and accepted by the whole community."²³

Luther's experiences in his early years were "not unusual" for his day. "His parents were pious people who certainly not only shared the widespread superstitions of their time, but who

²³E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 107.

could also think realistically and rationally.” Indeed, “the most conspicuous fact is that nothing in Luther’s childhood and adolescence indicates the nature of his later life and work.”²⁴

Three specific influences should be considered as impacting Luther’s understanding of the doctrine of God and its relationship to the practice of prayer. First, Luther received a nominalist education in both secular and ecclesiastical circles. This offered him a platform for deep and critical investigation. Second, he read and treasured the writings of St. Augustine, which helped to form the foundational substance of Luther’s theology. Third, Luther also grew up with and later confronted the existing tradition of late medieval catechetics. This catechetical system failed to meet the needs of evangelical theology and pushed Luther to expound his teachings in what became popular catechetical writings.

Luther’s Education

Luther received his early education in the town of Magdeburg. There he was exposed briefly to the *Devotio Moderna*, a Dutch reform movement that in the fifteenth century had spread across large parts of Europe. In Luther’s case, this exposure came via the Brethren of the Common Life, who “eagerly devoted themselves to housing and supervising schoolboys away from home.”²⁵

Oberman notes that the Brethren’s aim was to place learning in the service of piety. When the Dominicans attempted to drag the Brethren into a heresy trial for suspicion of anticlerical sentiments, Johannes Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris and a leading

²⁴Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther*, 21.

²⁵Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 96.

council theologian, protected the Brethren and supported their cause at the Council of Constance.

This led to Gerson's great popularity among the Brethren, and with good cause.

“[Gerson's] life also seemed an exemplification of their ideals: though learned, he eschewed the seductive stylishness of scholarly subtleties and was able to find words for the hopes and grievances of his contemporaries. Gerson stood for gradual edification, not revolutionary reform; he was less concerned with the educated elite than with the ordinary Christian, thus embodying the Brethren's ideal of modern piety.”²⁶

Oberman goes on to note that, “Luther, too, valued the patron of the *Devotio Moderna*, calling him ‘Doctor Comforter.’” He respected Gerson as a “pastoral theologian concerned with the care of souls.”²⁷ Still, the *Devotio Moderna* had its limitations, for it

had called for a return to the sources, but all it could offer were *florilegia*, anthologies of quotations to be used as guides for spiritual growth through the imitation of Christ. Now, a new and different world was being opened up, the world of classical and Christian antiquity. . . . The Brethren still concentrated on devotional Bible reading without the distraction of a scholarly apparatus of text variants and linguistic elucidations. But their collections of pious proverbs could no longer provide the key for a precise understanding of the Bible; they were replaced by Hebrew and Greek dictionaries and grammars.²⁸

The influence of these reform ideals cannot be considered deep nor pervasive for Luther, for there is no indication that Luther took serious interest in the reform program of the Brethren.²⁹ Still, Luther's taste of this movement may have provided a foundation for his deep questioning of things commonly accepted rather than a blind acceptance of “pious proverbs.”

After his year at Magdeburg, Luther continued his schooling at the Latin school in Eisenach from 1498 to 1501. In 1501, he began his studies at the University of Erfurt, graduating

²⁶Ibid., 97.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 98.

²⁹Ibid., 97.

with a master of arts degree in 1505. At Erfurt, Luther was schooled in the *via moderna*, which came to be known as nominalism.

In 1497, prior to Luther's arrival at Erfurt, two professors on the faculty, Jodokus Trutfetter and Bartholomaeus Arnoldi, held a disputation in which they defined the core teachings of nominalism. With these principles integrated into their teaching, Trutfetter and Arnoldi wrote handbooks to introduce students to the application of nominalistic criteria.³⁰

“Again and again both of them cited one basic notion as the decisive principle and characteristic of the *via moderna*: all philosophical speculation about the world must be tested by means of experience and reality-based reason, regardless of what even the most respected authorities might say to the contrary. Arnoldi emphasized that this was to be no different in the case of theology: all theological speculation is to be tested by the authority of the Scriptures as interpreted by the Church.”³¹

This is the “Tradition II” which Oberman discusses at some length in *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*. Briefly put, this tradition

refers to the written and unwritten part of the apostolic message as approved by the Church. Here it is not the function of the doctors of Holy Scripture but that of the bishops which is relatively more stressed. The hierarchy is seen to have its “own” oral tradition, to a certain undefined extent independent, not of the Apostles, but of what is recorded in the canonical books. Ecclesiastical traditions, including canon law, are invested with the same degree of authority as that of Holy Scripture.³²

While it is true that Luther's education took a sudden turn when he broke from his law studies to enter the monastery, this change did not sever his ties with nominalism. On the contrary, for all their strictness in regard to behavior, the Augustinian monastic order in Erfurt did allow the pursuit of the *via moderna* in their study of theology. “After all, the Dominicans

³⁰Ibid., 118.

³¹Ibid., 118-119.

³²Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 373.

were pledged to Thomas Aquinas and the Franciscans primarily committed to Duns Scotus. Though the Augustinians had decided for the *via antiqua* in their statutes, in practice they granted freedom of choice.”³³

It is uncertain why Luther decided to join this particular order. The fraternity that the order had established in honor of St. Anne gave the order contact with the surrounding city, allowing people like Luther to get a better understanding of the monastic community. Perhaps it was the combination of this familiarity, the openness of the order to the *via moderna*, and the strict discipline of the Augustinians that attracted Luther to this particular monastery in his break with the outside world.

When Luther was ordained a priest in 1507, he prepared for the celebration of his first mass using Gabriel Biel’s exposition of the canon of the mass. Biel, a nominalist, was the author of “the best theological textbook of the time,” a dogmatics “which was also a survey of the history of Christian thought.”³⁴ Luther was introduced to this latter work by Johannes Nathin, who held the Augustinian chair of theology at the University of Erfurt.³⁵ “Philipp Melancthon later related that Luther had studied his Biel so intensively that the Reformer was able to quote whole pages from memory.”³⁶

Placher notes that “these late medieval theologians like William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel tried to put God’s role in justification into a system—a system that also included an important place for human moral efforts.”³⁷ As he describes it further:

³³Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther*, 130.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 138.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, 38-39.

The rules Biel described preserve places for grace and for divine freedom, but those places exist within a clearly structured system of human ethical struggle, in which God plays a rather carefully defined role and we can grasp the principles behind God's actions. Moreover, while the system requires grace for our salvation, it also requires our very best moral efforts.³⁸

This system was the very thing with which Luther struggled.

Oberman notes that Luther's criticism of scholasticism "did not culminate in the common reproach that its line of argument was too formal, logical, or dialectical. What made his own tradition suspect to him was its belief that Aristotle's philosophy offered a timeless, comprehensive system of interpretation that even provided a key to the Scriptures."³⁹ This objection can be seen in a portion of Luther's *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*:

47. No syllogistic form is valid when applied to divine terms. This in opposition to the Cardinal.⁴⁰

48. Nevertheless it does not for that reason follow that the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity contradicts syllogistic forms. This in opposition to the same new dialecticians and to the Cardinal.

49. If a syllogistic form of reasoning holds in divine matters, then the doctrine of the Trinity is demonstrable and not the object of faith.⁴¹

The categories which were established and argued by scholastics came to be defined and discussed in philosophical distinctions rather than in Scriptural terms. In this respect, the scholasticism which Luther rejected may have been a precursor to modernist attitudes regarding

³⁸Ibid., 39.

³⁹Oberman, *Luther*, 169f. See also Lohse, *Martin Luther*, 30; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. Vol 2, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14*, Daniel E. Poellot, asst. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 124-125.

⁴⁰"Luther refers to the Cardinal of Cambrai, Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420), a French theologian, a commentator on the Sentences of Peter Lombard and guiding spirit of the conciliar movement which led to the calling of the Council of Constance (1414-1418)." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. ed. Vol 31, *Career of the Reformer: I*, Harold J. Grimm, ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 12.

⁴¹Ibid.

God insofar as it permitted philosophical categories to preside over the interpretation of Scripture.

Luther, however, did not see himself bound by scholastic categories. In his rejection of such ratio-philosophical arguments, Luther parted company with his premodernist contemporaries by returning to the simple (albeit at times paradoxical) words of Scripture. In so doing, Luther returned to the early Church's approach to the Bible. Oberman refers to this as "Tradition I," which

represents the sufficiency of Holy Scripture as understood by the Fathers and doctors of the Church. In the case of disagreement between these interpreters, Holy Scripture has the final authority. The horizontal concept of Tradition is by no means denied here, but rather understood as the mode of reception of the *fides* or *veritas* contained in Holy Scripture. Since the appeal to extrascriptural tradition is rejected, the validity of ecclesiastical traditions and *consuetudines* is not regarded as "self-supporting" but depends on its relation to the faith handed down by God in Holy Scripture.⁴²

Clearly, Luther was trained as a nominalist, which meant that Luther was trained to examine and critique no matter how well-known or established the "authority" might be. The depth of this influence on Luther is still debated today. Lohse writes, "scholars have repeatedly asked whether late medieval Ockhamism and the critical, even destructive questions that it raised against Thomism did not constitute the negative presupposition for the gradual development of Luther's Reformation theology."⁴³ In any event, as one taught and trained to challenge proponents of the *via antiqua* (Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus), Luther did not simply absorb and accept their theology; he challenged it. In so doing, he returned to the earlier Church's view of Scripture and grounded his teaching on Scripture alone.

⁴²Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 372.

⁴³Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther*, 22.

The Influence of St. Augustine

While it may be impossible to establish a cause-and-effect connection between Augustine and Luther on the specific issues of God's immutability and the practice of prayer, it seems apparent that Augustine's teachings on God and prayer would have been formative for Luther's doctrinal development. We do not know exactly when he first began reading Augustine, yet the writings of Augustine came to be one of the greatest influences on the theology of Luther. Luther cited him often and expressed great appreciation for the things Augustine had written. In his *Preface to the Complete Edition of a German Theology*, Luther made it clear that "no book except the Bible and St. Augustine has come to my attention from which I have learned more about God, Christ, man, and all things."⁴⁴

Augustine clearly and definitively described his theology of God in his work *On the Trinity*. There he argued that God cannot be changeable in substance, for God's substance defines God's being.

He is, however, without doubt, a substance, or, if it be better so to call it, an essence, . . . But other things that are called essences or substances admit of accidents, whereby a change, whether great or small, is produced in them. But there can be no accident of this kind in respect to God; and therefore He who is God is the only unchangeable substance or essence, to whom certainly BEING itself, whence comes the name of essence, most especially and most truly belongs. For that which is changed does not retain its own being; and that which can be changed, although it be not actually changed, is able not to be that which it had been; and hence that which not only is not changed, but also cannot at all be changed, alone falls most truly, without difficulty or hesitation, under the category of BEING.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Martin Luther, *American Edition*, 31:75.

⁴⁵St. Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity." Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol 3, Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 88.

Just as Augustine saw God as unchangeable in substance, neither did he allow for discussion of anything accidental in God, “because there is nothing changeable or that may be lost.”⁴⁶

How then shall we make it good that nothing is said of God according to accident, except because nothing happens to His nature by which He may be changed, so that those things are relative accidents which happen in connection with some change of the things of which they are spoken. . . . In us therefore some change does take place; for we were worse before we fled to Him, and we become better by fleeing to Him: but in Him there is no change.⁴⁷

Thus while Augustine recognized that changes with respect to time and creation may be considered relative accidents with respect to God, he definitely defended the immutability of God.

Augustine’s writings on prayer may also have had influence on Martin Luther. One of Augustine’s most helpful and descriptive treatments of prayer appeared in Letter 130, written to Proba. In this letter, Augustine offered a description of the relationship between prayer and God. As Timothy Maschke has written, “To Proba, Augustine clearly suggests that ‘we ought to ask, without doubting, what God considers and not what we ourselves will.’”⁴⁸

Augustine argued for prayer as, to quote Maschke, a “gracious conformation” to God’s will, “the humble restructuring or reforming of the Christian’s life to the divine will as empowered by the assurance of God’s grace.”⁴⁹ M. Jackson seems to agree with this assessment when he writes that the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer “is the penitent’s opportunity to show

⁴⁶Ibid., 89.

⁴⁷Ibid., 96.

⁴⁸Timothy Maschke, “St. Augustine’s Theology of Prayer: Gracious Conformation.” in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine Presbyter Factus Sum*, edited by Joseph T. Lienhard, et. al. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 435.

⁴⁹Ibid., 431.

the consistency of his spiritual attitude while his spiritual aspirations are being re-formed by making word and deed go together.”⁵⁰

For Augustine, “prayer is clearly conversation with God, a communication with a personal source of power and help beyond himself.”⁵¹ More basic than this, Augustine understood prayer as the expression of human desires.⁵² Even so, Augustine never saw prayer as a means to manipulate God, nor even to inform him of man’s desires. In *The Teacher*, Augustine’s son, Adeodatus, said, “Now we use words when we pray; but it is not proper to believe that God is taught anything by us or reminded of anything.”⁵³

According to this way of thinking, we do not pray to make our requests clear to God, but rather, we pray to make our requests clear to ourselves. This allows us to consider and compare the requests of our will with the will of God. The primary purpose of prayer, according to Augustine, is to bring about a change in us. Faithful Christian prayer brings us into conformity with God’s will.

Fixed prayers both enable individuals to mark their progress in their spiritual journey and also encourage them toward greater Christian maturity. Words serve as benchmarks for the Christian’s progress toward maturity as members of the Body of Christ. In addition, words make Christians more aware of what it is that they actually desire. The use of words in prayer, then, has the purpose of developing those who pray spiritually and leads them forward toward gracious conformation.⁵⁴

⁵⁰M.G.St.A. Jackson, “The Lord’s Prayer in St. Augustine,” in *Studia Patristica Vol XXVII: Cappadocian Fathers, Greek Authors after Nicea, Augustine, Donatism, and Pelagianism*, edited by Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1993), 320.

⁵¹Maschke, “St. Augustine’s Theology of Prayer,” 432.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Quoted in Maschke, “St. Augustine’s Theology of Prayer,” 433.

⁵⁴Ibid., 434.

This fits well with Augustine's understanding of God's immutability. Since God is unchangeable, we sinners must change, or "conform," to meet him. This is most true of the Lord's Prayer, which serves as "*the* prayer of conformation; by it the Christian believer is able to express the ultimate act of conformation, 'to pray only in a spiritual manner.'"⁵⁵ Jackson notes that, according to Augustine, there is no room for personal gain in prayer that is consonant with the Lord's Prayer.⁵⁶

How might Augustine answer those who insist that the human free will be given greater recognition in terms of its power and influence? Jackson points out that Augustine

at least is clear in his own mind that his doctrine of grace does not destroy the exercise of the will; rather it places it in a re-formative context of creative dependence on God. Grace brings out the full flowering of the will. Pelagianism, to Augustine, renders superfluous all prayer by denying the continuing impact of the Fall and usurping the eschatological perspective of God's judgment.⁵⁷

In Augustine, therefore, Luther would have found a practice of prayer that sought man's "gracious conformation" with God's will. This perspective of prayer grew out of Augustine's strong statement and defense of the immutability of God. One may ask, however, if there remains something to prayer beyond "gracious conformation," something not fully uncovered by Augustine. This question will be further explored in the writings of Luther.

Late Medieval Catechetics

A third and important area to consider in the background of Luther's writings, especially regarding his teachings on prayer in the *Large* and *Small Catechisms*, is that of the catechisms of late medieval times. We do not know which, if any, of these catechisms Luther might have

⁵⁵Ibid., 436.

⁵⁶Jackson, "The Lord's Prayer in St. Augustine," 318.

⁵⁷Ibid., 317.

personally known and used, yet it seems probable that the Luther family would have continued in the catechetical tradition current in the church of their day. As a monk and priest, Luther would certainly have become familiar with that tradition. This, in turn, would have formed a foundation from which Luther developed his own catechetical work.

Reu describes the three-fold method of instruction employed in the medieval church. In domestic catechization, parents and sponsors were encouraged to teach their children, often using the tracts and books provided by various authors. This instruction was measured and tested in the confessional, where priests were to examine the penitents at least once per year. Religious instruction also took place in the Latin schools and convent schools, where students were expected to memorize certain prayers and parts of the catechism.⁵⁸

Reu's assessment of the effectiveness of this method is rather negative. He writes, "If, however, we conclude from these facts that the Medieval Church did justice to her task of teaching or 'ushered in a golden period of education' (so J. Janssen), we should commit a grievous error."⁵⁹ The efforts of medieval catechesis, therefore, should not be perceived as successful or even adequate in achieving their aim.

In a further examination of the catechetical tradition leading up to Luther's day, Gottfried Krodel notes that, "it was the confession of sins, the preparation for it, and its experience by young and old, which was the matrix in which the late medieval church developed what we would call catechetical work."⁶⁰ As instruction for mandatory confession became the focus and

⁵⁸M. Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A History of Its Origin, Its Distribution and Its Use* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1929), 1-3.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁰Gottfried Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism in the Context of Late Medieval Catechetical Literature," *Concordia Journal* 25, no. 4 (October 1999): 365.

setting for teaching, the Decalogue quickly came to dominate medieval catechesis.⁶¹ “If we understand ‘catechetical materials’ in the sense that has been shaped by SC and LC, then the manuals for confession were the catechisms of the late medieval church, even though they did not have that title, and their primary purpose was not *catechesis* but instruction about how and what to confess to the priest.”⁶²

Discussions of prayer in medieval catechesis did not focus on instruction but on obedience. Krodel argues:

In private confession, knowledge of and obedience to the Lord’s Prayer (together with other prayers), the Creed, and the Ten Commandments was tested in a system of works-righteousness (which in certain circumstances can be a religious mechanism): the more you obey the commandments, the better is your faith and the more effective are your prayers. Conversely, the less you obey the commandments, the poorer is your faith, and the less effective are your prayers.⁶³

Catechesis on prayer, therefore, did not explain the theology behind the practice of prayer. It did not even concern itself with understanding the text of the prayer. The focus, instead was simply on properly and obediently repeating the words. For example, the “instruction” given in Dietrich Kolde’s “A Fruitful Mirror” focused on the method rather than the meaning of prayer:

When you are about to pray, prepare your heart for great fervor and devotion, because you are about to speak with such a great Lord and it is very important for you, because the Lord has much to hold against you and he will condemn you to eternal death unless you can beg his forgiveness. Therefore you should go to a private place and get on your knees as Solomon did, and stretch out your arms as Jesus did on the cross, and lie down flat on your face as Jesus did in the orchard, or sit as Mary Magdalene did at the feet of our dear Lord; and you should cast your eyes down to the ground as the public sinner did at the temple, and you should also occasionally lift up your eyes toward heaven as Mary and the apostles did at the ascension of our Lord. And then you should ask in three ways. First, you should ask as a criminal who asks the judge not to sentence him to death. Second, you should ask as a poor man asking a rich lord for gifts and

⁶¹Ibid., 366, 368.

⁶²Ibid., 367.

⁶³Ibid., 371.

possessions. Third, you should ask as a dear child fondly asks his dear father. Additionally, you should think or say before your prayer: O dear Lord, my debt is great, my time is short, my sins are many. O dear Lord, I cannot repay you: Have mercy on me. I hope I will never anger you again.⁶⁴

In the succeeding chapters, Kolde directed the reader to the texts of the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the prayers for the canonical hours, and other prayers to the saints. Kolde's instruction culminated in rosaries that consist of "150 Hail Marys and 15 Our Fathers."⁶⁵ These prayers specifically and prayer in general were taught as little more than a "religious mechanism."⁶⁶

Luther clearly viewed these catechetical tools as wholly inadequate for instructing evangelical churches. As Luther himself noted in his treatise on the German Mass:

First, the German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism. Catechism means the instruction in which the heathen who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they should believe, know, do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith. . . . This instruction or catechization I cannot put better or more plainly than has been done from the beginning of Christendom and retained till now, i.e., in these three parts, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Our Father. These three plainly and briefly contain exactly everything that a Christian needs to know.⁶⁷

Luther had preached on the parts of the catechism numerous times in his career and had even published various catechetical tracts, yet for a long time he felt himself too busy to produce a complete catechism. In February of 1525, he commissioned Justus Jonas and Agricola "with the preparation of a '*catechismus puerorum*' When this project came to naught, Luther

⁶⁴Dietrich Kolde, "A Fruitful Mirror or Small Handbook for Christians" in Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran. Texts and Studies in Religion Volume Thirteen* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 87.

⁶⁵Ibid., 120.

⁶⁶Krodel, "Luther's Work on the Catechism," 370.

⁶⁷Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*. gen. ed. Lehmann, Helmut T., Vol 53, *Liturgy and Hymns* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 64-65.

decided to write a catechism himself, even though several catechisms had already been issued by others.”⁶⁸

Luther saw the critical need for good catechetical material when he participated in the Saxon Visitations of 1528 and realized the terrible state of catechesis in the church.⁶⁹ The medieval catechisms would not serve to teach evangelical doctrine and practice. Something far better was needed, and that something would manifest itself as Luther expounded his teaching on God and his theology and practice of prayer in his own *Catechisms*.

Conclusion

Luther’s theological contributions to the doctrine of God and the practice of prayer appear to have been marginalized in the debates involving open theism. Sanders’ rejection of Luther can easily be described as the result of modernism imposing itself on the premodernist/post-scholastic thought of Luther without fully and fairly understanding Luther. If we would hear Luther speak to the issues of today, we must first learn to hear him rightly. This involves understanding the historical and cultural context in which Luther wrote, as well as considering certain major influences pertinent to the discussion at hand. A better understanding of this background sets the stage for a more careful examination of his contributions to the discussion of God’s immutability and its relationship to the doctrine and practice of prayer.

Writing, as he did, in a premodernist age, Luther’s words must be understood as distinct from a modernist world view. Modernism has sought to explain everything about God in unequivocal terms. In the process of doing so, modernists have taken concepts unique to God

⁶⁸M. Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*, 12.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 16-17. See also the Prefaces to the Small Catechism and Large Catechism of Martin Luther in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., translated by Charles Arand, et. al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 347f., 379f.

and limited their definition so that they apply to both God and man, differing only in matter of degree. Premodernists, such as Luther, did not so limit God, but recognized God as transcending our understanding. Rather than seeking to close logical gaps in our comprehension of God, premodernists were content to let those apparent contradictions stand.

This does not mean that Luther's words are uncertain or ambiguous. As we shall see, Luther was not afraid to make very bold, clear statements about God. He did not anchor those statements in what appeared to be logical, but in the revelation of Scripture. Though such statements might pose a question or create confusion for us and our modern way of thinking, Luther understood revelation as unique to God and therefore surpassing our understanding.

Certain factors in Luther's background come together in a consideration of Luther's teaching of God's immutability and the related doctrine and practice of prayer. Trained as a nominalist, Luther's education helped to prepare him to ask questions and even challenge established church authorities. Eventually, Luther struggled against the very system in which he had been trained. He came to reject Aristotelianism and transcend scholasticism, following the tradition of the early Church and founding his theological doctrine and practice on Scripture alone.

In the course of Luther's studies, he was also influenced by the writings of St. Augustine. Here, Luther was presented with a decisively immutable God. Since, according to Augustine, God cannot be changed in any way, God cannot be changed through prayer either. Augustine understood prayer as seeking a change in man rather than looking for any change in God. Yet Augustine's perspective may have insufficiently comprehended all that God has given in setting before us the gift and privilege of prayer.

Finally, Luther was raised in a world dominated by medieval catechetics, which insisted on a careful obedience and virtually blind submission to the patterns and traditions of the church. In the course of communicating the things that needed to be memorized and repeated, mostly in preparation for the confessional, medieval catechetics failed to articulate the theology behind its prayers and practices. In short, medieval catechetics proved inadequate to the task of teaching evangelical theology, forcing Luther to prepare his own catechetical works that expressed his doctrine of God and his theology and practice of prayer.

CHAPTER THREE

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF GOD

Introduction

On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X issued the papal bull, *Exsurge Domini*, against Martin Luther. Forty-one articles from Luther's writings were condemned as heresy (although no basis was given for such condemnation).¹ According to the bull, "Luther was in error on original sin, concupiscence, penance, justification by faith, the Lord's Supper, the true treasures of the Church, indulgences, excommunication, the power of the Pope, general councils, good works, free will, purgatory, etc."² This condemnation, published in German in September of 1520,³ called for Luther to recant his teaching or face excommunication from the Roman church.

Luther rejected Rome's call to recant. While his burning of the papal bull may have been an impulsive action, his attack on the framework upon which the Roman Church had been built was not.⁴ After the bull was issued, Luther publicly defended himself through four written responses: *Adversus execrabilem Antichristi bullam* (November 1520); *Wider die Bulle des Endchrists* (November, 1520); *Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X.*

¹Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*. Translated by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 48.

²E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 485.

³Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. ed. Vol 32, *Career of the Reformer: II*, George W. Forell, ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 5.

⁴Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 491.

novissimam damnatorum (December, 1520); *Grund und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind* (March, 1521).⁵

One of the most notable responses to Luther came from the pen of the famous humanist, Desiderius Erasmus. For years Erasmus had avoided entering into conflict with Luther, for he sympathized with many of Luther's positions. Erasmus had wanted to see Luther "administer a thorough house-cleaning to the Roman court in order to cleanse and purify it from the worldliness and corruption which had taken possession of it, but to stop short of anything which might lead to a division in Church unity."⁶ At the same time, overt support for the Lutherans might create difficulties for Erasmus, jeopardizing his own safety and interests. "So he played fast and loose with them for several years . . . until at last Luther definitely classed him where he rightly belonged, namely, amongst his opponents."⁷

In November of 1523, Julius de' Medici was elected pope, taking the name of Clement VII. Early in his reign, "he intimated that he was well disposed towards Erasmus . . . As usual, Erasmus was flattered at this manifestation of good will on the part of the new Pontiff, and hastened to assure his Holiness of his gladness at hearing the news of his elevation to the supreme head of the Church."⁸ Critics of Erasmus, who had been silenced under Pope Adrian, now renewed their attacks and attempted to number Erasmus among the Lutherans.⁹ To protect

⁵Luther, *American Edition*, 32:5.

⁶John Joseph Mangan, *Life, Character & Influence of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, Volume 2* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1927), 113.

⁷*Ibid.*, 108.

⁸*Ibid.*, 230.

⁹Erika Rummel, *Erasmus and His Catholic Critics II 1523-1536* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf Publishers, 1989), 4.

himself, Erasmus wrote to Pope Clement “to assure the Pope of his unswerving fidelity to the Holy See and his total dissociation from Luther and his party.”¹⁰

Many looked to Erasmus to answer Luther’s assertions. Henry VII of England, Pope Clement VII, Duke George of Saxony, and others sought Erasmus’ response to Luther, not just as a statement of opposition to Luther’s teachings, but also, it seems, as a confession and proof of Erasmus’ own faith. In a letter to an old friend, Erasmus admitted giving in to these pressures, albeit unwillingly. “At Rome they make me out to be a Lutheran, but in Germany I am held as an extreme anti-Lutheran. . . . urged as I am on all sides by kings and my own friends, I have assumed that task [of writing against Luther], although I know that I shall bring about nothing but a renewal of these tumults.”¹¹

Finally, in 1524, Erasmus published his *De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe Seu Collatio* (A Diatribe or Discourse On the Freedom of the Will). This work was not intended to be a personal attack on Luther but rather a discussion of the theology proposed in Luther’s *Assertio* of 1520.¹² Mangan offers a fair depiction of the tenor and tone of the *Diatribe*, in which Erasmus “was exceedingly courteous to Luther, and manifested a disposition to propitiate him and at the same time to win him back to orthodox methods of thinking. . . . his intention was not to dogmatize, but to elicit the truth.”¹³

¹⁰Mangan, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 233.

¹¹Ibid., 235.

¹²Philip S. Watson, translator, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 33, *Career of the Reformer III* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 8-9.

¹³Mangan, *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 247.

Yet Luther was not to be swayed from his way of thinking nor from the truth he had discovered in the Scriptures. Erasmus challenged Luther's assertions regarding the place of man's free will in regard to salvation. Luther's reply to Erasmus was not only pointed and thorough, it also became one of the most fundamental works of his theological career: *De servo arbitrio*.

It has been asked whether Luther eventually changed his mind about his position on man's free will. On the basis of Luther's own words, McSorley has said, "It seems very unlikely that he did. Twelve years after he wrote *De servo arbitrio*, Luther could still write to Wolfgang Capito (July 9, 1537), in reference to the forthcoming publication of his collected works: 'I consider none of my books to be worthwhile, except perhaps *De servo arbitrio* and the *Catechism*.'"¹⁴

Published in 1525, *De servo* was not written as what we today would recognize as a systematic theology. In the style of the day, Luther answered Erasmus's Diatribe point by point. While effective in terms of refutation, this approach did not allow Luther to give a full and systematic presentation of his own position. This, in turn, has probably contributed to the ongoing debate over the precise meaning of Luther's words.

Although the chief article of debate revolved around man's free will, that is not the only topic treated in *De servo arbitrio*. In the course of his arguments against Erasmus, Luther provides considerable commentary from the Scriptures on numerous teachings, many of which

¹⁴Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 9.

are fundamental to Lutheran doctrine. In several places, Luther specifically comments on the doctrine of God's knowledge, foreknowledge, and immutability.

The teachings of Luther and the statements of Erasmus that elicited them provide insight into their views on God's attributes and their relationship to the issue of man's free will. While Erasmus and Luther wrote to a sixteenth century audience, certain aspects of their dispute offer opportunities to connect with current discussions. An examination of Erasmus' *Diatribes* reveals parallels to certain elements of modern open theism. This, in turn, implies that Luther's *De servo arbitrio* may be helpful in addressing the concerns and positions raised by open theists today.

Erasmus' *Diatribes* or Discourse On the Freedom of the Will

While the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* identified several areas of dispute with Luther's theology, Erasmus made it clear that he confined his discussion of Luther's controversial teachings to only one doctrine.¹⁵ That doctrine, the target of Erasmus' *Diatribes*, was Luther's assertion that man is without free will and that all happens by necessity. Erasmus quotes this doctrine directly from Article 36 of Luther's *Assertio*:¹⁶

That nobody may suppose me to have invented the charge, I will cite his own words from his "assertions": "Wherefore," he says, "it is needful to retract this article. For I was wrong in saying that free choice before grace is a reality only in name. I should have said simply: 'free choice is in reality a fiction, or a name without reality.' For no one has it in his own power to think a good or bad thought, but everything (as Wyclif's article condemned at Constance rightly teaches) happens by absolute necessity."¹⁷

¹⁵Gordon E. Rupp and Philip S. Watson, trans. and ed., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 36.

¹⁶*Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum* (December, 1520).

¹⁷Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 64.

The publication of Luther's assertion was extremely troubling to Erasmus. Even supposing there was some truth in this doctrine, he asked, "What could be more useless than to publish this paradox to the world?"¹⁸ If all were governed by "necessity," then who would bother with the effort to amend a sinful life? Luther's assertion might find a place for discussion "by the learned world, or even in the theological schools, although I should not even think this to be expedient save with restraint."¹⁹ Outside of that limited sphere, such words would only serve to undermine efforts toward pious living. After all, "Who will be able to bring himself to love God with all his heart when He created hell seething with eternal torments in order to punish his own misdeeds in his victims as though he took delight in human torments?"²⁰

Erasmus had difficulty with those who refused to fully recognize and credit the place and power of human free will in man's pious life and eternal salvation. Erasmus' first comments on this issue may have been directed at an oversimplification of the Thomistic position.²¹ He spoke of those who

attribute most of all to grace and practically nothing to free choice, yet do not entirely remove it, for they deny that man can will the good without particular grace, they deny that he can make a beginning, they deny that he can progress, they deny he can reach his goal without the principal and perpetual aid of divine grace. Their view seems probable enough in that it leaves man to study and strive, but it does not leave aught for him to ascribe to his own powers.²²

¹⁸Ibid., 41.

¹⁹Ibid., 42.

²⁰Ibid., 41.

²¹Ernst F. Winter, ed. and trans. *Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1961), 30.

²²Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 53.

Erasmus also opposed what, according to Winter, was most likely Carlstadt's view.²³ He spoke against "those who contend that free choice is of no avail save to sin, and that grace alone accomplishes good works in us, not by or with free choice but in free choice, so that our will does nothing more than wax in the hand of the craftsman when it receives the particular shape that pleases him."²⁴ In their fear of any trust in human merits, those who hold this view (as Winter translates it) "go too far."²⁵

Erasmus voiced his greatest opposition to what he understood to be Luther's teaching. This view Erasmus described as, "the view of all those who say that free choice is a mere empty name, nor does it avail either in the case of the angels or in Adam or in us, either before or after grace, but it is God who works evil as well as good in us, and all things that happen come about by sheer necessity."²⁶ This teaching, along with that of Carlstadt's, were the focus and concern of Erasmus' *Diatribes*.

How, then, did Erasmus define free will? "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them."²⁷ Elaborating further, Erasmus wrote:

This power of the soul with which we judge, . . . is obscured by sin, but not altogether extinguished. The will with which we choose or refuse was thus so far depraved that by its natural powers it could not amend its ways, but once its

²³Winter, *Erasmus-Luther*, 30.

²⁴Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 53.

²⁵Winter, *Erasmus-Luther*, 31.

²⁶Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 54.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 47.

liberty has been lost, it was compelled to serve that sin to which it had once for all consented.

But, by the grace of God, when sin has been forgiven, the will is made free to the extent that, according to the views of the Pelagians,²⁸ even apart from the help of new grace it could attain eternal life.²⁹

What Erasmus claimed to offer as a definition of free will is what he believed to be a simple summary of the views of the orthodox Fathers, who

distinguish three stages of human action: the first is thought, the second will, the third accomplishment. In the first and the third they give no place for the working of free choice; our soul is impelled by grace alone to think good thoughts, and by grace alone is moved to perform what it has thought. Yet in the second phase, that is, in consenting, grace and the human will act together, but in such a way that grace is the principal cause and the secondary cause our will. Since, however, the sum of the matter is attributed to him who brings the whole to performance, man cannot achieve anything by his own good works, and even the fact that he can consent and cooperate with divine grace is itself the work of God.³⁰

Erasmus defended this view with numerous passages of Scripture, and concluded by reaffirming his position. “Thus to those who maintain that man can do nothing without the help of the grace of God, and conclude that therefore no works of men are good—to these we shall oppose a thesis to me much more probable, that there is nothing that man cannot do with the help of the grace of God, and that therefore all the works of man can be good.”³¹

²⁸At this point in his translation of Erasmus, Ernst Winter offers an explanatory footnote regarding Pelagianism. “*Pelagius*, a British monk of the late 4th and early 5th centuries AD, was a contemporary of Augustine. His followers were known as Pelagians. His doctrine, Pelagianism, taught that the will is free only when influenced neither toward good nor toward evil. Man is endowed with original perfection. Augustine formed his own view on original sin and divine grace in opposition to Pelagianism, declared heretical by the Church Council of Ephesus (431). The *Semi-Pelagians* of the later 5th century taught a modified form, condemned in 529. Erasmus’ interpretation of Pelagianism is less critical than that of the Church. Luther thus inclines to classify Erasmus as a Pelagian, something he distinctly abhors.” Winter, 23.

²⁹Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 48-49.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 80.

³¹*Ibid.*, 85.

Here he effectively turns the argument on its head. For Erasmus, all the works of man can be good with the help of the grace of God. He avoids the question of whether man's works are good without the grace of God. Erasmus' definition of free will is, as McSorley rightly puts it, "seriously defective."³² In terms of his argument against Luther, Erasmus missed Luther's point "that the thesis of the unfree will is a question of what fallen man can do without grace."³³ Erasmus' failure to maintain this distinction clouds the clarity of his presentation.

It is clear that Erasmus' work reflected the neo-Semipelagian views of Ockham and Biel. McSorley excuses Erasmus for holding these views, claiming that Erasmus was ignorant of the canons of the II Synod of Orange which had condemned semi-Pelagianism. It is true that Erasmus may have been saved from the charge of supporting heresy by virtue of his ignorance of Orange II and because of his obedience to the church.³⁴ The semi-Pelagianism Luther found in the *Diatribes* remained a problem, however, as it created further conflict between Luther and Erasmus rather than helping them to address the differences between them.

In so "reflecting the theological unclarity of his time,"³⁵ Erasmus risked being charged with a heretical stand alongside the Pelagians (or, at least, the semi-Pelagians). Nor did Erasmus try to defend himself by using the detailed arguments of Scholasticism on the subjects of free will or the foreknowledge of God, for Erasmus "opposed Scholasticism and the medieval *Summae*."³⁶

³²McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* 283.

³³Ibid., 284.

³⁴Ibid., 288f.

³⁵Ibid., 289.

³⁶Bernard Holm, "Erasmus," in *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, 792.

Instead, Erasmus only alluded to such arguments while he attempted to keep his position basic and rather “non-committal” in nature. As he put it, “As far as I am concerned, I admit that many different views about free choice have been handed down from the ancients about which I have, as yet, no fixed conviction, except that I think there to be a certain power of free choice.”³⁷

What sort of God, then, did Erasmus describe as compatible with his understanding of man’s free will? First of all, it should be clear that Erasmus recognized God’s vast superiority over man. He clearly wrote, “there are some secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply and, if we try to do so, then the deeper we go, the darker and darker it becomes, by which means we are led to acknowledge the unsearchable majesty of the divine wisdom, and the weakness of the human mind.”³⁸

Erasmus held to the church’s long-standing teaching of God’s immutability without defining further what that immutability means. As for those passages in Scripture that might suggest God to be mutable, Erasmus noted that “Holy Scripture has its own language, adapted to our understanding. There God is angry, grieves, is indignant, rages, threatens, hates, and again has mercy, repents, changes his mind, not that such changes take place in the nature of God, but that to speak thus is suited to our infirmity and slowness.”³⁹

Certain Bible passages “seem to attribute a certain contingency and even mutability to God,” an example of which is Jeremiah 18:8-10:

And if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it. And if any time I declare concerning a

³⁷Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 37.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 38.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 41.

nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it.

“But,” Erasmus continued, “we must not forget that here the Holy Scripture is speaking after the manner of men, as in other places also it does quite often, since there is no mutability in God.”⁴⁰

Citing further examples from II Kings (20:1, 5) and II Samuel (12:10), Erasmus suggested that the doctrine of God’s immutability actually supports his argument in favor of free will.

In passages like this a figurative use of language excludes mutability from God, so it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that there is in us a will that can turn one way or the other; or, if of necessity it is bent toward evil, why is sin imputed? If of necessity it is turned toward the good, why should God from being angry become propitious when there is no further grace due to us?⁴¹

If God is immutable and all things were to happen by necessity (as Luther suggested), then God would also be responsible for man’s sin. Erasmus avoided saying this by contending that if man has the ability to choose freely between good and evil, then God can justly charge man with the guilt of sin. Since God does not and cannot change, Erasmus argued that man must have free will, otherwise God would be culpable for injustice or evil.

Complications arise when God’s relationship to the future is more closely examined. If God’s foreknowledge is infallible, can one speak of a truly free will in man? One might assume man’s will cannot be considered free since his future is already known.

Erasmus finds sufficient explanation in the idea that foreknowledge does not impose necessity on our will. “For prescience is not the cause of things which happen, for it befalls us to foreknow many things which do not happen because we foreknew them, but rather we foreknow

⁴⁰Ibid., 58.

⁴¹Ibid.

them because they are going to happen. Thus the eclipse of the sun does not happen because astrologers predict its occurrence, but they predict its occurrence because it was bound to happen.”⁴²

While such statements may hold true for the natural world, and even for human beings, the subject becomes more difficult when we consider the will and foreknowledge of God. Erasmus accepts the argument that, “For God to will and foreknow are the same thing; in some way it must be that he wills what he foreknows as future, and that which he does not hinder, though it is in his power to do so. . . . Thus the will of God, since it is the principal cause of all things that take place, seems to impose necessity on our will.”⁴³

To argue his way out of this seeming necessity, Erasmus suggested that “not all necessity excludes free will, since God the Father necessarily begets the Son, and yet begets him freely and willingly, for he is not forced to do so. Some necessity can also be posited of human affairs which nonetheless does not exclude a liberty of our will.” Erasmus then turned to the example of Judas Iscariot, noting that

God foreknew (and what he foreknew he in some way intended) that Judas would betray the Lord. Thus if you look at the infallible foreknowledge of God, and his immutable will, Judas was necessarily going to turn traitor to his Lord, and yet Judas could change his intention, and certainly had it in his power to refuse to undertake his treacherous design. You say, “What if he had changed his mind?” The foreknowledge of God would not have been falsified, nor his will hindered, since he himself would have foreknown and intended beforehand that Judas should change his mind. Those who argue such things with Scholastic subtlety admit a necessity of consequence, but not of the consequent (for with these terms they are wont to expound their view). For they have it that it must necessarily follow that Judas should betray the Lord if God willed this to happen with his

⁴²Ibid., 66.

⁴³Ibid., 66-67.

eternal will, but they deny that it follows that Judas therefore betrayed necessarily, since this wicked business originated in a perverse will.⁴⁴

Erasmus recognized the apparent problems associated with God's foreknowledge and will, and claimed that they could be resolved through the scholastic distinction of antecedent and consequent necessity. At this point in his translation of Erasmus, Ernst Winter comments:

On predestination Erasmus is very elementary and orthodox. He does not enter in the problem of the 'foreseen merits' of the just but merely states Valla's view that foreknowledge is not predetermination. Scholastic philosophy distinguishes antecedent necessity (*necessitas consequentis*) from the consequent necessity (*necessitas consequentiae*). As God foresees the free acts of men, Erasmus argues, they are determined *not* by antecedent necessity, a necessity which would determine the free will of the agent, but by consequent necessity, the historical fact that, granted free choice, the act would inevitably take place.⁴⁵

Erasmus did not pursue this scholastic argument in great detail. On the contrary, he attempted to maintain the simple position that God foresees what man will do, but man still has the free will to determine his future.

Erasmus' understanding of the connection between God's grace and man's free will has significant implications for the ethical actions and holy life of man, particularly the place of prayer. Where Wyclif (and also Luther) ascribed all things to sheer necessity, Erasmus asked, "What room does he leave either for our prayers or for our endeavors?"⁴⁶ In his epilogue, Erasmus further objected to the imposition of necessity on the grounds that it makes God's commands toward pious living pointless.

What is the point of so many admonitions, so many precepts, so many exhortations, so many expostulations, if of ourselves we do nothing, but God in

⁴⁴Ibid., 68.

⁴⁵Winter, *Erasmus-Luther*, 52.

⁴⁶Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 43.

accordance with his immutable will does everything in us, both to will and to perform the same? He wishes us to pray without ceasing, to watch, to fight, to contend for the prize of eternal life. Why does he wish anything to be unceasingly prayed for which he has already decreed either to give or not to give, and cannot change his decrees, since he is immutable?⁴⁷

To explain his own understanding of the place of prayer and other ethical actions, Erasmus described a framework that consisted of four different varieties of grace. The first grace, Erasmus said, “is implanted by nature and vitiated by sin (but, as we have sin, not extinguished).”⁴⁸ The second variety is, “peculiar grace, with which God in his mercy arouses the sinner wholly without merit to repent.”⁴⁹ Aided by this grace,

by his alms and prayers and his devotion to sacred studies, and by listening to sermons, as well as by appeals to good men for their prayers and other deeds morally good, as they call them, he behaves as a candidate for the highest grace. . . . There is, therefore, a natural grace; there is a stimulating grace (albeit imperfect); there is the grace that makes the will effective, which we called cooperating, which allows us to perform that which we have undertaken to do; there is a grace that carries to conclusion.⁵⁰

Erasmus thus taught that prayer and other pious activities, motivated by an initial grace, combine with “cooperating” grace. In so doing, they become part of man’s “good works” that help toward the “grace that carries to conclusion,” that is, salvation.⁵¹

Erasmus attempted to maintain the doctrine of God’s immutability, yet still allow for man’s free will as an active force in salvation. According to his own words, he clearly saw a

⁴⁷Ibid., 87.

⁴⁸Ibid., 52.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 53.

⁵¹Hence McSorley’s charge regarding Erasmus’ neo-Semipelagianism.

superior, immutable God as the cause for all good. To subject man to necessity (as Luther did) would make God responsible for man's sin and unjust in condemning man for that sin. God's grace must, therefore, cooperate with man for salvation; without God's activity, man cannot be saved. For Erasmus, this meant there had to be a definite place for the working of human free will in the course of man's salvation.

Among the actions of that free will, Erasmus clearly listed the activity of prayer. He indicated that through prayer (as well as other pious activities) man puts himself in position to receive the "highest grace" that completes his salvation. In this quiet but clear way, Erasmus attributed a distinct and, to a degree, salvific power to prayer and other acts of piety.

Free will and human effort, therefore, remained essential parts of salvation in Erasmus' *Diatribes*. This is the point that Luther so vehemently responded to in *De servo arbitrio*.

Erasmus and Open Theism

Before proceeding to Luther's response to Erasmus' *Diatribes*, we turn to a brief comparison between the sixteenth century Erasmus and twentieth/twenty-first century open theism. Admittedly, open theists have not cited Erasmus as a source of or contributor to their work; Erasmus was never a major figure in their theological traditions, as he continually defended the immutability of God. Still, certain commonalities between open theism and Erasmian theology are evident, suggesting that open theists might consider Erasmus at least partially sympathetic to their theological position.

It is clear that Erasmus continued to support the church's teaching of the immutability of God. He recognized that certain Scripture passages do seem to suggest God's mutability, but that

these passages should be understood “figuratively,” as God’s way of speaking to our human infirmity. As already noted, Erasmus held to the doctrine of immutability, believing that this doctrine supported his claims regarding human free will.

When Erasmus further explored the doctrine of God, he considered God’s knowledge of the future, which he apparently understood to be infallible and comprehensive. This led him to turn to the scholastic distinctions regarding antecedent and consequent necessity in his effort to maintain his argument in favor of free will. In the end, Erasmus sought to simplify his position as much as possible, entrusting the difficulties to the awesome mysteries of God.

Clearly, Erasmus stood in partial agreement with the open theists on the subject of human free will. For Erasmus, free will, though affected by God’s grace, was a viable and necessary force in the course of man’s salvation. This has already been noted in his summary of the church Fathers’ “three stages of human action,” thought, will, and accomplishment. Erasmus stated that free will belongs “in the second phase” where “grace and the human will act together, but in such a way that grace is the principal cause and the secondary cause our will.”⁵²

Open theists would readily agree with Erasmus regarding the existence of human free will, but understand the power and influence of free will to extend much further than Erasmus did. In the three stages of human action that he drew from the church Fathers, Erasmus saw human free will exerted only in the second phase, the “will.” Open theists would agree that free will is in man’s “will,” but would also see free will at work in man’s “thought” and “accomplishment.” Thus they significantly expand on Erasmus’ position.

⁵²Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 80.

A measure of agreement between Erasmus and open theism can also be discerned on the subject of prayer. Though he included many other acts of piety along with it, Erasmus saw prayer as a significant contributing power in the course of man's salvation. Though he did not explicitly state how, Erasmus understood the holy act of prayer to be a positive influence that led to God giving the final grace that leads to eternal life.

In their theological presentations, open theists have tended to ignore the strong concerns for piety and holy life exhibited by Erasmus. They do, however, discuss prayer as a considerable power to influence and affect God. Rather than connecting prayer to the various "graces" that Erasmus cited, open theists appear to take prayer as a more independent instrument, a power employed by the free will of man.

To a great degree, Erasmus can be counted with those described by open theists as holding to a "classical theist" position. Obviously, Erasmus' belief in the immutability of God would be problematic for open theists. Open theism's solution to the questions about man's free will has been to posit a mutable God who does not know the future. Introducing such a God removes the need for the scholastic distinctions suggested by Erasmus.

Yet Erasmus' strong stance in favor of human free will does offer significant material that parallels open theism. Though not building directly on Erasmus' work, open theists have, in some ways, seemed to pick up where he left off. Where Erasmus was willing to leave his uncertainties to the mystery of God, open theists have sought to delve into those mysteries. In this we can see the drift from Erasmus' premodernist approach to theology toward open theism's modernist/postmodernist approach, which seeks to resolve logical contradictions in ways that are understandable to human reason.

As one considers Luther's answer to Erasmus' *Diatribes*, it is clear that the issues of this sixteenth century controversy are still under discussion today. Many of the issues Erasmus raised against Luther find their parallels (albeit in a somewhat different guise or in greater degree) in the writings of modern open theists. Among these are the doctrine of God's immutability and the place and practice of prayer in relation to that immutability. Thus the answer offered by Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, addresses more than Erasmus's *Diatribes*. Luther's writing also speaks to the teachings of modern open theism.

Luther's *De servo arbitrio*

Luther was not initially inclined to answer Erasmus' *Diatribes*. He was of the opinion that he had already clearly and sufficiently stated his teaching, and there was little point in repeating himself. Eventually, "faithful brethren in Christ" urged him to respond on the grounds that "the authority of Erasmus is not to be despised, and the truth of Christian doctrine is being imperiled in the hearts of many."⁵³

In taking on this highly respected intellectual giant of his day, Luther also expressed his hope to win Erasmus back to the truth. In Luther's opinion, Erasmus had mounted a vigorous defense of free choice, setting forth the case "with all the energy of so distinguished and powerful a mind, but with no other effect than to make things worse than before."⁵⁴ The *Diatribes* had made Luther even more sure of his own position that "free choice is a pure fiction."⁵⁵

⁵³Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 103; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:18.

⁵⁴Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 104; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:18.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

The discussion of free choice or free will remains the focal point of Luther's *De servo arbitrio*. In developing that focal point, Luther touches on numerous other doctrines, including "digressions on such important themes as law and Gospel, the clarity of Scripture, responsibility for sin, the relation between faith and reason, and his doctrine of *Deus absconditus* and *Deus praedicatus*. The concept of God which Luther unfolds in *DSA* itself provides sufficient material for a monograph."⁵⁶ Such a discussion would also include Luther's understanding of God's immutability.

Luther's Understanding of the Immutability of God

On the surface, it appears that Luther and Erasmus shared a similar understanding of the immutability of God. Both made simple assertions of God's immutability, and nowhere did one take the other to task on the subject. Luther's disagreement with Erasmus becomes clear as one examines their discussion of the impact of God's immutability on man's free will.

It is no coincidence that one of the often-cited passages of *De servo arbitrio* connects Luther's objection to free choice to the immutability of God. Luther asserted that it is "fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will. Here is a thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered, so that those who want free choice asserted must either deny or explain away this thunderbolt, or get rid of it by some other means."⁵⁷

⁵⁶McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?*, 299.

⁵⁷Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 118; Luther, *American Edition*, 33: 37.

Luther held fast to the immutability of God and criticized Erasmus for being inconsistent in his application of the immutability of God to his arguments in favor of free choice. Erasmus' discussion of God's foreknowledge had sought to circumvent the necessity imposed by that foreknowledge using scholastic arguments of contingency. Luther objected and pointed out that this line of argument effectively places limits on God's immutability. Erasmus, Luther said, had contradicted himself. "Was it not you, my dear Erasmus, who asserted a little earlier that God is by nature just, by nature most merciful? If this is true, does it not follow that he is immutably just and merciful—that as his nature never changes, so neither does his justice or mercy?"⁵⁸

According to Luther, Erasmus cannot speak of God's immutability selectively, applying it only to certain attributes of God while denying it to others. On the contrary, "what is said of his justice and mercy must also be said of his knowledge, wisdom, goodness, will, and other divine attributes."⁵⁹ Those other attributes would include God's foreknowledge.

Here Luther challenged Erasmus' reasoning directly:

If, then, the assertion of these things concerning God is, as you state, religious, pious, and salutary, what has come over you that you now contradict yourself by asserting that it is irreverent, inquisitive, and vain to say that God foreknows necessarily? You declare that the will of God is to be understood as immutable, yet you forbid us to know that his foreknowledge is immutable. Do you, then, believe that he foreknows without willing or wills without knowing? If he foreknows as he wills, then his will is eternal and unchanging (because his nature is so), and if he wills as he foreknows, then his knowledge is eternal and unchanging (because his nature is so).⁶⁰

⁵⁸Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 118-119; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:37.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 119; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:37.

These last lines are quite significant. Both Luther and Erasmus agreed that God's nature should be considered immutable. On this basis, Luther insisted that all attributes of God must likewise be considered immutable and unchanging. Denying immutability to one attribute would create a contradiction that would then deny immutability to all attributes.

Though he did not dwell on or discuss the subject at length, the immutability of God was a subject Luther consistently affirmed throughout his writings. Rather than speaking generally of the immutability of God, Luther usually wrote about specific things of God that are termed immutable. These comments appear in his discussions of other issues.

For instance, in his lectures on the book of Romans (1515-1516), he anticipated many of the same concerns and arguments regarding free will and immutability later found in *De servo arbitrio*. There he noted that God saves us

not by our own merits, but purely by His own election and immutable will, in the very face of so many rapacious and terrifying adversaries who try in vain to harm us. For if He did not lead us through so many frightful things, He would leave much room for high opinions concerning our own merits. But now He shows that we are saved by His immutable love. And thereby He gives approval not to our will but to His own unchanging and firm will of predestination.⁶¹

With such words, Luther removed any consideration of our merits and anchored our salvation wholly in God's immutable will, immutable love, and immutable predestination.

For Luther, the Word of God was "immutable and insuperable."⁶² In his lectures on the book of Genesis (1535-1536), he described the Law of God as "the eternal and immutable decree

⁶¹Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, Vol. 25, *Lectures on Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 371.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 317.

of God concerning the worship of God and the love of one's neighbor,"⁶³ and "the eternal and immutable judgment of God, whose accusation and assault you will not easily endure."⁶⁴ Luther also took note of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which "earnestly reminds us of the immutability of God's counsel and promise, lest we attribute fickleness and untrustworthiness to God."⁶⁵

It was vital for Luther that the Word of God be recognized as immutable, for it is this immutable Word of God that creates and establishes faith. When Luther wrote against the Roman teachings on penance in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), he spoke of "the immutable truth of God's threat and promise which calls forth faith" by which men are "cast down and lifted up."⁶⁶ In his 1528 treatise *Concerning Rebaptism*, he wrote of the unchangeable nature of God's Word which Luther recognized as even more certain and important than faith.

Is it not true that the Word of God is greater and more important than faith, since faith builds and is founded on the Word of God rather than God's Word on faith? Furthermore faith may waver and change, but God's Word remains forever [Isa. 40:6-9; I Pet. 1:24]. Then too, tell me, if one of these two should be otherwise, which should it rather be: the immutable Word or the changeable faith? Would it not more reasonably be the faith that should be subject to change rather than the Word of God? It is fairer to assume that the Word of God would change faith, if a right one were lacking, than that faith would change the Word of God.⁶⁷

⁶³Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Vol. 3, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 15-20* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 84.

⁶⁴Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Vol. 7, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 38-44* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 275.

⁶⁵Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Vol. 4, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 21-25* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 145.

⁶⁶Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 36, *Word and Sacrament II* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 84-85.

⁶⁷Martin Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism* in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 260-261.

According to Luther, faith is founded on the immutable Word of an immutable God. This connection was revealed in a marginal gloss on Romans 4:20, where Luther wrote:

For these are the two things which make faith hard and difficult. First, because it is “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), indeed things which seem contrary to the things which do appear, or things which cannot take place, where all nature argues against its taking place. And when this handicap has been overcome, the second is even more difficult, namely, the anxiety of heart that perhaps God is changing His mind and is doing something else. The first obstacle considers the power of God, the second His truthfulness. The strength of both points is God’s immutability both inwardly and outwardly.⁶⁸

Luther wrote more specifically about immutability when he discussed the Incarnation of Christ in *This Is My Body* (1527). There, he said simply that “the Godhead is immutable in itself and cannot pass from one place to another as creatures do.”⁶⁹ A bit later in that work, he added that when Christ or the Father appeared to prophets, apostles, and saints, this shows “that both God and Christ are not far away but near, and it is only a matter of revealing themselves; they do not move up and down or back and forth, for God is immutable, and Christ also sits at the right hand of God and does not move hither and yon.”⁷⁰

Luther maintained his firm stand regarding God’s immutability when he dealt with Bible passages that (as open theists have pointed out) seem suggestive of God’s mutability. Granted, there are some passages Luther lectured on without delving into the issues of God’s immutability, since this was hardly a pivotal issue of his time. With these passages, he often let the words stand without further comment.

⁶⁸Luther, *American Edition*, 25:41.

⁶⁹Martin Luther, *This Is My Body in Luther’s Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 37, *Word and Sacrament III* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 62.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 66.

For instance, in his discussion of Psalm 110:4 (“The Lord has sworn, and He will not repent”), Luther’s focus was on the priesthood of Christ, not on immutability. His words hint at an apparent mutability of God when he said,

This ‘not repenting’ sounds too intense to be pleasing. For many things please God of which He later repents, as Gen. 6:7 says: ‘I repent of having made man,’ that is, He produced the effect of repenting, namely, by destroying what He had made. So the Law also pleased until Christ, but now it displeases. But the priesthood of Christ pleases in such a way that it will never be displeasing. Therefore it necessarily follows that it will be forever.⁷¹

In his lectures on Hosea (1524), he commented on God’s words in Hosea 11:8, “My heart recoils,”

That is, it has been changed. He promises great mercy. It grieved the Lord according to the multitude of His mercy when He went too far. This is called repenting. He is saying, as it were, “That My people have been so afflicted grieves Me.”⁷²

Yet Luther gave no further comment as to how such repentance would be possible for an immutable God. He also passed over the question of divine repentance in his brief comment on Amos 7:6, “*The Lord repented concerning this; This also shall not be*, namely, ‘This is not to happen in this time while the kingdom is still flourishing.’”⁷³

When Luther lectured on Joel 2:13, he explained God’s “repentance” as his willingness to forgive the sins of man.

⁷¹Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, Vol 11, *First Lectures on the Psalms II, Psalms 76-126* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1976), 368.

⁷²Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, Vol 18, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets I, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 60.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 174.

In the Hebrew it reads as follows: “He easily repents of evil,” namely, that which He intended. He quickly discontinues the misfortune He intended to inflict. This is a familiar phrase, occurring here and there in the prophets, as in Jeremiah (Jer. 18:8): “If that nation . . . turns from its evil, I shall repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.” This repentance is often attributed to God, namely, when He changes His mind about an evil He had intended to inflict. The sense is as if you would say: “He is easily moved to forgive.”⁷⁴

Commenting on Joel 2:14 (“Who knows whether He will not turn and repent?”), Luther was careful to distinguish the speaker’s sentiments from pronouncements about God.⁷⁵

He is speaking in the fashion of a terrified conscience which finally, after being afflicted, is barely encouraged and begins to breathe again for hope and for the goodness of God. But this has not been translated well enough. In German we say it this way: *Wer weiss, er möcht sich umwenden* and repent of the evil. That is, He ceases from the evil which He had intended. He does not continue to want evil for us, etc.⁷⁶

This distinction was made even more clear in Luther’s comments on similar words from Jonah 3:9 (“Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from His fierce anger, etc.”):

Here the king talks as though he were in doubt and uncertain whether or not God would be gracious to them . . . This is the way it goes: A truly contrite heart wrestles with fear and with doubt and has not yet gained a full victory. That is why it speaks as though it were uncertain. . . . Therefore these words are, rather, evidence of faith, but of a faith that trembles with fear and that still contends for mastery, but that all the while keeps God’s grace before its eyes, saying: “God may yet repent and turn from His fierce anger, etc.,” that is, grace still hovers in the background, and all is not wrath.

It is superfluous to enter on the subtle question here how God can repent, turn from and regret His anger, since He is unchangeable. Some people are deeply concerned about this; they complicate the matter for themselves unnecessarily. Let us, rather, observe what a fine faith dwelt in these people, who

⁷⁴Ibid., 97.

⁷⁵See also Luther’s 1542 discussion of the misuse of this passage by Eck who, on the basis of this passage, suggested that the Scriptures approve of doubt. “The Licentiate Examination of Heinrich Schmedenstede” in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz, gen. ed., Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol 34, *Career of the Reformer IV* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 310.

⁷⁶Luther, *American Edition*, 18:99.

did not only believe Jonah's announcement that the city would perish but also sought comfort in God's mercy, although they had no promise of this from Jonah, for they heard nothing but his threat.⁷⁷

Luther took it for granted that the Ninevites had previously heard something about God, little though it may have been. "For they could not have heard more of God's Word than the news that He is the Creator of heaven and earth, that He is the true God, that is, that He is gracious and merciful. This little fragment of information they use to such good advantage for their salvation that they put both Jews and Christians to shame."⁷⁸ Thus they expressed their hopes for a possibility of God's repentance based on what they knew of God.

Generally speaking, Luther understood the difficulties associated with the immutability of God to be "matters of grammar and the figurative use of words, which even schoolboys understand; but we are concerned with dogmas, not grammatical figures, in this discussion."⁷⁹ Years later, however, in his comments on Genesis 6:5-6, Luther introduced a different and, as he thought, simpler way of understanding these passages that discuss the "repentance" of God. Rather than dismissing it on the basis of "figures of speech," Luther instead ascribed "repentance" to "the hearts of the men who carry on the ministry of the Word."

It is in this manner that God saw human wickedness and repented. That is, Noah, who had the Holy Spirit and was a minister of the Word, saw the wickedness of men and through the Holy Spirit was moved to grief when he observed this situation. Paul also similarly declares (Eph. 4:30) that the Holy Spirit is grieved in the godly by the ungodliness and wickedness of the ungodly. Because Noah is a faithful minister of the Word and the mouthpiece of the Holy

⁷⁷Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, Vol 19, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets II, Jonah, Habakkuk* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 88-89.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁹Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 144; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:71.

Spirit, Moses correctly states that the Holy Spirit is grieving when Noah grieves and wishes that man would rather not be in existence than be so evil.

Therefore the meaning is not that God from eternity had not seen these conditions; He sees everything from eternity. But since this wickedness of man now manifests itself with the utmost violence, God now discloses this wickedness in the hearts of His ministers and prophets.

Thus God is immutable and unchanging in His counsel from eternity. He sees and knows all things; but He does not reveal them to the godly except at His own fixed time, so that they themselves may see them too. This seems to me to be the simplest meaning of this passage, and Augustine's interpretation differs little from it.⁸⁰

Drawing these citations together, it becomes clear that Luther saw the immutability of God as complete and without limitation. For Luther, there were no aspects or attributes of God which had to be reexamined or reexplained in such a way as to limit or modify God's immutability.

Immutability and Free Choice

Luther recognized that this pervasive understanding of divine immutability existed in his theology, and he did not shy away from its profound implications. As he wrote in *De servo arbitrio*, "From this it follows irrefutably that everything we do, everything that happens, even if it seems to us to happen mutably and contingently, happens in fact nonetheless necessarily and immutably, if you have regard to the will of God."⁸¹ In fact, the immutability of God was vitally important in Luther's argument against free choice. He insisted, "We do not do anything by right of free choice, but as God has foreknown and as he leads us to act by his infallible and

⁸⁰Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, gen. ed. Daniel E. Poellot, Vol 2 *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 6-14* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 44-45.

⁸¹Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 119; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:37-38.

immutable counsel and power. Thus we find it written in the hearts of all alike, that there is no such thing as free choice.”⁸²

According to Luther, Erasmus’ definition of free will contradicted the immutability of God. Luther understood Erasmus’ “power of the human will” to be

. . . a capacity or faculty or ability or aptitude for willing, unwilling, selecting, neglecting, approving, rejecting, and whatever other actions of the will there are. Now, what it means for that same power to “apply itself” and to “turn away” I do not see, unless it is precisely this willing and unwilling, selecting, neglecting, approving, rejecting, or in other words, precisely the action of the will. So that we must imagine this power to be something between the will itself and its action, as the means by which the will itself produces the action of willing and unwilling, and by which the action of willing and unwilling is itself produced. Anything else it is impossible either to imagine or conceive here.⁸³

Such a definition gave the human will far too much power. As Luther put it, “On the authority of Erasmus, then, free choice is a power of the will that is able of itself to will and unwill the word and work of God, by which it is led to those things which exceed both its grasp and perception.”⁸⁴ This sort of “free choice” would effectively supplant the power and will of God, greatly affecting and even changing things beyond its understanding.

In this way Luther exposed Erasmus’ teaching as being the same as that of the Pelagians. The Pelagians had taught that the “divine power” of free choice to choose between good and evil was available to man. Likewise, “as Erasmus sees it, free choice not only moves itself by its own power, but also applies itself to things which are eternal, that is, incomprehensible to itself.” Though Erasmus had claimed “that the human will was completely ineffectual without grace,”

⁸²Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 245; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:191.

⁸³Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 171; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:105.

⁸⁴Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 173; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:106.

his more serious definition of the matter shows the will capable of applying itself to things eternal.⁸⁵

Erasmus had claimed that his *Diatribes* concerned itself with three viewpoints or opinions regarding free choice. In *De servo arbitrio*, Luther recalled this distinction:

The first opinion, then, when compared with itself, is such as to deny that man can will anything good, and yet to maintain that a desire is left to him which nevertheless is not his own. . . . The second is that harder one which holds that free choice avails for nothing but sinning. This is Augustine's view . . . The third and hardest opinion is that of Wycliffe and Luther, that free choice is an empty name and all that we do comes about by sheer necessity. It is with these two views that *Diatribes* quarrels.⁸⁶

Luther argued that these three views are effectively one and the same. Therefore, because the *Diatribes* defended the first of these views and denied the other two, the *Diatribes* really contradicted and defeated itself. "For when it has been conceded and agreed that free choice, having lost its liberty, is perforce in bondage to sin and cannot will anything good, I can make no other sense of these words than that free choice is an empty phrase, of which the reality has been lost."⁸⁷

Later in his argument, Luther wrote:

But even *Diatribes* herself, . . . is at length compelled by the force of truth to admit our view when she says: "The question of the will and the determination of God is more difficult. For God to will and foreknow are the same thing. And this is what Paul means by "Who can resist his will if he has mercy on whom he wills and hardens whom he wills?"⁸⁸

⁸⁵Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 173-174; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:107-108.

⁸⁶Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 180; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:115-116.

⁸⁷Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 181; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:116.

⁸⁸Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 241; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:186.

As noted earlier, Erasmus had tried to avoid this line of argument against free choice, denying that the immutability of God imposed any necessity on man. He had suggested this conflict could be resolved and free choice maintained by resorting to the scholastic distinctions of contingency. Luther countered:

To happen contingently, however—in order that we may not misuse terms—means in Latin, not that the work itself is contingent, but that it is done by a contingent and mutable will, such as there is not in God. Moreover, a work can only be called contingent when *from our point of view* it is done contingently and, as it were, by chance and without our expecting it, because our will or hand seizes on it as something presented to us by chance, when we have thought or willed nothing about it previously.⁸⁹

Thus Luther directly dismissed scholastic arguments of contingency, since such arguments can only be made from our point of view and cannot be applied to an immutable God.

Luther saw God's immutability imposing necessity on man. This led to the question of whether or not God can be charged with responsibility for evil. Luther's response in *De servo arbitrio* was simple:

Since, then, God moves and actuates all in all, he necessarily moves and acts also in Satan and ungodly man. But he acts in them as they are and as he finds them; that is to say, since they are averse and evil, and caught up in the movement of this divine omnipotence, they do nothing but averse and evil things. . . . Here you see that when God works in and through evil men, evil things are done, and yet God cannot act evilly although he does evil through evil men, because one who is himself good cannot act evilly; yet he uses evil instruments that cannot escape the sway and motion of his omnipotence.

It is the fault, therefore, of the instruments, which God does not allow to be idle, that evil things are done, with God himself setting them in motion.⁹⁰

Luther further said

⁸⁹Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 119; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:38.

⁹⁰Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 232-233; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:176.

God works evil in us, i.e., by means of us, not through any fault of his, but owing to our faultiness, since we are by nature evil and he is good; but as he carries us along by his own activity in accordance with the nature of his omnipotence, good as he is himself he cannot help but do evil with an evil instrument, though he makes good use of this evil in accordance with his wisdom for his own glory and our salvation.⁹¹

God remains good, Luther explained, and the evil that is done is the fault of Satan and ungodly men, who are faulty instruments of God's action. Even though they are evil, God is still able to use these instruments to accomplish good.

Luther himself raised (and answered) the question of why God allows evil to continue:

But why does he not at the same time change the evil wills that he moves? This belongs to the secrets of his majesty, where his judgments are incomprehensible [Rom. 11:33]. It is not our business to ask this question, but to adore these mysteries. And if flesh and blood is offended here and murmurs [cf. John 6:61], by all means let it murmur; but it will achieve nothing; God will not change on that account.⁹²

For Luther, then, these things belonged to the mysteries of God, what he would term the "hiddenness" of God.

Erasmus had attempted to argue that the logical way to avoid charging God with evil was to posit and defend man's free will. To further his argument, Erasmus had pointed to the case of Judas Iscariot, suggesting that Judas had free choice to betray Jesus or not to betray him.⁹³

Luther countered rather abruptly:

Leaving aside the fact that the will can only will evil, as was proved above, how could Judas change his mind so long as the infallible foreknowledge of God remained? Could he change God's foreknowledge and make it fallible? Here Diatribe gives up; she deserts the standard, throws away her arms, and quits the

⁹¹Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 234; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:178.

⁹²Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 236; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:180.

⁹³Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 68.

field, making out that the discussion has to do with Scholastic subtleties about the necessity of consequence and consequent, and she has no desire to pursue such quibbles.⁹⁴

Luther further described how God's immutability must overthrow human free choice when he wrote:

We know quite well that God does not love or hate as we do, since we are mutable in both our loving and hating, whereas he loves and hates in accord with his eternal and immutable nature, so that passing moods and feelings do not arise in him. And it is this fact that makes complete nonsense of free choice, because God's love toward men is eternal and immutable, and his hatred is eternal, being prior to the creation of the world, and not only to the merit and work of free choice; and everything takes place by necessity in us, according as he either loves or does not love us from all eternity, so that not only God's love but also the manner of his loving imposes necessity on us.⁹⁵

From our human perspective, then, Luther admitted that to us God may appear to be mutable. At the same time, he steadfastly asserted that our mutable human will and the events of our lives are governed and guided by the immutable will of God.

While Luther allowed for some discussion of "free choice," he did so reluctantly. He allowed free choice to man, but "only with respect to what is beneath him and not what is above him." He immediately modified this statement when he said, "That is to say, a man should know that with regard to his faculties and possessions he has the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to his own free choice, though even this is controlled by the free choice of God alone, who acts in whatever way he pleases." Perhaps this hesitation regarding free will even in the free choices of things "beneath him" was because we may not rightly know what things are truly "above" us and what things are "beneath" us insofar as the immutable will of God is concerned.

⁹⁴Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 247; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:193.

⁹⁵Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 252; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:199.

In any event, Luther made it abundantly clear that, “in relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a man has no free choice, but is a captive, subject and slave either of the will of God or the will of Satan.”⁹⁶

This position of the Reformer had also been discussed by Philip Melanchthon in his *Loci Communes* of 1521. There, Melanchthon wrote:

If you estimate the power of the human will as touches its natural capacities according to human reason, it cannot be denied but that there is in it a certain kind of liberty in things external. These are matters which you yourself might experience to be within your power, such as: to greet or not to greet a man; to put on certain attire or not to put it on; to eat meat or not to eat it as you will. Upon this contingency of external works those philosophers who attributed freedom to the will, have fastened their eyes. In truth, however, because God does not look upon the external works but upon the inner motions of the heart, Scripture has recorded nothing about such freedom.⁹⁷

As Melanchthon later noted, “Of what consequence is it, to discuss freedom in external matters when God requires purity of heart?”⁹⁸ Thus, “If you refer the will to external works there seems to be from natural judgment, some degree of liberty. If you refer the will to the affections, even from the point of view of natural judgment there is plainly no liberty.”⁹⁹

Since so many qualifiers must be employed when applying the term “free choice” to man, Luther made it clear that he understood “free choice” to be a term that can be applied only to God.

⁹⁶Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 143; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:70.

⁹⁷Philip Melanchthon, *The Loci Communes of Philip Melanchthon*, trans. Charles Leander Hill (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1944), 75-76.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 80.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 81.

It follows now that free choice is plainly a divine term, and can be properly applied to none but the Divine Majesty alone; for he alone can do and does (as the psalmist says [Ps. 115:3]) whatever he pleases in heaven and on earth. If this is attributed to men, it is no more rightly attributed than if divinity itself also were attributed to them, which would be the greatest possible sacrilege.¹⁰⁰

Luther's contention, therefore, was that it is not appropriate to speak of man having "free choice." He recognized and defended the immutability of God, which extended to all attributes and aspects of God's dealings with man. Given these factors, one might be inclined to consider Luther a fatalist, who taught that everything we do is done from a slavish, robot-like obedience to the divine will. How did Luther avoid the charge of fatalism?

First of all, Dau rightly notes that it is "doing Luther a flagrant injustice when he is made to deny that man has no longer any natural reason and will in the secular affairs of this life. . . . It is only in the higher hemisphere that Luther denies the existence of free will. Throughout his writings Luther asserts the existence, the actual operation, and the necessity of human free will, though sadly weakened by sin, in the affairs of this present life."¹⁰¹ Dau goes on to observe that this is the position of the Augsburg Confession of 1530, which states that "man's will has some liberty for the attainment of civil righteousness and for the choice of things subject to reason."¹⁰²

Engelder also helps to rescue Luther from the charge of fatalism, pointing out that alongside salvation by grace alone (*sola gratia*), Luther taught universal grace (*gratia*

¹⁰⁰Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 141; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:68.

¹⁰¹W.H.T. Dau, *Luther Examined and Reexamined: A Review of Catholic Criticism and a Plea for Revaluation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 108.

¹⁰²AC XVIII, 1.

universalis).¹⁰³ This contradicts the contention of both synergists and Calvinists that one must either teach synergism or determinism. Luther's writings look beyond this dilemma to a third alternative, in which

Man is converted by grace alone, but that does not involve the thought that man is coerced into conversion. Grace *creates* the willingness. Grace does not destroy our personality. Read, read, *De Servo Arbitrio!* "His will being changed and sweetly breathed on by the Spirit of God." (P. 73; cp. P. 167.) And, generalizing, one need be neither a synergist nor a Calvinist; you can be a Biblicist—if you are willing to sacrifice your rationalism on the altar of Scripture.

Put it yet another way. Can you explain the *discretio personarum*? Luther refused to explain why of two men, both of whom God wills to save and both of whom are in equal corruption and guilt, one is saved and the other lost. Luther denounced the attempt to solve the *Cur alii, alii non?* problem in this life as presumptuous wickedness.¹⁰⁴

So Engelder calls Luther a "Biblical determinist" who "declared with a loud voice that our salvation is due to nothing else than God's gracious purpose and firm determination."¹⁰⁵ In the context Engelder addresses, this means preaching grace alone alongside universal grace while not answering "why some, not others?" In our present discussion, it means preaching an immutable God yet refusing to be cornered into fatalism, since the Scriptures deny fatalism by preaching universal grace. Thus a Biblical determinist accepts the declarations of Scripture even in the face of an apparent logical contradiction, for he depends on God's determination of grace rather than on man's self-determination.

Luther's "sacrifice of rationalism" must draw protests from those who insist on logically consistent expositions of theology, yet it does not mean that he was wholly without explanation

¹⁰³Th. Engelder, "A Course in Lutheran Theology" *Concordia Theological Monthly* Vol. IX (1938): 493, 883.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 884.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 892.

for this way of thinking. Luther provided the context for his “Biblical determinism” when he drew the distinction between the hidden God (*deus absconditus*) and the revealed God (*deus revelatus*). While Luther himself did not extensively elaborate on this distinction, it is most helpful to us, especially in understanding how to handle the questions surrounding the immutability of God.

The Hidden and Revealed God

To briefly state the distinction: God has revealed himself and his working to us in his Word, and most directly in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. This is the *deus revelatus*, the revealed God (or *deus praedicatus*, the God who is preached). While Christ was and remained the center of Luther’s theology, Luther also recognized that there are things of God that have not been revealed to us. These things are either beyond our human comprehension or that have simply been kept from us by God. These comprise the *deus absconditus*, the hidden God.¹⁰⁶

Brian Gerrish points out that Luther’s description of the hidden God was, in itself, not all that precise. He describes two distinct strands in Luther’s theology that fall under the heading of *deus absconditus*. The first of these saw God hidden in his revelation; this is the hidden God

¹⁰⁶As we draw this distinction, a word of caution from Engelder. “Though both, Calvin and Luther, speak of a revealed and a secret will of God, they differ absolutely on the matter itself. Luther clings to Scripture in defining the extent of God’s gracious will; Calvin follows the light of reason and experience. Luther clings to the universality of grace, proclaimed in Scripture, Calvin insists on the particularity of grace, since not all are actually saved. Luther teaches the efficacy of the means of grace also in the case of those who resist; Calvin teaches that this efficacy is restricted to the elect. Luther speaks of a seeming contradiction between the revealed and the secret will of God; Calvin of a real contradiction; and he cancels the revealed will by means of the secret will.” Th. Engelder, “A Course in Lutheran Theology,” 818.

who makes himself known through Christ. The other strand comprised the God hidden behind his revelation, the “Naked God” whose presence is terrifying to us.¹⁰⁷

Gerhard Forde comments on the positive and negative aspects of the hiddenness of God, effectively elaborating on these the two strands noted by Gerrish:

On the one hand, that the naked God hides from us and saves us from destruction: “No one can see God and live.” The constant temptation of the theologian of glory in us is to try to penetrate the “hidden majesty” of God. Were we able to do that this side of the Parousia, nothing but destruction would result. Enough mischief is accomplished by our unsuccessful attempts to do so. There is a “hidden grace” in the hiddenness of God. On the other hand, the negative aspect is that apart from the proclamation we live under the wrath of the divine hiddenness—the terror of naked abstractions, the divine absence, the nothingness. As the ever-present absent One of the terrifying abstractions, the One who is the end of us, God not preached merges into and becomes confused with Satan, the accuser and destroyer.¹⁰⁸

While it is meet, right, and salutary to hold fast to the God revealed in Christ for the promises of our salvation, it is also important for us to recognize God’s hiddenness as well. Many of the things we would like to know have not been revealed to us. There are also occasions when God’s hidden will and revealed will stand in apparent contradiction to each other. “Says Luther: ‘He does not will the death of a sinner—in his Word, that is. But he does will it by that inscrutable will.’”¹⁰⁹

Gerrish states that because of this logical contradiction, one must agree with those who “proclaim the collapse of Luther’s doctrine of God at this point.” It is unfortunate that Gerrish

¹⁰⁷B.A. Gerrish, “To the Unknown God” *The Journal of Religion* 53:3 (July 1973): 267.

¹⁰⁸Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 17.

¹⁰⁹Gerrish, “To the Unknown God,” 273.

comes to such a conclusion, for he goes on to describe (with considerable accuracy) how Luther maintained the paradoxical tension between the hidden and revealed God.

Luther's assurance that we have the Father's will in Christ, and his counsel that we should flee to God in the manger or contemplate the wounds of Jesus, do not resolve the theological problem, and he does not pretend that they do. . . . Only the constant renewal of faith through contemplation of Christ, the mirror of God's heart, can vanquish one's anxieties concerning his own standing before God; and even then the hidden will stays to challenge faith's confidence in the goodness of a God who permits many others to be lost. The practical solution is not instantaneous and final. We do not simply turn from the Hidden God, and then forget all about him. The forbidding figure waits on the edge of faith and, for this reason, determines (in some measure) the content of faith, which has the character of a turning from the Hidden God. The luminous object of faith is set against a dark, threatening background. Awareness of the Hidden God, therefore, qualifies faith in Christ.¹¹⁰

As Forde puts it, "Luther's distinctions in the doctrine of God are well known. God clothed in the flesh is set against the naked God (*deus indutus* versus *deus nudus*) and the revealed God against the hidden God (*deus revelatus* versus *deus absconditus*). . . . Faith is precisely the ever-renewed flight from God to God: from naked and hidden God to God clothed and revealed."¹¹¹ As he says, this movement "from God to God" is based on faith, not human reason or logic. Egil Grisliis describes Luther's "break" from human logic in this way:

The exact manner of encountering God in his hiddenness is thus by faith rather than by knowledge, obtained either by sense perception or by deductive reasoning. Therefore, Luther can speak, more specifically, about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in whose passion there is hidden God himself. . . . At the same time, faith perceives the presence of the invisible God. . . . Although God is present in all of his creation, this presence is hidden, and can only be believed.¹¹²

¹¹⁰Ibid., 274-275.

¹¹¹Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 22.

¹¹²Egli Grisliis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God: The Problem of the *Deus Absconditus* in Luther's Treatise *De Servo Arbitrio*" *McCormick Quarterly* 21:1 (November 1967): 82-83.

Thus setting forth the distinction between the revealed and hidden God, Grislis makes it clear that

this is not an attempt either to impugn the veracity of God or to propose an easy method of de-coding the divine message that could be used outside of faith (i.e., we do not necessarily find out what God really means by merely negating all that God says and does). Rather, Luther is suggesting that the way into faith leads through such an ultimate level of trust which no longer has any objective grounds for confidence.¹¹³

Essentially, Luther argued that God works in ways that are not only beyond our understanding, they are contradictory to our understanding. This is no accident; God does this so that we live by faith.

Living by Faith

By the working of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, God creates faith in us. This is his gift to us; it is not our choice nor the product of our human will. As we face trials in this life, this God-given faith enables us to trust that behind the mutable things we perceive as evil for us, God's immutable will is working for our good. Indeed, if we are truly to live by faith, it cannot be any other way:

Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it. Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as Scripture says: "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up" (I Sam. 2[:6]). . . .

Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems,

¹¹³Ibid., 85.

according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith. As it is, since that cannot be comprehended, there is room for the exercise of faith when such things are preached and published, just as when God kills, the faith of life is exercised in death.”¹¹⁴

Luther’s recognition that we live by faith led him to defend the immutability of God adamantly. Were any change in God possible, worked either from within God or from without, it would cast fatal doubts on God’s working through Law and Gospel. For, “how can he [God] promise or threaten if his foreknowledge is fallible or can be hindered by our mutability?”¹¹⁵

This having been said, the working of God through Law and Gospel may appear to suggest some kind of mutability in God. The question arises as to what induces God to turn from wrath and extend forgiveness, and whether that constitutes a change in an “unchangeable” God. Such a question is little more than a re-phrasing of the classic question of why some and not others are saved.

Since the answer is not evident in the revealed God, pursuing the question attempts to reach into the hiddenness of God. Of this “hidden and awful will of God whereby he ordains by his own counsel which and what sort of persons he wills to be recipients and partakers of his preached and offered mercy,” Luther said, “This will is not to be inquired into, but reverently adored, as by far the most awe-inspiring secret of the Divine Majesty, reserved for himself alone and forbidden to us much more religiously than any number of Corycian caverns.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 138; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:62-63.

¹¹⁵Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 240; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:185.

¹¹⁶Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 200; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:139.

Such speculation is dangerous business, as Grislis notes, for it “undertakes to measure and comprehend the infinite God by finite standards.”¹¹⁷ Elert notes that the Formula of Concord also “warns against brooding over this, for such brooding causes either ‘security and impenitence or despondency and despair.’ . . . God alone knows why He sends out (*freigeben*) His Word for one place or one people but not for the other, for hardening and for a call to turn back.”¹¹⁸ We may ponder and search into the hiddenness of God only as far as his revelation answers our questions. Beyond that, we cannot probe further, and by faith we must be willing to accept his silence.

God’s workings through Law and Gospel should not be understood, therefore, as two conflicting wills in God. They are, rather, the operations of an immutable God, and any apparent mutability in God or inconsistency in his actions is left, by faith, in the hiddenness of God. In other words, the question of “Why some, not others?” must be left to the *deus absconditus*.

Denying any power of free choice in us, Luther connected God’s omnipotence with his foreknowledge, placing us under the necessity of God’s foreknowledge. He noted

first, that God is omnipotent, not only in power, but also in action (as I have said), otherwise he would be a ridiculous God; and secondly, that he knows and foreknows all things, and can neither err nor be deceived. These two points being granted by the hearts and minds of all, they are quickly compelled by inescapable logic to admit that just as we do not come into being by our own will, but by necessity, so we do not do anything by right of free choice, but as God has foreknown and as he leads us to act by his infallible and immutable counsel and power.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Grislis, “Martin Luther’s View of the Hidden God,” 94.

¹¹⁸ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism, Volume One*, translated by Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 138.

¹¹⁹ Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 244-245; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:191.

In his conclusion to *De servo arbitrio*, Luther ran the argument in the other direction, so to speak. Taking the attributes of God as a given, he eliminated the possibility of human free choice. He also pointed out that there is a soteriological necessity for the elimination of free choice in man:

For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and predestines all things, that he can neither be mistaken in his foreknowledge nor hindered in his predestination, and that nothing takes place but as he wills it (as reason itself is forced to admit), then on the testimony of reason itself there cannot be any free choice in man or angel or any creature. . . .

To sum up: If we believe that Christ has redeemed men by his blood, we are bound to confess that the whole man was lost; otherwise, we should make Christ either superfluous or the redeemer of only the lowest part of man, which would be blasphemy and sacrilege.¹²⁰

Pastoral Concerns

Finally, it should be clearly noted that the immutability and necessity of God's will working among us was a matter of grave pastoral concern and comfort for Luther. "For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered."¹²¹ Thus we can cling to God with confidence, "For the operations of God are not childish or bourgeois or human, but divine and exceeding human grasp."¹²²

It was, in part, Luther's firm position on the bondage of the will that kept his position on God's immutability from becoming cold and mechanical. Some have focused on the distance that immutability puts between God and man. Luther, however, saw divine immutability as an

¹²⁰Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 332-333; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:293.

¹²¹Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 122; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:43.

¹²²Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 130; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:54.

anchor point of certainty for man's relationship to God. Were God mutable in any way, man would never be sure of his position before God, nor of God's attitude toward him. The immutability of God (and its resulting necessity) secures man's place before God. This allows man to depend wholly on God by faith rather than depend on human undependability.

This becomes more clear when we consider Luther's comments regarding necessity. Luther never wanted God's immutable will to be understood as a compulsory mechanism that forces our actions. In this, he decried the use of the word "necessity" in these discussions.

I could wish indeed that another and a better word had been introduced into our discussion than this usual one, "necessity," which is not rightly applied either to the divine or the human will. It has too harsh and incongruous a meaning for this purpose, for it suggests a kind of compulsion, and the very opposite of willingness, although the subject under discussion implies no such thing. For neither the divine nor the human will does what it does, whether good or evil, under any compulsion, but from sheer pleasure or desire, as with true freedom; and yet the will of God is immutable and infallible, and it governs our mutable will, as Boethius sings: "Remaining fixed, Thou makest all things move"; and our will, especially when it is evil, cannot of itself do good. The reader's intelligence must therefore supply what the word "necessity" does not express, by understanding it to mean what you might call the immutability of the will of God and the impotence of our evil will, or what some have called the necessity of immutability, though this is not very good either grammatically or theologically.¹²³

He reiterated and clarified this point later when he said

Now, by "necessarily" I do not mean "compulsorily," but by the necessity of immutability (as they say) and not of compulsion. That is to say, when a man is without the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will, as if he were taken by the scruff of the neck and forced to it, like a thief or robber carried off against his will to punishment, but he does it of his own accord and with a ready will. And this readiness or will to act he cannot by his own powers omit, restrain, or change, but he keeps on willing and being ready; and even if he is compelled by external force to do something different, yet the will within him remains averse and he is resentful at whatever compels or resists it. He would not be resentful, however, if it were changed and he willingly submitted to the compulsion. This is

¹²³Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 119-120; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:39.

what we call the necessity of immutability: It means that the will cannot change itself and turn in a different direction, but is rather the more provoked into willing by being resisted, as its resentment shows. This would not happen if it were free or had free choice.¹²⁴

As Luther made clear in his lectures on Genesis lectures, “God is immutable and unchanging in His counsel from eternity. He sees and knows all things; but He does not reveal them to the godly except at His own fixed time, so that they themselves may see them too.”¹²⁵ Luther saw the immutable will of God as a comfort to us, an assurance that we have a God on whom we can truly depend.

Luther refused to escape this problem by allowing for human free choice along with Erasmus. While arguments of contingency seem to reconcile the logical conflicts, they also introduce an uncertainty to the promises of God. That uncertainty not only misleads us into doubting God’s promises, it may even mislead us into denial of God himself. As Luther put it,

if you doubt or disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? For when he promises anything, you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety and a denial of the Most High God. But how will you be certain and sure unless you know that he knows and wills and will do what he promises, certainly, infallibly, immutably, and necessarily?¹²⁶

Though God’s will is often hidden from us, Luther made it clear that one should in no wise doubt divine providence.

¹²⁴Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 139; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:64.

¹²⁵Luther, *American Edition*, 2:45.

¹²⁶Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 122; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:42.

One of the concerns Erasmus had raised in his defense of free choice was his desire to foster and promote pious living. With Luther's denial of free choice and insistence on an immutable God, the place of such piety in man's life may be drawn into question. Luther responded that our ignorance of the hidden will of God cannot be seen as an excuse from faithful stewardship. Rather, we are to use the earthly means that God has given us to live:

Therefore one should not ask whether God wants to preserve and sustain us in accordance with His immutable will. No, one should resolve as follows: "I believe that God will preserve me. But His counsels are unknown to me, likewise the means by which He will fulfill His promise. Therefore one must use the means that are at hand." Sustenance must be sought with toil and zeal. The things necessary for sustaining this life must be provided: milk, cheese, wool. The field must be cultivated, and the produce must be gathered. One should not indulge in ease, as though you had no need of domestic concerns or the household did not have to be burdened with toil, since you have the promise of God. For God does not want you to become useless through sloth and laziness. No, He has stated: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken" (Gen. 3:19). And likewise: "Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you, etc." (Gen. 3:18). God says: "I have promised you nourishment and the preservation of life but I want you to use the creatures and the means that are at hand and to do what you can, lest you tempt Me. But if you are deprived of the help and counsel of all men, then at last I will make provision for you with some miracle. But if means are at hand, consider that they have been shown and offered to you by Me."¹²⁷

Conclusion

In his *Diatribes*, Erasmus had sought to counter Luther's claims that all things happen by necessity. He defended, instead, the activity and power of human free will. Erasmus believed that the classic attributes of God, including God's immutability, supported his contentions.

¹²⁷Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Vol. 7, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 38-44* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 219-220.

Luther identified Erasmus' arguments for human free will, particularly Erasmus' introduction of scholastic categories of contingency, as imposing limits on the immutability of God. This, in turn, weakened and undermined the other attributes of God. Pushing Erasmus' arguments to their logical conclusion would have resulted in de-Deifying the Deity and overthrowing any certainty regarding God's promises.

On the basis of the Scriptures, Luther insisted on describing God's immutability as complete and without limitation. Through this view, God was understood to impose necessity on man. That necessity did not mean that God should be charged with responsibility for evil, for that responsibility rests with Satan and ungodly men, who simply carry out the evil that is in them. Why God does not change that situation remains a mystery to us, and should not be speculated on nor explored since God has not revealed it to us. This is one of the first clear statements of what he later spoke of in *De servo arbitrio* as the "hiddenness" of God.

Luther made radical statements regarding the immutability of God—radical in the sense that they were uncompromising. His refusal to make use of scholastic distinctions that had, in the past, offered paths of "reason" out of these problems bear witness to Luther's radicality. He saw such reasoning as compromising the statement that God is immutable.

The logical implications of this position, however, were significant. It has been widely accepted that if one holds to the immutability of God, one must either agree to some form of synergism (as Erasmus), or else one becomes a fatalist (as in Stoicism and, later, Calvinism). Yet Luther was no fatalist. While continuing to deny synergism, Luther also opposed Stoicism by teaching both salvation by grace alone and universal grace alongside his immutable God. He held these doctrines in paradoxical tension, even though it requires the sacrifice of human reason

to do so. This led Engelder to offer us the helpful description of Luther as a “Biblical determinist.”

The framework that allowed Luther to maintain his Biblical determinism is found in his recognition of the distinction between the hidden and revealed God. Erasmus and the open theists have paid lip service to the “mystery” of God, but failed to recognize fully the hiddenness of God. Luther depended on that hiddenness, for it recognizes that the contradictions we may perceive in God’s nature or actions have a point of resolution that is beyond our understanding: within the hidden God.

The hiddenness of God further provides a place for a faith which holds fast to God’s revealed promises in spite of the logical contradictions we may face. God’s will may be hidden from us at times and it may even seem to contradict itself. By faith, we leave those contradictions to the hidden God. For, also by faith, we depend upon what has been revealed to us about God, that his nature and will are immutable and unchangeable. This revelation serves as the anchor for our hope: God’s fulfillment of his threats in the Law and his promises of the Gospel.

Luther’s stand against Erasmus was not merely a theological or an academic speculation, but a truly pastoral and practical concern for the salvation of the Christian. If God is mutable, then all his promises are in doubt. Luther’s concern, therefore, not only includes a clear rejection of human free will as a factor in man’s eternal salvation. It also calls for a firm hold on the immutable foreknowledge and will of God, and demands a dependence on the immutability of God Himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

LUTHER'S TEACHING ON PRAYER

Introduction

Open theists have raised the accusation that classical theists teach an immutable God, yet pray to God as though he were mutable. While that debate continues among Evangelicals, it is clear that Luther's potent contributions to the doctrine of God have been ignored. Might Luther also have a contribution to make regarding the subject of prayer?

First, a word of clarification is in order. Prayer has often been broadly defined as "talking to God in words and thoughts." While "praise" and "thanksgiving" may be considered part of a person's prayer life, the questions raised by open theists involve the impact that our "asking" might have on God. In other words, when a person come before God in prayer, is that person seeking or expecting some change in God to take place that the petition may be granted?

This chapter will discuss prayer in terms of its narrower definition as petition, an activity in which we ask God for something. Luther seems to have understood this to be the primary function of prayer, speaking of it as "calling upon the name of God in every need" (*Large Catechism*, III, 5, 8). As Luther also wrote, "A person who wants to make a request must present a petition, naming and describing something that he or she desires; otherwise it cannot be called a prayer" (*LC* III, 24).

Luther clearly understood God to be immutable. As we have seen, Luther defended that immutability through the careful distinction of the hidden and the revealed God. Was Luther also able to maintain the immutability of God in his teachings on prayer? How did Luther teach

us to pray to an immutable God? What place does our human will have as it approaches and confronts the will of an unchangeable God? To answer these questions, we consider the practical application of Luther's teachings on God as they appeared in his *Catechisms*.

Luther's Catechisms

Luther has provided us with his definitive teachings on prayer in his *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism*. These *Catechisms* were a product of long consideration on the part of the reformer. Already in 1516, Luther had preached a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. During Lent in 1517, he preached a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. This was published in 1519 under the title "*Auslegung des Vater unsers fuer die einfaltigen Laien.*" Also in 1519, Luther published, "*Eine kurze Form das Paternoster zu verstehen und zu beten,*" and "*Auslegung des Vaterunsers fuer sich und hinter sich.*"¹

Amid all his other tasks, Luther continually expanded his catechetical works. As Reu records:

In 1520 Luther collected the results of his catechetical labors and added a third part, the explanation of the Creed. He published this in the form of a confessional mirror, as a treatise for the common people, bearing the title *Eine kurze Form der zehn Gebote; eine kurze Form des Glaubens; eine kurze Form des Vaterunsers.*²

Luther's continued catechetical work indicated his ongoing desire to see that evangelical theology was taught to all people and not simply considered a matter of theoretical debate among the scholars. As he wrote in the foreword to his Personal Prayer Book of 1522,

It was not unintended in God's particular ordering of things that a lowly Christian person who might be unable to read the Bible should nevertheless be

¹Michael Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A History of Its Origin, Its Distribution and Its Use* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1929), 7-8.

²*Ibid.*, 8.

obligated to learn and know the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. Indeed, the total content of Scripture and preaching and everything a Christian needs to know is quite fully and adequately comprehended in these three items. They summarize with such brevity and clarity that no one can complain or make any excuse that the things necessary for his salvation are too complicated or difficult for him to remember.³

When Luther found himself very busy with other work in 1525, he commissioned Justas Jonas and Agricola to prepare a "*catechismus puerorum*,"⁴ but this project was never completed. Numerous catechisms were published by others,⁵ but comments of Luther indicate that the work had not yet been done, at least not to Luther's satisfaction. Thus in his German Mass of 1526 we find Luther's insistent comment, "First, the German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism."⁶

In 1528, Bugenhagen was called away to organize the church and schools of Braunschweig, leaving Luther to take over as preacher. During this time, Luther preached two series of catechetical sermons (in May and September of 1528), according to the regular practice in Wittenberg. Later that year, "Luther began to write the catechism promised long before, . . . the work that was later called the Large Catechism."⁷

After preaching these first two sermon series, Luther became personally involved in the Saxon Visitations. This experience revealed the church's deep need for catechetical resources, pressing Luther to preach a third catechetical sermon series. It also imbued him with a strong desire to finish work on the *Catechism*.

³Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Gustav K. Wiencke, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol 43, *Devotional Writings II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 13.

⁴Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, 12.

⁵Reu counts about thirty catechisms published between 1522 and 1529. *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 53, *Liturgy and Hymns* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 64.

⁷Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, 16-17.

The Visitations also led Luther to a realization of the exceedingly poor level of knowledge among the people, and the need for an even simpler form of instruction in the basics of the Christian faith. Luther reflected this need when he wrote his *Small Catechism*. “The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief, plain, and simple version” (SC Preface, 1). The *Small Catechism* was deliberately designed to be simple enough for the “crude heathen” he had encountered in the Visitations.⁸

Several subsequent editions of the *Small Catechism* were produced during Luther’s lifetime, each offering new features, such as the *Table of Responsibilities*, the *Marriage and Baptismal booklets*, the *Form of Private Confession*, etc.⁹ These added features reveal Luther’s ongoing concern for catechesis and his desire to provide more complete instruction of the faithful.

Luther’s catechetical writings, especially his *Small* and *Large Catechisms*, have been recognized as masterpieces of theology and language. They set the standard for catechetics in other church bodies, some of whom copied Luther’s arrangement while others simply used Luther’s work. These works, therefore, must be seriously considered in their testimony regarding Luther’s doctrine of God and its relationship to his teaching and practice of prayer.

“Our Father”

“With these words God tenderly invites us . . .”¹⁰ Here, in the *Small Catechism*, Luther understood the opening words of the Lord’s Prayer to invite or “entice us, so that we come to

⁸Ibid., 17.

⁹For an overview of these additions, see Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther’s Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2000), 189-192.

¹⁰*Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 17.

believe” (SC III, 2). Luther indicates that God does not force his immutable will upon his creatures as he establishes a relationship between himself and his “dear children.”

Given the bold words of Luther seen earlier in his *De servo arbitrio*, this gentle approach in his *Small Catechism* almost seems to suggest a change in his position when it comes to prayer. Luther’s words might lead some to believe that his teaching on prayer allowed one to understand God as mutable. The God depicted in this part of the *Small Catechism* is one who invites or entices man to pray rather than simply demanding prayer.

While God acts in ways that seem to allow his will to be thwarted, it would be premature to infer that Luther therefore teaches God’s “immutable” will is subject to change. True, the Father here entices us to pray rather than treating us like puppets or machines, doing only what we are forced or programmed to do. This enticement, however, is part of the relationship God has already established with his people.

Unlike catechetical instruction of the past, this relationship was deliberately reflected by Luther in his treatment of the Lord’s Prayer in his *Catechisms*. As Arand has pointed out, the parts of Luther’s *Catechisms* were organized deliberately to reflect and, indeed, to preach the new life of faith in Christ.¹¹ Simply put, the Ten Commandments are the Law of God that convict us of our sin. This condemnation drives us to the Gospel, which is revealed in the Apostles’ Creed. The person who has been stung by the Law finds comfort in the Gospel, as faith in Christ is created by the working of the Holy Spirit. The first breath of the Christian, then, is prayer, taught and encompassed in the Lord’s Prayer.

When the Father invites and entices his people to pray, he is inviting them to live and act out their Spirit-created faith. Had he simply demanded prayer, the Father would then have been

¹¹Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 129f.

returning to the Law. In such blind obedience, man's actions might then be considered potentially meritorious, contributing toward salvation. The relationship between God and his people is not one driven by Law but by the Gospel.

The Father entices us to believe "in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence." Our lack of boldness and confidence before God comes, in part, from a recognition of our sinfulness before the most holy God. It also comes from an increasingly acute awareness of the hidden God and the terror that he brings. As Luther has noted in *De servo arbitrio*, the only way we find comfort before the terrors of the hidden God is to cling to the promises made by the revealed God. Among these promises are these words which reveal that we are not only permitted but even invited and commanded to petition God in prayer, calling upon him as "Our Father."

Luther's intent becomes clearer when one considers his words in the Preface to the *Large Catechism*. He opened his *Large Catechism* discussion of prayer noting that, since we cannot obey the commandments, we need prayer to ask God "that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us in this regard" (*LC III Preface*, 2). Luther believed the Ten Commandments vitally important because they show us what God's will is. As he wrote in 1519, "That God's will be done means undoubtedly nothing else than that his commandments are kept, for through these God has revealed his will to us."¹²

Along these lines, Peters recognizes that, for Luther, the Lord's Prayer becomes a deeper repetition of the Decalogue.¹³ This echoes what Luther had written earlier at the conclusion of

¹²Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 42, *Devotional Writings I* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 43.

¹³"So wird das Herrengebet zu einer vertiefenden Wiederholung des Dekaloges." Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen, Band 1: Die Zehn Gebote* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 47.

the Ten Commandments, that “no one is able to keep even one of the Ten Commandments as it ought to be kept. Both the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer must come to our aid, as we shall hear later” (*LC I*, 316).

In both the *Large* and the *Small Catechism* Luther anchored prayer in the command and the promise of God. In the *Small Catechism*, this anchor is found most clearly when Luther addressed the “Amen” of the Lord’s Prayer. There, he wrote that “he [God] himself has commanded us to pray like this and has promised to hear us” (*SC III*, 21).

Elaborating on this brief statement, Luther described the significance of both the command of God and the promise of God in the Preface to his *Large Catechism*. There, the first foundation of prayer and encouragement to pray that Luther offered was that of duty, our obligation to obey the command of God. Citing the Second Commandment, Luther noted, “Thereby we are required to praise the holy name and to pray or call upon it in every need” (*LC III*, 5).

Luther answered those who raised questions about whether or not they should bother to pray by referring them to the law of God: prayer is commanded by him. Luther’s emphasis was clear. “To pray, as the Second Commandment teaches, is to call upon God in every need. This God requires of us; it is not a matter of our choice” (*LC III*, 8). This commandment does not insist on or expect some special degree of holiness on the part of the individual praying in order for that prayer to be heard. “The very commandment that applied to St. Paul applies also to me. The Second Commandment is given just as much on my account as on his. He can boast of no better or holier commandment than I” (*LC III*, 15).

Obedience to this commandment, not the holiness of the person praying, makes prayer a holy work before God. “For God does not regard prayer on account of the person, but on account

of his word and the obedience accorded it” (*LC III*, 16). No one can claim merit before God nor be assured his prayers are heard apart from this obedience to God’s commandment. At the same time, the believer has no option: he must pray. The Law of God has commanded it.

The second foundation of and encouragement toward prayer is God’s promise “that what we pray is a sure and certain thing” (*LC III*, 19). God has promised to hear and answer us, therefore his promise “ought to awaken and kindle in our hearts a longing and love for prayer” (*LC III*, 20). According to his gospel promise, God has adopted us into his family and called us his children. The very first words of the Lord’s Prayer are such words of promise, for “with these words God wants to entice us, so that we come to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father” (*SC III*, 2).

On this basis, Luther rejected “the prayers of monks and priests, who howl and growl frightfully day and night, but not one of them thinks of asking for the least little thing. . . . They only thought, at best, of doing a good work as a payment to God, not willing to receive anything from him, but only to give him something” (*LC III*, 25). Self-contrived works and artificial spirits of devotion do not bring about true prayer. Rather, the needs we face and feel drive us to cry out in spontaneous prayer, making attempts at artificial devotion unnecessary.

Even so, the matter of our praying is not left purely to our feelings of need. God takes no chances with our prayers. He teaches us how to pray so that we do not neglect what he knows to be the real needs of our lives. “For we are all lacking plenty of things: all that is missing is that we do not feel or see them. God therefore wants you to lament and express your needs and concerns, not because he is unaware of them, but in order that you may kindle your heart to

stronger and greater desires and open and spread your apron wide to receive many things”
(*LC III*, 27).

Though God guides our prayers in this way, this should not be seen as oppressive control on his part. Luther understood God’s guidance as a comfort and a further encouragement toward prayer. For “in addition to this commandment and promise, God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words and approach we are to use” (*LC III*, 22).

Rather than the give-and-take relationship sought by open theism, Luther saw God purely giving to us. God himself reveals and gives to us his command to pray, his promise that he will hear, and his own words with which to approach him. Thus with this prayer, God is providing us with “the weapons with which Christians are to arm themselves for resisting the devil”(*LC III*, 30), weapons he gives us for our protection, use, and blessing.

The “Thy” Petitions

The first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer do not speak directly of us and our wants or needs. Rather, these words speak of God, the hallowing of his name, the coming of his kingdom, and the doing of his will. Luther recognized that, in a sense, these petitions do not really ask that these things be done, for they are going to be done “without our prayer” (*SC III* 7, 10). Our real request in these petitions is that these things are done “among us.” As Luther explained these petitions, his words reveal his understanding of the relationship that exists between God and the believer. In so doing, they offer us a glimpse of the nature and attributes of the God to whom we pray.

“May your name be hallowed.” In his earlier treatment of the Lord’s Prayer (1519), Luther saw this as the theme of the entire Lord’s Prayer. “In this petition God becomes everything and man becomes nothing. The other six petitions serve the same purpose and intent,

namely, the hallowing of God's name."¹⁴ This first petition describes a sharp distinction between God and man, Creator and creature. Understanding this petition, therefore, is key to Luther's understanding of the whole prayer.

"God's name is holy in itself."¹⁵ By using the phrase "in itself" (*zwar an ihm selbs/per se quidem*), Luther seems to indicate that the name of God is its own instrument in establishing holiness. This holiness is an attribute of God, distinct and abstracted from the activity and influence of God's creatures.

At the very least, Luther here defined God as an independent being, that is, not dependent on his creatures for his holiness. As cited earlier in his arguments against Erasmus,¹⁶ Luther insisted that divine attributes be considered and applied in a unified fashion. God's status as an independent being, therefore, should also be considered as we examine Luther's treatment of God's will and nature and determine what, if anything, he may have said or implied about the immutability of God.

Luther never questioned whether God's name will be holy, whether God's kingdom will come, nor whether God's will may or may not be done, at least not in the abstract. He understood man as purely subservient to God and his divine will. As Peters points out, Luther's concern was that *only* God's name may be holy.¹⁷ This concern is a personal and pastoral one.

¹⁴Luther, *American Edition*, 42: 27.

¹⁵"Gottes Name ist zwar an ihm selbs heilig; Nomen Dei per se quidem sanctum est." *Die BekenntnisSchriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*. Zehnte Auflage. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 512.

¹⁶See chapter 3, page 91.

¹⁷"Luther deutet dies an durch das kleine Wörtlein "nur": "Himmlischer Vater, hilf, daß *nur* Dein Name möge sein." Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*. 3:60.

While man has no part in affecting or effecting the holiness of God's name, hallowing *only* God's name makes a profound difference "among us."

This is seen in God's concern for the desecration of his name. If Luther had understood God as truly and totally "cold" and distant from us (as open theists think classical theists do), the desecration of God's name should not be an issue for God. His name would be holy no matter what we do, and he would not concern himself with what we think. Yet it does matter to God, for he has made the holiness of his name a concern of this prayer. This reveals a direct, personal, caring relationship between God and man, as he wishes to guard us from profaning his name. It does matter to God what happens "among us."

This returns us to the fundamental question Luther raised about these petitions: whether or not we will be a part of what God is going to do. Luther wrote years earlier, "if we pattern ourselves after our Father and all his ways, all his good and names are likewise our inheritance forever."¹⁸ This thought was also expressed in the *Large Catechism*: "How does it [God's name] become holy among us? The plainest answer that can be given is: when both our teaching and our life are godly and Christian" (*LC III*, 39; see also *LC III*, 52).

Luther went on to state that this petition asks for "the same thing that God demands in the Second Commandment: that his name should not be taken in vain by swearing, cursing, deceiving, etc., but used rightly to the praise and glory of God" (*LC III*, 45). In other words, we are asking God for his holiness to be established in and direct our lives. In no way did Luther suggest that our prayers might help direct or define God's holiness among us. God's holiness is established completely apart from us. We receive, conform to, and reflect that holiness when God's Word is clearly and purely taught among us.

¹⁸Luther, *American Edition*, 42:28.

These thoughts were echoed or assumed in Luther's treatment of the Second Petition regarding the kingdom of God. A significant development in the *Small Catechism* was Luther's explicit inclusion of the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit, given by the Father, who brings about faith and a holy life (*SC III, 8*). Luther had already taught this in the meaning of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me." (*SC II, 6*).

Luther elaborated this point somewhat in the *Large Catechism*. There he noted that the desire expressed in this petition is "that we may be a part of those among whom his name is hallowed and his kingdom flourishes" (*LC III, 50*). The kingdom of which he wrote is the activity of Jesus Christ described in the Creed (*LC III, 51*), which is God's action for our salvation.

When we pray this petition, Luther said, we ask for "an eternal, priceless treasure and for everything that God himself possesses. It would be far too great for any human heart to dare to desire it if God himself had not commanded us to ask for it" (*LC III, 55*). In so saying, Luther made it clear that he understood the working of God to be removed from the influence of man. As taught in *De servo arbitrio*, God does everything, man does nothing toward salvation.

"May your will come about on earth as in heaven." As in the first two petitions, so Luther noted in the third that "God's good and gracious will comes about without our prayer" (*SC III, 10*). Once again, the concern of this petition is not to precipitate some sort of change in God, but that God's will be done "among us."

Luther took note of the special need to pray for God's will to be done when he wrote:

In a good government there is need not only for good builders and rulers, but also for defenders, protectors, and vigilant guardians. So here also; although we have

prayed for what is most necessary—for the gospel, for faith, and for the Holy Spirit, that he may govern us who have been redeemed from the power of the devil—we must also pray that God cause his will to be done. If we try to hold these treasures fast, we will have to suffer an astonishing number of attacks and assaults from all who venture to hinder and thwart the fulfillment of the first two petitions.¹⁹

Luther's words here indicate that the divine will not only sets the course for our earthly lives, it also protects us from losing God's precious gifts of faith and redemption. Any other will would lead or be led astray. Even "our flesh is in itself vile and inclined to evil, even when we have accepted God's Word and believe it" (*LC III*, 63).

Yet Luther could find no way that our will could of itself conform to God's will. His 1519 exposition clearly stated, "He who has and obeys his own will surely acts contrary to God's will."²⁰ He even raised the possibility of man having a just and good will which must nevertheless not be done because it is not in keeping with God's will. An example he offers is the will of King David when he wanted to build the temple. Of this, Luther said, "no matter how good our will may be, it is still immeasurably inferior to God's will. Therefore, our inferior good will must necessarily give way to the infinitely better will of God; it must submit to being destroyed by it."²¹

At this point in his 1519 exposition of the Lord's Prayer, Luther did allow for the discussion of a free will in man. In so doing, however, he argued against man's ability to define that freedom. The only way to consider a will truly free, according to Luther, is to realize that "a free will does not want its own way, but looks only to God's will for direction. By so doing, it then also remains free, untrammelled and unshackled."²² Thus the soul, trusting in the promise of

¹⁹*Large Catechism III*, 61. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 448.

²⁰Luther, *American Edition*, 42:44.

²¹*Ibid.*, 47.

²²*Ibid.*, 48.

God, says to God, “Your will and ours conflict with each other. Yours alone is good, though it does not seem to be; ours is evil, though it glitters.”²³

Luther returned to these thoughts a year later, in his *Brief Explanation* of 1520. Of the third petition, he said, “This means our will, compared with Thy will, is never good, but always evil; but Thy will is always best, lovable above all things and most to be desired. Therefore, be merciful to us, dear Father, and let nothing be done according to our will.” In speaking of the evils and injustices of life, Luther continued, “grant us grace to take pleasure in this will of Thine, which lays these things upon us, and to give Thee praise and thanks. . . . Help us to die willingly and joyfully, and to welcome death as a manifestation of Thy will, so that impatience and despair may not make us disobedient toward Thee.”²⁴

With his *Large Catechism*, Luther continued in his recognition that we are hindered from conforming to God’s will by the opposition of the devil, our flesh, and the world. “Therefore we who would be Christians must surely expect to have the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies and must expect that they will inflict every possible misfortune and grief upon us” (*LC III*, 65). Our need in this conflict is real, and our prayer is necessary for our own benefit, lest “our poor flesh . . . yield or fall away through weakness or sloth” (*LC III*, 67).

In this ongoing struggle, Luther described an almost dualistic battle between God and the devil. While there is no doubt about God’s final victory, Luther insisted that we need to pray for ourselves that we may remain in and under the will of God.

Just as God’s name must be hallowed and his kingdom must come even without our prayer, so must his will be done and prevail even though the devil and all his host bluster, storm, and rage furiously against it in their attempt to exterminate the

²³Ibid., 79.

²⁴Martin Luther, *Works of Martin Luther, The Philadelphia Edition*, Vol. II. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 378-9.

gospel utterly. But we must pray for our own sake so that his will may be done also among us without hindrance, in spite of their fury, so that they may accomplish nothing and we may remain steadfast against all violence and persecution and submit to the will of God.²⁵

No mention is made of our will or God's openness to it. Rather, Luther's words indicate that our sinfulness precludes any positive contribution we could make. God's will must prevail; all else is of the devil. Furthermore, Luther was confident that God's name will be hallowed, his kingdom will come, and his will shall be done. This is what he has revealed to us in Scripture, though the inner workings of his will may present contradictions to us and be hidden from us. On the basis of what God has revealed, Luther understood God to both know and control the future, at least in relation to the fulfillment of these petitions.

Daily Bread

Before discussing Luther's doctrine of God that may emerge in this petition, it is important to identify a significant shift in Luther's thinking regarding "daily bread." In 1519, Luther equated "daily bread" with the "divine Word" of God,²⁶ an understanding common in medieval catechetics up to that point. By the time Luther wrote his *Catechisms*, however, he clearly recognized that this petition of the Lord's Prayer expressed God's governance of things temporal as well as things eternal. "To put it briefly, this petition includes everything that belongs to our entire life in this world, because it is only for its sake that we need daily bread" (*LC III*, 73).

From this point on, Luther recognized the broad concerns of this petition to be more wide-ranging than most people had previously realized. As Luther noted in his exposition of the

²⁵*Large Catechism III*, 68. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 449.

²⁶Luther, *American Edition*, 42:51.

Fourth Commandment, “no one thinks about how God feeds, guards, and protects us and how many blessings of body and soul he gives us” (*LC I*, 128). Yet Luther consistently described all these concerns as being safe in the hands of God.

In numerous ways, Luther attempted to point his readers to the vast richness and complex relationships involved in God’s provision of our “daily bread.” His *Small Catechism* provided an ever-widening list that eventually surrenders its attempt at mentioning everything with the words “and the like” (*SC III*, 14). The *Large Catechism* offers similar descriptions of “how comprehensively this petition covers all kinds of earthly matters” (*LC III*, 76).

For example, we might ask God to give us food and drink, clothing, house and farm, and a healthy body. In addition, we might ask God to cause the grain and fruits of the field to grow and thrive abundantly. Then we might ask God to help us manage our household well by giving and preserving for us an upright spouse, children, and servants, causing our work, craft, or occupation, whatever it may be, to prosper and succeed, and granting us faithful neighbors, and good friends, etc. In addition, we may ask God both to endow with wisdom, strength, and prosperity the emperor, kings, and all estates, especially the princes of our land, all councilors, magistrates, and officials, so that they might govern well and be victorious over the Turks and all our enemies, and to grant their subjects and the general populace to live together in obedience, peace, and concord. Moreover, we might ask that he would protect us from all kinds of harm to our body and to the things that sustain us—from storms, hail, fire, and flood; from poison, pestilence, and cattle plague; from war and bloodshed, famine, savage beasts, wicked people, etc. It is good to impress upon the common people that all these things come from God and that we must pray for them.²⁷

In outlining these complex relationships, Luther made it clear that only God is able to make all these things work together for our good. Luther steadily emphasized how we ask God to do all these things (*LC III*, 76, 77, 79), and how it is God who “cares for us in all our needs and faithfully provides for our daily sustenance” (*LC III*, 82).

This persistent understanding of God as the active agent, providing for all our needs, ran through all Luther’s discussions of daily bread. Luther made it clear that he was not merely

²⁷*Large Catechism III*, 76-79. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 451.

depending on naturalistic forces to govern seedtime and harvest. Rather, Luther saw the power and action of God at work in and through all these things. “For if God did not cause grain to grow and did not bless it and preserve it in the field, we could never have a loaf of bread to take from the oven or to set upon the table” (*LC III*, 72).

The struggle to maintain this provision of daily bread was not simply a temporal battle. Luther clearly pointed out that this petition is especially directed “against our chief enemy, the devil, whose whole purpose and desire it is to take away or interfere with all we have received from God” (*LC III*, 80). He further stated that it is our prayer to God that restrains the devil from his wicked and destructive desires (*LC III*, 81). While Luther does not elaborate on this action of prayer or connect it with other statements, it is fair to say that our prayer is able to do this only because God has commanded us so to pray. Thus it is God who, apparently, chooses to direct his power through our prayers.

The issue for Luther in this petition was not a question of whether or not we will receive our daily bread. Luther assumed we will receive our daily bread from God. His emphasis was on our receiving our daily bread with recognition and thanksgiving: recognition that everything comes from God’s gracious hand and fatherly goodness, and thanksgiving to God for such faithful provision.

Luther did offer a word of caution, however, as he reminded his readers that there are times when God withdraws his gracious hand and stops providing daily bread. Those who might deprive others of their daily bread, might find the words of this petition “turned against them” (*LC III*, 84) as a punishment for sin. Both the giving and the withholding of our daily bread, then, are directed by the will of God.

In short, Luther understood man to be situated under and subject to the gracious will of God. Nowhere did he suggest that we may ask that our will be done by God in these matters. We are simply to recognize and give thanks for the good gifts that come from the hand of God through the words of prayer that God himself has given us to use.

Forgiveness of Sins and Life Everlasting

In the remaining petitions, Luther pointed out how our sins and the devil's attacks set before us the great need to call on God. This petitioning is necessary because, "although we have God's Word and believe, although we obey and submit to his will and are nourished by God's gift and blessing, nevertheless we are not without sin" (*LC III*, 86). Temptations attack us because "we live in the flesh and carry the old creature around our necks" (*LC III*, 102). Indeed, the devil is the "sum of all evil" and our entire prayer is "directed against our archenemy" (*LC III*, 113). The words of the Lord's Prayer, therefore, teach us to pray for our forgiveness, for protection from temptation, and for deliverance from evil.

In his exposition of the Fifth Petition, Luther clearly recognized man's total depravity, helplessness, and dependence on God. He made this clear when he said, "we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it" and that "we daily sin much and indeed deserve only punishment" (*SC III*, 16). There is no way in which we can compensate for our sins, no way in which we can, of ourselves, choose or do what is good in God's eyes. "In short, unless God forgives, we are lost" (*LC III*, 91).

Luther offered no hint of credit or contribution on the part of our human will. On the contrary, he said that God's purpose in this Fifth Petition is "to break our pride and keep us humble" (*LC III*, 90). For God "has reserved to himself this prerogative: those who boast of their goodness and despise others should examine themselves and put this petition uppermost in

their mind” (*LC III*, 90). Truly, any good that we do cannot come from us. It must, rather, come from God, as Luther noted in his exposition of the Fourth Commandment: “For this reason you should rejoice from the bottom of your heart and give thanks to God that he has chosen and made you worthy to perform works so precious and pleasing to him” (*LC I*, 117).

This leaves us with the great need to ask God for forgiveness. “Not that he does not forgive sins even apart from and before our praying; for before we prayed for it or even thought about it, he gave us the gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness. But the point here is for us to recognize and accept this forgiveness” (*LC III*, 88). With these words, Luther made it clear that our prayers are in no wise meritorious; they do not earn forgiveness for us in any way, nor do they influence God to forgive us. This prayer for forgiveness cannot be considered or construed as a means of grace. Rather, much like our petition for daily bread, with these words we recognize and receive what God has given to us.

For “God does not wish to regard our sins and punish us as we daily deserve but to deal graciously with us, to forgive us as he has promised, and thus to grant us a joyful and cheerful conscience so that we may stand before him in prayer” (*LC III*, 92). Here is the definition and focus of God’s love: he forgives. This is not the open theist’s definition of love, which is described in human terms and seeks human cooperation and contribution to the works of God. God’s love is purely God’s action toward us, and the focus of that action is forgiveness. On top of his forgiveness, he commands us to use our now-cleared consciences and pray, so that he can give us still more gifts and we can recognize the Giver.

Such a prayer is needed because we are too weak to stand on our own and are constantly under assault. This is the cry of the Sixth Petition, “and lead us not into temptation.” Luther

made it plain that “God tempts no one” (*SC III*, 18), yet he does allow temptation to come upon us.

If it is God’s will that we not fall into temptation, one might ask why he even allows us to be tempted. Though Luther did not directly address this apparent contradiction in his *Catechisms*, he had already answered it in his exposition of the Lord’s Prayer of 1519. There he made it clear that God allows man to be assailed by sin “so that man may learn to know himself and God; to know himself is to learn that all he is capable of is sinning and doing evil; to know God is to learn that God’s grace is stronger than all creatures.”²⁸

The *Catechisms* treat the temptations of the devil, the world, and the flesh as facts of life in this world. Throughout these temptations, the believer is utterly dependent on the merciful will and working of God. “As long as we remain in this vile life, where we are attacked, hunted, and harried on all sides, we are constrained to cry out and pray every hour that God may not allow us to become faint and weary and to fall back into sin, shame, and unbelief. Otherwise it is impossible to overcome even the smallest attack” (*LC III*, 105).

When confronted with temptation, Luther advocated a total dependence on the will of God, and cautioned against relying on human powers to defeat temptation.

At such times our only help and comfort is to run here and seize hold of the Lord’s Prayer and to speak to God from our heart, “Dear Father, you have commanded me to pray; let me not fall because of temptation.” Then you will see that the temptation has to cease and eventually admit defeat. Otherwise, if you attempt to help yourself by your own thoughts and resources, you will only make the matter worse and give the devil a wider opening. . . . But prayer can resist him and drive him back.²⁹

²⁸Luther, *American Edition*, 42:74.

²⁹*Large Catechism III*, 110-111. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 455.

Once again, Luther stated that human effort will only make things worse. Depending on the unchanging command and promise of God, our prayer is that “God would preserve and keep us” (*SC III*, 18) and “not allow us to fall and collapse under attacks and temptations” (*LC III*, 100).

Luther saw the Seventh Petition, “but deliver us from evil,” as a summary of the entire prayer. Here again, he pressed for complete reliance on the Father amid the trials of life, through death, and into eternal life. Once more, Luther assigned all the evil of this life to the devil, who “incessantly seeks our life and vents his anger by causing accidents and injury to our bodies” (*LC III*, 115). Against this foe we can do nothing but follow the command and hold to the promise of God as we pray without ceasing. “Thus you see how God wants us to pray to him for everything that attacks even our bodily welfare so that we seek and expect help from no one but him” (*LC III*, 117).

Though this petition summarizes the Lord’s Prayer, Luther did not want it to be understood as the focal point of the prayer. In his 1519 *Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer*, he cautioned against a misuse of this petition.

There are some, perhaps many, who honor and implore God and his saints solely for the sake of deliverance from evil. They have no other interest and do not ever think of the first petitions which stress God’s honor, his name, and his will. Instead, they seek their own will and completely reverse the order of this prayer. They begin at the end and never get to the first petitions. They are set on being rid of their evil, whether this redounds to God’s honor or not, whether it conforms to his will or not.”³⁰

Seeking to “use” this petition to selfishly rescue oneself from trouble is a misunderstanding and misappropriation of the whole prayer.

One might imagine that such a utilitarian understanding of prayer is something unique to the modern age, but Luther’s comments indicate that self-centeredness in prayer has been a

³⁰Luther, *American Edition*, 42:75.

persistent problem. It was important for Luther to point out clearly that the purpose of this prayer is not what we can get out of it for ourselves. Rather, the requests we make of God are first based on that relationship God has established with us. For this reason, Luther said, our Lord “has placed at the end this [Seventh] petition, for if we are to be protected and delivered from all evil, his name must first be hallowed in us, his kingdom come among us, and his will be done. In the end he will preserve us from sin and disgrace and from everything else that harms or injures us” (*LC III*, 118).

It is this relationship with God, one that is dependant on his command and promise and subservient to his will, that enables the confident “Amen” of our prayers. When people question the value of prayer, Luther said, it means that they “are looking not at God’s promise but at their own works and worthiness, and thereby they despise God and accuse him of lying. . . . Look! God has attached much importance to our being certain so that we do not pray in vain or despise our prayers in any way” (*LC III*, 122, 124).

As Luther wrote in 1519,

[Prayer] must rely on the truthfulness and the promise of God, for if God had not bidden us to pray and promised to hear us, then all creatures could not obtain so much as a kernel of grain with all their prayers. Therefore, take note that a prayer is not good and right because of its length, devoutness, sweetness, or its plea for temporal or eternal goods. Only that prayer is acceptable which breathes a firm confidence and trust that it will be heard (no matter how small and unworthy it may be in itself) because of the reliable pledge and promise of God. Not your seal but God’s Word and promise render your prayer good. This faith, based on God’s words, is also the true worship; without it all other worship is sheer deception and error.³¹

Prayer was not understood by Luther to be an action of cooperation with God. We are unworthy, undeserving, and utterly incapable of adding anything to God’s perfect will.

³¹Ibid., 77.

When we examine prayer as part of the Christian life in general and the Lord's Prayer as part of the Catechisms in particular, we find prayer intimately connected to faith. Arand has described it in this way:

In some ways, prayer becomes both the evidence and test of faith. If a person expects God to help, then that person will pray. If a person does not expect anything from God, then that person will not pray. . . . Prayer as petition highlights the receptive character of faith itself. This come through strongly in Luther's explanation of the petitions. Thus rather than being seen as a means of grace, prayer emerges instead as a means of faith!³²

As we live under God's revelation and, by faith, depend upon God's unchanging will, prayer will be recognized as the action of faith, the activity that is trust in God.

Conclusion

Classical theism teaches an immutable God. Open theists have challenged that doctrine by suggesting that, in spite of what they teach, classical theists nonetheless petition God as though he were mutable. While Luther may, in many ways be listed among the classical theists, this conflict between doctrine and practice was not in evidence in Luther's teaching on prayer.

This becomes clear when one reviews Luther's catechesis on prayer. Luther's concern for catechesis spanned his entire theological career. The pinnacle of his catechetical work came with the publication of his *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism*. In studying these works, it can be seen how Luther assumed and depended upon the immutability of God to support his positions and practices regarding Christian prayer.

According to Luther, it is God who has established the unique relationship that exists between himself and his people. On the basis of that relationship, believers are commanded to pray and given the promise that God will hear and answer their prayers. Luther saw Christian

³²Arand, *That I May Be His Own*, 164.

prayer in general, and the Lord's Prayer in particular, anchored in the command and promise which God has revealed to us: God has told his people to pray, and promised that he will hear and answer those prayers.

Along with the command and promise, God has revealed to us the pattern and method for Christian prayer. God himself has provided the content and even the very words that believers may use to petition God for various needs. In giving us the words of the Lord's Prayer, he has further shown how to ask in a manner that is in keeping with his will. All this should not be perceived as controlling or oppressive on the part of God, but gracious and giving. The God who has revealed himself to us has also revealed that we are permitted to approach him with our needs and wants.

At the same time, Luther recognized the sinfulness of man, as well as the ongoing struggle of believers against the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh. Man is utterly undependable and yet is in desperate need of help. In his total depravity, man is not able, of himself, to do anything that is good in the eyes of God and helpful in his struggle against evil. Sinful man has no standing before God nor claim upon him. This leaves man with neither right nor possibility of influencing any kind of change in God, for sinful man has no position from which he might impose his human will upon God, urging or persuading God to turn from the course set down by his will. Still, our need drives us to pray, and the believer asks for the help he needs from the only possible source of good, which is God.

Luther found this understanding of the relationship between revealed God and sinful man reflected in the Lord's Prayer. The prayer does not merely begin with the "Thy" petitions; all of its requests are formed and shaped by those petitions. God's name, kingdom, and will are the context for the Christian's life of prayer and life of faith. Man's place before God is one of utter

humility. God's name, kingdom, and will shall be glorified and accomplished with or without our prayer. These petitions ask that God would grant his people place and part in these glories, that they would be done "among us."

Luther's catechesis constantly subjected all prayers and petitions to the revealed will of God. God's will is done "without our prayer." The request made in the Lord's Prayer is for the person(s) praying it to be a part of that will. The petitioner does not seek to set God's agenda for him or with him, but to enjoy his blessings.

This idea of God's will being accomplished with or without our prayer is also seen in Luther's treatment of the Fourth Petition. On the basis of Scripture, Luther understood God to be the only active agent and provider of our daily bread. This places man firmly under the gracious and immutable will of God, for only an unchanging God would guarantee, comfort and assure us of a continued and gracious provision for our lives.

Luther pursued these thoughts as he further dealt with the forgiveness of sins, wrestling with temptation, and rescue from evil. Sinful man is utterly unworthy and incapable of making any contribution toward his own forgiveness. This forgiveness must come from God alone, and so the sinner depends upon God's revelation of his unchanging word and promise. Without Luther's assumption of and dependence on the immutable character of God, God's promises would be brought into question and the individual's assurance of forgiveness and redemption would be thrown into doubt.

The question of temptation further throws the believer into total dependence on God's merciful will, as man has no power to overcome evil. God's promised deliverance from evil likewise depends on God's unchanging will, yet Luther pointed out that this, too, was part of hallowing God's name, as revealed and requested in the First Petition.

Luther never spoke of God as causing or related to evil in any way. Standing firmly on the revelation of God, Luther ascribed all evil to the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh; God has no part in it. While his premodernist context may have allowed him to speak of God's involvement or presence in all things, good and bad, he ignored such discussions in his *Catechisms*.

His "avoidance" of such difficult matters probably grew out of pastoral concerns for his readers. Luther's concern to teach the "crude heathen" in a form they could understand had led him to radically simplify the *Catechism* (SC Preface, 1). To avoid introducing confusion or misunderstanding, Luther studiously avoided raising questions that can only find their answers in the hiddenness of God. In the simple teachings of the *Catechism*, he was very careful not to raise any doubts in the minds of his readers regarding the goodness of God and God's revealed promise that he would hear and answer our prayers.

In Luther's exposition of the Lord's Prayer, there is no hint of our being able to ask God for something with an assumption that God might change. On the contrary, Luther insisted that God's name is hallowed, his kingdom comes, and his will is done without our prayer. While the immutability of God and his will in these matters is assumed, Luther's repeated emphasis that we pray for these things to be done "among us" seems to further assume our mutability.

In the Lord's Prayer, we do ask God to change us that we may be subject to his will. On the surface, then, Luther seems to have understood prayer in a manner similar to that described earlier in the work of St. Augustine: as a means toward our "gracious conformation"³³ to the immutable will of God. Indeed, many of Luther's catechetical statements reflect a desire to change our sinful will to be like God's perfect will.

³³See chapter 2, page 63f.

Terminating our search for Luther's understanding of prayer at this point, however, may fall short of fully answering our initial question, "Can God be persuaded?" This question not only asks what prayer does for us, it also inquires into the relationship that prayer might establish between us and God. Without doubt, Luther could agree with Augustine and describe prayer as God's tool for the ongoing sanctification and reformation of the Christian's life. Yet to see prayer only as a means for self-improvement is to miss Luther's unique perspective on prayer.

The key to Luther's understanding of prayer is found in his emphasis on the revealed command and promise of God. We are commanded to pray, and God has promised to hear us. For Luther, the goal of that command and the purpose of that promise is not just to change us, but to do what God has said: to pray.

It is at this point where prayer becomes the action and activity of faith. We pray to God, knowing him to be immutable (for so he has revealed himself to us), and yet we ask him to do and change things for us. How this "works" cannot be resolved within the bounds of our human logic, and God does not reveal the answer to us. We must simply trust and act upon what the revealed God has said over what the hidden God has not told us.

Furthermore, the questions of what our prayer might do to or for God are left unanswered. On these matters too, the Scriptures are silent. God has not revealed what impact or effect, if any, our prayers may have on the inner workings of the Trinity. Will these things be revealed to us in eternity? The Bible does not say. Even if they are unknown or unknowable for us, does God answer these things for himself? Even this, we do not know. It is all hidden from us, forcing us to consider it part of the *deus absconditus*.

Since God has remained silent on the matter, Luther refused to speculate. Instead, in accordance with God's revealed command and promise, Luther simply prayed. Arand has

referred to prayer as a “means of faith.” One might argue that, though he did not use such words himself, Luther understood prayer as “visible faith,” for faith prays: it speaks back to God after it has been spoken to by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For Luther, prayer was not an act of “consultation” with God. It was the divinely-given opportunity for faith to exercise itself by heeding God’s revealed command, confidently clinging to God’s revealed promise, and boldly seeking help from the immutable God who has revealed himself to us. It was this understanding of prayer as faith-in-action that we find in Luther’s personal life of prayer.

CHAPTER FIVE

LUTHER'S PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Introduction

As seen in the previous chapters, Luther was able to teach an immutable God consistently in his formal doctrine as well as in his catechesis on prayer. Luther's catechetical writings were careful expressions of the doctrine Luther drew from Scripture. As Arand points out:

The catechisms exhibit little interest in conveying an abstract theoretical knowledge or a body of facts organized for transmission from one generation to the next. Doctrine is not abstract theory to be contrasted with practical skills and how-to steps for daily living. If anything, the Reformers (and the church fathers before them) viewed doctrine as pastoral care. . . . Doctrine provides the Christian with a diagnosis of the innermost needs of human beings. It provides a framework for interpreting life and the experiences of life in the light of the triune work of God. Doctrine provides a foundation for faith and life in order to make sense of a world that often seems confusing and meaningless. Most importantly, it brings God and his gifts into our very lives.¹

It has been demonstrated that Luther's formal catechetics on prayer remained consistent with his doctrine of God. Indeed, Luther's teaching on prayer is deeply rooted in his doctrine of God, especially in his distinction between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*. The question remains whether Luther also maintained this consistency in his personal practice of prayer. To resolve this question, we turn to some prominent examples of Luther's actual practice of prayer.

¹Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2000), 114.

A Simple Way to Pray

In 1535, six years after the publication of his *Catechisms*, Luther wrote a thirty-four page book and dedicated it to “a good friend . . . for Peter, the master barber.”² In this book, Luther outlined a method for personal devotions which he said were drawn from his own experience and practice. This, said Luther, was “what I do personally when I pray.”³ *A Simple Way to Pray* provides us with a look inside Luther’s personal prayer life.

Both the texts of the prayers he offers as well as the pattern of prayer he describes in this work prove instructive regarding Luther’s doctrine of God and practice of prayer. According to his own testimony, Luther built his personal prayer life around the *Small Catechism* and the Scriptures within the context of the larger Church. Whenever possible, he said, “if it be the day and hour for it [he would hurry] to the church where a congregation is assembled.”⁴ There, reminded of the fact that he was in the midst of and part of the people of God, Luther would begin his prayers.

First, he would recite the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and perhaps some words of Christ or Paul. This he did to “warm the heart”⁵ and focus the intent on prayer to God. His use of *Catechism* and Scripture to create this focus suggests that Luther was not attempting simply to generate some humanly-created emotional state for prayer. Rather, he used this time to allow God’s words to increase his awareness and consciousness of the divinely-appointed context and command for prayer.

²Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 43, *Devotional Writings II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 190.

³Ibid., 193.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 194.

This awareness was reflected in the first prayer Luther suggested in *A Simple Way to*

Pray:

O Heavenly Father, dear God, I am a poor unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to raise my eyes or hands toward thee or to pray. But because thou hast commanded us all to pray and hast promised to hear us and through thy dear Son Jesus Christ hast taught us both how to pray and what to pray, I come to thee in obedience to thy work, trusting thy gracious promise. I pray in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ together with all thy saints and Christians on earth as he has taught us: Our Father . . .⁶

The words of this prayer not only repeat but depend upon the key points Luther made in the preface to the Lord's Prayer in his *Large Catechism*. With these words, Luther recognized our status as "poor unworthy sinners." In keeping with his arguments against Erasmus, Luther's prayers made no claim to do anything that might be considered good or meritorious in God's eyes, nor able to influence him in any way. On the contrary, Luther repeated back what God has told us in his Word: we do not deserve to come before God in prayer.

Though an undeserving sinner, Luther boldly claimed the ability and privilege of prayer. He made this claim because God has both commanded us to pray and promised to hear us. Rather than hinting at any possibilities of discussing or debating things with God, Luther further recognized our prayers as wholly dependent on Christ, who taught us how we are to pray and what we are to ask of God. This teaching comes most clearly to us in the words of the Lord's Prayer, for which the suggested prayer quoted above was merely a preface. Thus, in obedience and trust, Christians pray according to the words and pattern given us by Christ.

At this point, Luther suggested an expansion of one's prayers based on the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Here, the Lord's Prayer serves as a guide to the individual's prayer life not simply as a text to be recited but as a pattern to guide a wider range of prayer

⁶Ibid., 194-195.

requests. By carefully considering each of the petitions, the person praying would be led into a deeper understanding of the text of the Lord's Prayer and, at the same time, into further thoughts for prayer.

In this pattern of prayer, Luther saw the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work through the Word of God (specifically the words of the Lord's Prayer, which are themselves words of Scripture). "The Holy Spirit himself preaches here, and one word of his sermon is far better than a thousand of our prayers. Many times I have learned more from one prayer than I might have learned from much reading and speculation."⁷ When we use the words of Scripture in our prayers, God may then also preach to us even as we pray to him, for we are listening to God's words while we speak those words back to God. Luther apparently believed this is what happens when we pray the Lord's Prayer.

Luther's suggestions for prayer clearly revealed a prayer life that sought to be subject to the will of God. This is openly stated in his meditations on and prayers derived from each of the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer. In the First Petition, Luther sought the hallowing of God's name "both in us and throughout the whole world."⁸ He asked God to "convert those who are still to be converted," that together we may "obey thy will." Luther's prayer asked God to "restrain those who are unwilling to be converted" and to "defend us" from them.⁹

Under the Second Petition, Luther directed his prayer against those who opposed God's kingdom. Once again, he asked that God would "convert them and defend us. Convert those who are still to become children and members of thy kingdom so that they with us and we with them may serve thee in thy kingdom in true faith and unfeigned love and that from thy kingdom

⁷Ibid., 198.

⁸Ibid., 195.

⁹Ibid., 195-196.

which has begun, we may enter into thy eternal kingdom.”¹⁰ In this request to be a part of God’s kingdom, Luther also expressed his understanding that this kingdom would be fulfilled when all God’s promises to us are fulfilled—in eternal life.

These thoughts are repeated under the Third Petition, where once again Luther asked God to “convert those who have yet to acknowledge thy good will that they with us and we with them may obey thy will and for thy sake gladly, patiently, and joyously bear every evil, cross, and adversity, and thereby acknowledge, test, and experience thy benign, gracious, and perfect will.”¹¹ Notable here is the willingness not simply to suffer evil, but to bear it “joyously.”

Such joyous submission is an act of faith in the revealed God and his promise to work all things for our good (Romans 8:28). Faith submits even though the reason God allows evils, crosses, and adversities to assail us remains hidden from us. This attitude demonstrates a powerful desire to submit to the will of God rather than to seek or attempt to redirect God’s course. Luther’s words here may be directed against human desires to keep evil out of our lives at any cost, rather than recognize the intricacies of God’s plan and his will and ability to use evil and turn it to our good.

As in the *Catechisms*, Luther’s prayers under the Fourth Petition looked to God for all blessings “in this temporal and physical life.”¹² Luther called upon God to “grant that I may manage [my family] well, supporting and educating them as a Christian should.”¹³ His prayers suggested no trust in human abilities, but committed everything to the hand of God. Clearly,

¹⁰Ibid., 195.

¹¹Ibid., 196.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 197.

Luther saw God as both powerful and dependable to do this, otherwise there would be little point to such a prayer.

In the Fifth Petition Luther called upon God's gracious action for us in Christ. Even man's power to forgive is dependent on God, as Luther noted when he counseled "anyone who feels unable to forgive, let him ask for grace so that he can forgive."¹⁴ He sought from God the abilities to remain "fit and alert, eager and diligent in thy word and service" under the Sixth Petition. Under the Seventh Petition, Luther once again sought the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises, depending wholly on God's grace until Christ comes again.

These petitions were not directed by the desires and whims of man's will, but by the will of God, living and active in his Church. Thus Luther ended his prayers as he began them: keenly aware of his place among all Christians. As he advised Peter, "Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole of Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain."¹⁵ Luther's concluding "Amen" returned, finally, to the promise of God when he said, "Do not leave your prayer without having said or thought, 'Very well, God has heard my prayer; this I know as a certainty and a truth.' That is what Amen means."¹⁶

Luther did not prescribe his words for everyone's prayers. The hearts of his readers may have been stirred and guided by these words, but Luther offered his prayers only as a suggestion for the kind of thoughts that might flow from the Lord's Prayer. He made it clear that true prayer is not simply a matter of mechanically repeating the "right words." In fact, Luther warned that

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 198.

¹⁶Ibid.

our prayers should never become “idle chatter and prattle” as were “the prayers of the priests and monks.”¹⁷

For Luther, true preparation for prayer involved attentive clarity. As he put it, “a person who forgets what he has said has not prayed well. In a good prayer one fully remembers every word and thought from the beginning to the end of the prayer.”¹⁸ Just as God reveals himself clearly in the Scriptures, so faith trusts clearly in that revelation. Therefore, prayer calls for “concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer!”¹⁹

Yet Luther should not be misinterpreted here as requiring some level of piety or holiness to approach God in prayer. Luther’s words are cautions against the thoughtless prayers of wandering minds. It is the command and promise of God that enable and allow us to come to God in prayer.

Indeed, as David Scaer has pointed out, there are times when we are not powerful and holy but utterly powerless and helpless. Those are the times when we most need to approach God in prayer. Scaer addresses this in his treatment of Luther’s prayer and the *Anfechtungen* (temptations, trials, struggles) we face as Christians. As Scaer writes, “*Anfechtungen* add both depth and dimension to prayer. Prayer indicates that the Christian has not given up hope and his willingness to seek help from God. . . . In his helplessness the afflicted can go no place but to God for aid and assistance. Prayer is the plea for aid.”²⁰

Scaer elaborates regarding the relationship of *Anfechtungen* and prayer:

¹⁷Ibid., 198. Compare LC III, 25.

¹⁸Ibid., 199.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰David P. Scaer, “Luther on Prayer” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47 (1983): 305.

Luther would never understand prayer as an instrument in the hand of the Christian to manipulate God. Nevertheless, the Christian has to learn that God is near in the hour of need and that in answer to prayer He helps. Rather than seeing *Anfechtungen* as a hindrance to prayer, the *Anfechtungen* are themselves invitations to pray. God and Satan in “alliance” work in the life of believers to bring about God’s will. If prayer became permissible only when a person was pious, then no one would ever be permitted to pray. . . . The concept that the Christian can pray only with the Spirit’s aid again accentuates the centrality of God’s grace in Luther’s theology. Therefore, in prayer the only proper attitude is for the Christian to commit himself entirely into the hands of God.²¹

When we pray, therefore, we are to commit ourselves into God’s hands, pay attention to our prayer, and ask God for something. We should not think we are praying if we just join with those who pray mindlessly and, as Luther put it, “martyr” the Lord’s Prayer.²²

In his own prayer life, when he had time and opportunity, Luther also prayed through the Ten Commandments. He did this by dividing each commandment “into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands.”²³ Each commandment thus became the occasion for instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer (i.e., petition).

As instruction, Luther would think of the commandment as “what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly.”²⁴ Here, Luther recognized what God teaches and orders and what he “intends and expects me to do.”²⁵ Essentially, Luther repeated back what the law of God expects and demands.

In his thanksgiving, Luther encouraged recognizing all that God has done or provided in connection with the particular commandments. Under the Sixth Commandment, for instance,

²¹Ibid., 306.

²²Luther, *American Edition*, 43:200.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 206.

Luther said that God “protects and upholds this commandment and does not leave violations unpunished, even though he himself has to act if someone disregards and violates the commandment and precept.”²⁶ God’s enforcement of his commands provides an occasion for our thanksgiving, for he does these things for our protection and welfare.

Luther exposed the total inability of man to keep God’s law in his third “strand” of confession. This is evident under the First Commandment when he wrote, “I confess and acknowledge my great sin and ingratitude for having so shamefully despised such sublime teachings and such a precious gift throughout my whole life . . . I repent of these and ask for his grace.”²⁷ As he put it under the Fifth Commandment, “Really, it is high time that we started to deplore and bewail how much we have acted like rogues and like unseeing, unruly, and unfeeling persons who kick, scratch, tear, and devour one another like furious beasts and pay no heed to this serious and divine command.”²⁸

The fourth and final “strand” was explicitly a prayer. That is, he directly asked for something from God. In various ways, each in keeping with its respective commandment, Luther asked God to “help me by thy grace to learn and understand thy commandments more fully every day and to live by them in sincere confidence.”²⁹ For example, reminding Peter of what may happen when God’s will is not done, Luther advised Peter to “pray earnestly to the dear Father, who has set you in an office of honor in his name and intends that you be honored by the name ‘father.’ Ask that he grant you grace and blessing to look after and support your wife, children,

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 201.

²⁸Ibid., 205.

²⁹Ibid., 200-201.

and servants in a godly and Christian manner. . . . Otherwise the home is nothing but a pigsty and school for rascals, as one can see among the uncouth and godless.”³⁰

With each of these “strands,” Luther returned to his earlier emphasis on submission to God. He repeatedly asked to do and be conformed to God’s will. In no way did Luther ask or even suggest that God’s will be changed according to his own will.

Only in God does Luther find any ground for hope or help in this life. As Luther describes it under his prayers for the Third Commandment, “[God’s] word is the only light in the darkness of this life, a word of life, consolation, and supreme blessedness. Where this precious and saving word is absent, nothing remains but a fearsome and terrifying darkness, error and faction, death and every calamity, and the tyranny of the devil himself, as we can see with our own eyes every day.”³¹

Luther treated the Creed briefly, again suggesting that it be divided into four “strands,” as were the Commandments. Under his first “strand” for the First Article of the Creed, Luther reiterated man’s incapability to contribute in any positive way to God, God’s work, or God’s will:

You are God’s creation, his handiwork, his workmanship. That is, of yourself and in yourself you are nothing, can do nothing, know nothing, are capable of nothing. . . . But what you are, know, can do, and can achieve is God’s creation, as you confess [in the Creed] by word of mouth. Therefore you have nothing to boast of before God except that you are nothing and he is your Creator who can annihilate you at any moment.³²

In this book that openly reflected Luther’s practice of prayer, Luther did not deviate from his published doctrine of God. He offered no appeals that might suggest we are able to change

³⁰Ibid., 204.

³¹Ibid., 202.

³²Ibid., 210.

God's mind. Instead, he entrusted himself to the revealed God, seeking to be changed to conform to God's revealed will. While "conformation" was key to Luther's regular routine of prayer, and vital to the life he proposed for the Christian, it is not the final word of Luther on prayer. His prayer life called for such conformation on the basis of a faith that was able to turn to the revealed God even when confronted by terror and confusion arising from the hiddenness of God. We see this faith at work as Luther practiced his teaching on prayer in his own life.

"Case Studies" in Luther's Prayer

While Luther's book, *A Simple Way to Pray*, claimed to reflect Luther's own prayer life, it was a formally prepared publication. One may still wonder whether Luther personally practiced what he preached. That is, when Luther himself faced a crisis (beyond the daily routine of his prayers), did he become inconsistent? Did he try to influence or "persuade" God, seeking to impose his own will and thereby direct or achieve some change in God's will?

Two events in Luther's life may serve as examples of Luther's attitudes toward God in prayer. One is the grave illness of Philip Melanchthon in 1540; the second is the death of his daughter, Magdalene, in 1542. Luther's actual prayers during these difficult and tragic times were not recorded. The comments he offered regarding these events do give us a glimpse into Luther's prayer life in action.

In the summer of 1540, Philip Melanchthon was in Hesse, attempting to deal with the bigamy of Landgrave Philip of Hesse. This situation was so difficult and disturbing that Melanchthon became gravely ill over it, suffering from a high fever and general weakness. Luther seemed to believe that these ailments were brought about by Melanchthon's sensitive

disposition.³³ Whatever the cause, the illness was real enough, and apparently it was perceived as life-threatening.

In that instance of dire need, Lehmann reports,

Luther boldly prayed for his recovery and literally snatched his ill colleague from the jaws of death. His prayer was answered. He reported, "In that instance our Lord God had to listen to me, for I threw the whole burden at his feet and kept dinning into his ears all his promises which I was able to enumerate from Scripture, insisting that he had to answer my prayer if indeed I were to trust his promises."³⁴

Luther obviously faced this situation with confidence, praying boldly and holding God to his promises. God, in that instance, answered Luther's prayer by healing Melanchthon.

Reports of this incident, however, seem to have been somewhat romanticized. Köstlin recounts Luther's bold words of prayer as well as his decisive actions toward Melanchthon. These comments by Köstlin led Francis Pieper to deal with the matter under his discussion of the distinction between conditional and unconditional prayer in his *Christian Dogmatics*. Of this particular prayer of Luther's, Pieper writes, "such cases belong to the domain of the *fides heroica* and are not subject to the general rule. It is the business of the Holy Spirit to direct the prayer of the individual Christian in special, exceptional circumstances. Who will dare to circumscribe His power?"³⁵

It is true that, as far as it is recorded, Luther offered this prayer for Melanchthon unconditionally. That is, he was asking for a temporal blessing, normally understood as not

³³Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 54, *Table Talk* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 388.

³⁴Martin E. Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), 130-131. Ludolphy cites the original source for this quote as "Die handschriftliche Geschichte Ratzebergers über Luther und seine Zeit, hrsg. Von Chr. Gotth. Neudecker (Jena 1850) S. 103. Vgl. Auch CR 3, 1060f." Ingetraut Ludolphy, "Luther als Beter." *Luther* 33 (1962):130-131.

³⁵Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Volume III* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 83.

having the direct promise of God. Yet Luther did not (as far as we know) directly submit this request to the will of God by saying, “not my will but Thine be done.”

But did Luther actually commit some heroic act of faith by praying this prayer? Or is this the sort of prayer that he advocated all along? To place such an act under the heading of “heroic faith” might be misunderstood as putting the burden upon Luther for his “heroism.” Luther’s claim, however, is that he put the burden on God’s promises as far as Luther understood those promises.

Realizing this, it is possible to see Luther’s prayer in a different light. Treating Luther’s prayer as an unconditional request might interpret it as an attempt to persuade God’s course of action. Reading Luther’s words as a bold and faith-filled attempt to find hope and help in the promises of God maintains Luther’s trust in God’s immutability.

Luther described his prayer as dependent on the promises God had revealed in Scripture. “I threw the whole burden at his feet and kept dinning into his ears all his promises which I was able to enumerate from Scripture, insisting that he had to answer my prayer if indeed I were to trust his promises.”³⁶ He did not say which promises he had in mind, only that they were the anchor of his prayer. As noted earlier,³⁷ Luther had recognized that “in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it.”³⁸ Trusting in the revealed God and his promises against the hidden God, who was somehow at work in Melancthon’s illness, Luther would have understood his prayer to be in complete agreement with the command and promises of God.

³⁶Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*, 130-131.

³⁷In chapter 3, page 110.

³⁸Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 138; Luther, *American Edition*, 33:62-63.

For, given such a bold prayer on Luther's part, what might his reaction have been if Melanchthon had died? Luther's own remarks lead us to believe that this is what had been expected. After Melanchthon's recovery, Luther wrote to his wife that he and those with him had trouble believing that Melanchthon had actually survived.

Master Philip truly had been dead, and really, like Lazarus, has risen from death. God, the dear father, listens to our prayers. This we [can] see and touch [with our hands], yet we still do not believe it. No one should say Amen to such disgraceful unbelief of ours.³⁹

That Melanchthon did not die Luther credits to God alone. God acted graciously according to what Luther had correctly understood to be his promises.

Had God done otherwise, Luther most likely would have, in faith, attributed God's action to the *deus absconditus*, the hiddenness of God. Luther would have trusted that this outcome was according to God's will and plan, and for the good of all concerned. Such was the attitude revealed through Luther's dealing with the death of his beloved daughter, Magdalene.

In September of 1542, Luther's thirteen-year-old daughter, Magdalene, became ill. Shortly thereafter, she died. Before her death, as she became more seriously ill, Luther said, "I love her very much. But if it is thy will to take her, dear God, I shall be glad to know that she is with thee."⁴⁰

Not that this loving father would surrender his beloved daughter without a struggle. For, "When his daughter was in the agony of death, he [Martin Luther] fell on his knees before the bed and, weeping bitterly, prayed that God might will to save her. Thus she gave up the ghost in the arms of her father." Here see Luther personally wrestling with yet submitting to the will of

³⁹Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 50, *Letters III* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 209.

⁴⁰Luther, *American Edition*, 54:430.

God. "I'd like to keep my dear daughter because I love her very much, if only our Lord God would let me. However, his will be done! Truly nothing better can happen to her, nothing better."⁴¹

One might attempt to argue that God was "persuaded" in the case of Melanchthon but not in the case of Magdalene. One could also question the record of Luther's prayer, for Luther's repeated submission to God's will comes through clearly in every other respect. Lehmann cites another instance in Luther's life that further illustrates Luther's understanding of prayer and its place before God:

He himself was once present at the bedside of a woman who became critically ill in childbirth. Deeply moved by her plight, he comforted her and confidently prayed with her for her restoration. However, in this case God did not let himself be prevailed upon. The woman died. Luther, bowing humbly beneath the divine disposal of events in this situation, nonetheless believed that God had heard his prayer in a way that this devout woman would thank him for it in the life to come.⁴²

Though not afraid to pray boldly, Luther was also able to submit humbly to the will of God that remained hidden from him.

Conclusion

A Simple Way to Pray was a published attempt to reflect and teach Luther's own practice of prayer. Grounded thoroughly in the *Small Catechism*, Luther's prayers were woven from the texts of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles' Creed. Through all of these prayers, Luther repeatedly recognized the inabilities of sinful humanity. He sought to turn to God in all things, depending on God's command and unchanging promises as the anchor for his prayers.

⁴¹Ibid., 432.

⁴²Lehmann, *Luther and Prayer*, 145-146.

An examination of certain situations in Luther's life reveals that Luther was able to maintain these attitudes in actual practice. His bold prayer for Melancthon, though sometimes thought of as "heroic," can be understood as wholly dependent on the revealed promises of God. By contrast, Luther's prayers at his daughter's death clearly shows Luther's willingness to trust in God's revealed promises even as he submitted to God's hidden will.

These incidents remind us to be cautious regarding the accuracy and interpretation of anecdotal evidence and historical records. At the same time, they challenge us to think through Luther's prayers carefully, for there may be a much deeper understanding beneath the surface of his words. Luther's submission to the will of God assumed God's immutability, for such submission depends upon God's revealed and established will. Submission to a mutable God whose will is subject to change would be futile and frustrating. In that case, seeking to impose one's own will on such a God and thereby "persuade" him would be the more logical and comforting course of prayer.

Luther set no such course. Instead, as in his formal catechesis, his personal prayer life reflected an immutable, unchanging God. Such a God is dependable, keeping the promises he has revealed to us. Such a God is a comfort to sinful human beings, even when his purposes are hidden from us and his ways seem contrary to our logic. Such a God calls us to trust in what he has revealed in the face of what he has left unrevealed. By faith, Luther sought to be conformed to the revealed will of God, that he might more firmly trust in the revealed God over against the hidden God.

SUMMARY, ANALYSIS, AND CONCLUSION

Summary

Can God be persuaded? What impact does the prayer of a Christian have on God? As Christians come before God in prayer, it is first necessary to consider how they are to understand their God. Some see God as immutable, unchanging. There is a God who has already incorporated their prayers into an all-encompassing, divine plan. Others see God as open to change rather than bound to a particular (or at least, a detailed) plan for what is yet to come. They approach him with the expectation that, through their prayers, they can influence his course of action, persuading or even directing God's plan for the future.

Can God be persuaded? Classical theism has answered with a categorical "no." The usual argument offered is that God is immutable, and because he is immutable, prayer cannot persuade nor effect any kind of change in God. Instead, prayer should be understood as something that God has already factored into his plans for the world. It has also been said that while prayer does not change God, it does change the person praying.

This doctrinal stance of classical theism has been challenged by open theism. Open theists claim that God can be persuaded, that human will can be imposed upon God. They address the questions surrounding the nature and activity of prayer by raising questions about the immutability of God. Open theism sees immutability as an extra-biblical concept, developed from assumptions that originated not in the Bible but in Greek philosophy. It argues that these foreign assumptions have been supported via a biased reading of Scripture (biased, that is, in favor of divine immutability). An "open" reading of the data has further led open theists to

reconsider their understanding of God's relationship to the future. They describe God's foreknowledge as limited, based on the assumption that no one—not even God—can know what has not yet happened.

For open theists, prayer is not just an opportunity to communicate with God, but a divinely given tool through which man imposes his will upon and “persuades” God. In their view, classical theism betrays a serious weakness when it comes to the issue of prayer. Recognizing classical theism's desire to maintain God's immutability, open theists accuse classical theists of praying to God in ways that suggest him to be mutable: the prayers of classical theists sound like they seek and even expect changes in God. Such inconsistencies not only undermine both doctrine and practice in classical theism, they also create confusion in the minds and hearts of the faithful.

Some modern classical theists, wanting to defend their teachings, have begun to address this accusation. The possibility of understanding a “relational mutability” in God has been discussed, tentatively suggesting that certain “changes” may be predicated of God with relation to his people. These “relational” changes, however, should not be construed as violating God's immutability. Nor should these attempts to define immutability more carefully be seen as a concession to open theism. Classical theists continue to point out weaknesses and dangers in open theism, ranging from misinterpretation of specific texts to conclusions that put salvation itself at risk.

In the final analysis, these disputes between open and classical theists result from fundamental presuppositional differences. In their arguments, open theists presuppose libertarian human freedom, that is, “free choice,” and allow that presupposition to drive other facets of their

doctrine. Furthermore, they describe God in human terms and insist on remaining within the bounds of human logic in any talk about God.

Classical theists note that this penchant for human logic leaves little room in open theism for consideration of paradoxes or for the “mysteries” of God. Rather than pursuing a human model of relationship as open theists do, classical theists draw clear distinctions between the Creator and his creation. Humbled by the mysteries of God, classical theists point out that the presupposition of prayer is not to help form God’s will, but to seek that his will is done.

Absent from this discussion, however, has been the theological perspective of Martin Luther. It is true that Luther spoke to a premodernist world, a world quite unlike that of the modernists who currently battle over these issues. Yet Luther’s voice brings a fresh, new perspective to this discussion.

Recalling Luther’s background, one finds that his nominalist education provided him with a framework from which to examine and question even well-established authorities. Eventually, Luther questioned nominalism itself as he found its neo-Semipelagianism views conflicting with Scripture. Thus Luther’s words come to us from a post-scholastic stance, one that rejected the logically-bound categories of its day in favor of a faithful adherence to Scripture alone.

With respect to God’s immutability, Luther was able to draw on the theology of Augustine. Augustine had argued thoroughly and decisively for the total immutability of God in substance and accident. Augustine had also described prayer as a tool for man’s conformation to the divine will. Accepting these things, Luther nonetheless went beyond Augustine in his own theological development.

Luther chose to communicate much of his theology to the church through catechetical sermons and writings. The poor state of catechesis in Luther’s time and the need for a truly

evangelical catechism in the course of the Reformation drove Luther to expand his own catechetical efforts. This led to the practical expression of Luther's theology and his practice of prayer in his *Small and Large Catechisms*.

This theology and practice of prayer was grounded in Luther's doctrine of an immutable God, a doctrine clearly expressed in Luther's *De servo arbitrio*. Perhaps not coincidentally, *De servo arbitrio* was written in response to Desiderius Erasmus, Luther's contemporary, who was a noted proponent of human free choice. While Erasmus would not let go of God's immutability, his persistent defense of free choice paralleled many of the arguments of modern open theism.

Luther, by contrast, defended divine immutability and denied human free choice. Though this led him perilously close to making God responsible for sin, Luther did not attempt to rescue his argument by turning (as Erasmus did) to scholastic arguments of contingency. Abandoning attempts to force everything within the bounds of human logic, Luther posited and maintained a distinction between the revealed God (*deus revelatus*) and the hidden God (*deus absconditus*).

Unfortunately, Luther has been dismissed by open theism at this very point, just where he makes a significant contribution to the discussion at hand. Luther did not assume that all questions about God are answerable. He simply and solely depended on God's revelation as far as that revelation goes. Thus Luther was willing to sacrifice rationalism in favor of a Biblical determinism. The things that are not revealed about God remain unrevealed and cannot be discerned or deduced. Luther was clear that we cannot look into or speculate on the inner workings of the hidden God. Rather, we must simply trust God (revealed) against God (hidden). This is the life of faith that the Christian lives, and that faith is acted out in prayer.

Luther's *Catechisms* proclaim the anchor of Christian prayer to be the command and the promise of God. God has told us to pray and promised he will hear and answer us. At the same time, neither God nor his will changes, so we can depend upon them. Therefore, we pray.

Prayer does not seek a change in God. Instead, it seeks for God's will to be done. Luther repeatedly reflected this in his treatment of the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer. For him, prayer is an expression of one's desires that, by faith, understands it should submit itself to God's will. Prayer remains dependent on the revelation God has given, even though it is also aware of the hiddenness of God and recognizes it cannot comprehend what that hidden God may choose to do. Although prayer under these terms may not seem "logical," prayer is not about logic: prayer is an act of faith.

For Luther, this position was more than an abstract, doctrinal theology. Luther lived out his doctrine in his own prayer life. We find this reflected both in his instructions on prayer and in anecdotal evidence from events in his life. At all times, Luther's prayer life revolved around the command and promise of an immutable God. Luther found comfort in that immutability, for it served as an unshakable anchor for this act of faith called prayer.

Conclusions

From the data presented in this dissertation, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Open theism does not present a viable alternative understanding of God for those who wish to remain faithful to the entire witness of Scripture. Open theists claim to work only on the basis of what has been revealed in Scripture, yet their doctrine is grounded in and driven by the principle of libertarian human freedom. While they attempt to face some challenging questions in an innovative way, the conclusions that are logically drawn by open theists ultimately conflict with clear teachings of Scripture.

Open theism's persistent defense of libertarian human freedom forces a logic that ultimately undermines the doctrine of God that is revealed in Scripture. Their whole model of God is based on a human model of relationship rather than on a clear understanding of a distinction between Creator and creation. Indeed, God is so thoroughly humanized in open theism that all of his attributes must be reconsidered and redefined.

Open theism treats the love of God as though it were a human emotion, not as something unique to God. As pointed out by classical theists, open theists limit God's omnipotence, most obviously in terms of their statements that God is unable to know the future. God's supposed subjection to the power of time brings into question such things as whether time is part of the creation, how we would define God's "eternal" nature, and the meaning of everlasting life.

Furthermore, open theists believe that theology cannot discuss or even consider that within God there may be things which cannot be seen or otherwise known to humanity. Open theism's approach to theology effectively denies the hiddenness of God. This means that only the revealed God can be considered, and open theists insist that this revelation be resolved into one, logical whole.

Obviously, open theism alters more than the doctrine of God's immutability. It attempts to redefine the nature of God and his relationship to his people, resulting in a new doctrine of God and a "soteriological inclusivism"¹ that are not found in Scripture. This consistent departure from the whole witness of Scripture renders open theism an unviable alternative for theology.

2. Luther posited an immutable God in essence and attributes, and he did not draw any boundaries or limitations on that immutability. Most of the time, Luther did not discuss

¹For this discussion, see Chapter 1, page 29. Robert A. Pyne, and Stephen R. Spencer. "A Critique of Free-Will Theism, Part Two." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 158 (October-December 2001), 396.

immutability in terms of the essence of God. Rather, he considered the immutability of God as it has been revealed to us, that is, in his immutable Word, his immutable Law, etc.

Luther, however, was not a systematic theologian in the modern sense of the term. Hence he did not write an abstract theology. Nearly all of his statements were in the context of sermons, exegetical teaching, or dealing with specific issues or conflicts. Viewing his statements as a whole, it becomes clear that he was not describing immutability merely in terms of certain attributes of God, but that he understood God's immutability to extend to the very essence of God.

Such a position would be consistent with his words to Erasmus that one cannot selectively assign qualities to God.² Luther, therefore, did not limit himself to a "relational" immutability or an "ethical" immutability when talking about God. He simply and directly spoke of the immutability of God.

3. Luther "resolved" the logical difficulties posed by an immutable God by recognizing a distinction between the revealed God (*deus revelatus*) and the hidden God (*deus absconditus*).

Logical difficulties may arise when one argues for a totally immutable God, for even though God portrays himself as immutable, in some places in Scripture he appears mutable. For instance, if God does not or cannot change, how does one reconcile the existence of evil? God has set his course and plan for the world, yet there is evil in the world. If evil is part of God's unchangeable plan, then should God be considered the author of evil? Or, if God is immutable, then the point and purpose of our prayers may be drawn into question. Prayer seems superfluous if God is going to do things as he had planned anyway.

²See chapter 3, page 91-92.

Luther answered these logical difficulties by recognizing the distinction between the revealed and hidden God. Luther drew his theology from the *deus revelatus*, the God revealed in Scripture. He further recognized from Scripture that while God is revealed to us, God is also hidden from us, and we are forbidden to speculate on what may be hidden.³

The hiddenness of God remains to challenge our faith. Though we believe the hidden God to be good, we are also terrified by him, fearing the possibilities of His wrath. This forces us to trust what God has revealed about himself (*deus revelatus*) against the God we cannot see (*deus absconditus*). This includes trusting him (*deus revelatus*) in the face of otherwise unanswerable questions and apparent logical contradictions. While there is no guarantee that we shall find a resolution of these things in the hidden God (since they are hidden from us and we cannot even know whether we shall ever find the answer), we can and must live by faith, depending solely upon the God who has revealed himself to us.

4. The preaching and application of Law and Gospel are not to be understood as a change that happens in God but as the operations of an immutable God. God does not change, but through the working of Law and Gospel he changes us.

Some classical theists have considered a “relational mutability” in God, apart from this distinction between Law and Gospel. They imply some sort of change may take place in God in relation to his creatures, yet they also say that God does not change. As it stands, this introduces further contradiction rather than resolution to this discussion.

When one recognizes the distinction between Law and Gospel, however, one sees the immutable God coming to us with a two-fold intention: to condemn sinful man for his sin, and to forgive the sinner because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to the

³See chapter 3, page 111-112.

revealed God, the change takes place in man who is converted by the working of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. The question of why some are saved and others are not must fall under the hiddenness of God, for its answer has not been revealed to us in Scripture. Though this approach is logically frustrating to modernist thinkers, Luther reminds us that there can be no speculation upon such things that fall under the hiddenness of God.

5. Luther did not understand prayer as man's opportunity to impose his will upon and thus "persuade" God, at least not insofar as prayer has been taught to us through God's revelation. It is true that Luther did not directly answer the question of God's persuadability, since this was not an issue of conflict in his day. Yet it is also true, as demonstrated from his writings, that Luther would deny the open theist's understanding of prayer that depends on God changing his mind. Such a position denies the immutability of God which Luther found revealed in the Scriptures and upon which his theology and practice of prayer depended.

Rather than concerning himself with the question of whether or not God is persuadable, Luther committed himself to that which God has revealed. He prayed under the command and promise of God, not under some hope of persuading or directing God. Luther saw prayer as faith in action. Such faith trusts in the revealed God and leaves the unknown and uncertain undisturbed in the counsels of the hidden God.

A "Test Case": The Prayers of Jesus

Another way of highlighting the differences between open theism and Luther regarding the mutability or immutability of God is to turn to the prayers of Jesus. Which of these perspectives is congruent with the way in which Jesus chose to pray?⁴ Turning to the Gospels,

⁴To avoid complicating these comparisons, it will be assumed that there is substantial agreement regarding other related doctrines, such as the two-fold nature of Jesus as true God and true man, the authority and accuracy of the Scriptural accounts, etc. If the differences between theologians on these related issues were to be raised, the

we can easily discern three major categories of passages on this subject: passages in which Jesus provides instruction on prayer to his disciples, passages that speak about Jesus praying, and passages that record the words of Jesus' own prayers. Though Luther and the open theists can find common ground on a number of these things, the distinctive differences between Luther's theology and open theism quickly become evident.

In terms of instruction, we find Jesus teaching the words and pattern of the Lord's Prayer (in Matthew 6 and Luke 11). In addition to this, Jesus provided further injunctions and instructions on prayer. He discussed such topics as not thinking a person will be heard by virtue of the quantity of his prayers (Matthew 6:7), the need to pray for one's enemies and persecutors (Matthew 5:44; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:28), and remaining persistent in prayer (Matthew 9:38; Luke 10:2, 18:1). Jesus told his disciples to pray with boldness and confidence, asking God for whatever they needed because God promises to hear prayer (Matthew 6:8, 7:7, 21:22; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:9-13; John 16:23-24).

We may discern a measure of agreement between Luther and the open theists regarding the things that Jesus said about prayer. There remains a significant silence in the course of these instructions, however, for nowhere did Jesus teach that our prayers should seek for our human will to be done. The only qualifier Jesus provided is the promise that "you will receive, if you have faith" (Matthew 21:22). Open theists might understand this "faith" to mean an innate confidence that whatever I convince myself can happen will happen; I can convince God to follow this course. Luther, on the other hand, would see this "faith" as a trust in Christ, his redemption, and the will of God that flows from that gift of life; my prayer will be answered if I

point of comparison might be so obscured as to make the comparisons meaningless.

am bound to Christ by faith and, in that faith, I am led by God to pray in ways that are within the bounds of God's will.

In terms of passages that speak about Jesus praying, the Gospels offer us a look at Jesus' prayer life. He spoke words of thanksgiving and blessing at the feeding of the 5,000 (Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; John 6:11), the feeding of the 4,000 (Matthew 15:36; Mark 8:7), and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:17,19). On several occasions, we are told that Jesus went off by himself to pray (Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35, 6:46; et. al.). While these passages reveal Jesus to have been a "man of prayer," they do not give us the substance of those prayers. Luke notes that some of these private prayer sessions took place at or just prior to major events in Jesus' ministry: his Baptism (Luke 3:21); before naming the twelve apostles (6:12); at his transfiguration (9:28); and before giving his disciples the Lord's Prayer (11:1). We may speculate that Jesus was somehow preparing for these events in his prayers, but we have not been given any text or indication of what he actually prayed at those times.

In terms of Jesus' own prayers, we have only a few texts that detail Jesus' words. In Matthew 11:25-26 (see also Luke 10:21), Jesus gave thanks to the Father "that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." While these words do not reflect specific requests on the part of Jesus, they do recognize God's action to be in keeping with the Father's "gracious will."

John records similar words of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:41-42). Here, the purpose of Jesus' prayer of thanksgiving are clear: through these words, those standing nearby may believe that the Father sent him. This statement of Jesus' connection to the Father is vindicated moments later when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

John's Gospel also provides us with the longest recorded prayer of Jesus in chapter 17, commonly known as Jesus' "high priestly prayer." In this prayer, Jesus affirms that he had done the work the Father had given Him to do (17:48, 26). He asks that as God is glorified (17:1, 5), his disciples, those with Jesus then (17:6) and those yet to come (17:20), would be kept safe from the evil one (17:15), made one (17:11, 22), and sanctified in the truth of God's Word (17:17). There is no indication whatsoever of Jesus attempting to change the Father's plans at this point. In fact, such a request would disrupt the plans that have been set down by God, foretold in Scripture, and fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus had directly petitioned the Father in John 12:27-28, when he said, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Here began the open wrestling of Jesus' human will with the plan and purpose of God. This struggle was carried into Gethsemane, where Jesus repeatedly asked that the cup of suffering pass from him. Though his human desire for survival was great, Jesus nonetheless returned to the same place each time: "Not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39f.; Mark 14:35f.; Luke 22:42f).

Finally, Jesus did speak words of prayer from the cross. He prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies (Luke 23:34) as he had taught his disciples to do. He cried out in agony in the words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). At the last, he surrendered himself into the care of his Father, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46).

Perhaps the prayers from Gethsemane best provide a comparison with our circumstances, for they depict a real struggle with the will of God. Jesus expressed his desire to avoid suffering

the agonies of the cross that was to come, yet he nevertheless submitted himself to the will and plan of the Father. The plan would not change; it must be carried out for the sake of the world.

One could, perhaps, argue that this is an unfair comparison. Jesus is true God as well as true man, and this is God's plan of salvation being enacted. To disrupt this with the desires of one's personal will would have destroyed us all. Yet when that struggle did come to pass, Jesus' words recorded in the Greek of Matthew 26:42 are exactly the same as the Greek words of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:10: "Thy will be done."

What Jesus did not teach by instruction, then, he taught by example. His prayers stand against the teachings of open theism, for he sought to glorify God's will and submit to that will rather than his own desires. As powerful as the struggle in Gethsemane was, Jesus' concern was not to change God's plan to suit himself, but to fulfill the "hour" to which Jesus was coming.

Open theism seeks to persuade God, yet its advocates would be hard-pressed to provide proof from Jesus' prayers that this is what we are called to do when we pray. Luther, on the other hand, recognized the sinfulness of man's will and consistently set that sinful human will aside in favor of God's perfect will. Sin was not an issue for Jesus in the sense of a sinful will deferring to God's sinless will, for Jesus himself was without sin; his will was perfectly congruent with the Father's will. Yet the struggle of Gethsemane makes Jesus' deference to the Father's will clear. Throughout his prayers, Jesus constantly submitted his will to the unchanging will of God.

Implications for Today's World

Open theism's challenge to the doctrine of God and consequent practice of prayer is helpful in that it pushes us to reexamine and restate our teachings and beliefs. All too often, we assume things to be true, even self-evident, without explaining them. Not only are we capable of

defending our teachings and practices, but we must do so for each successive generation, lest people be led away from the truth of Scripture.

The mutable God of open theism is restricted to the boundaries of the rational and the reasonable. He is treated according to human models of existence and relationship. This leads to limits on his power and questions about his nature and attributes.

The immutable God of Martin Luther transcends our understanding, yes, even our very existence. While he has revealed himself to us, he has also kept himself hidden. Though we may find confusions and logical difficulties within his revelation, those must be allowed to stand unresolved. Logic limits; faith frees. If humanity has the last word, man dominates his God; if Scripture has the last word, even if that word reveals that some things are hidden from us, God reigns.

As modernism shifts to post-modernism, there is a trend away from the pursuit of pure logic and a willingness to accept the numinous. No longer must things be defined by human reason; there seems to be a growing recognition that reason can be limiting and insufficient to deal with the things of this universe. If this is so, if we can conceive of being able to act by faith rather than by logic, then Luther's views must certainly be considered viable in our world.

If postmodernism continues to open possibilities of thinking "outside the box" of modernist logic, then Luther's premodernist/post-scholastic views may speak even more intelligibly to the generation ahead than they have to this modernist one. Luther needs to be heard within the original context of his life and works, not according to some modernist interpretation or measurement. Luther's willingness to maintain the paradoxes set forth in Scripture while not shying away from the full blast revelation of God deserves careful consideration, study, and application to the theological questions of today.

What do these things mean for our life of prayer? On the surface, Luther's distinctive understanding of prayer may not result in much change in terms of the wording of our prayers. Perhaps, more significantly, we should consider shifting some of our talk about our prayer. There seems to be a growing tendency in the Lutheran Church to speak of the "power of prayer." While Luther himself used phrases similar to that a few times, his teaching on and practice of prayer clearly depict an activity of faith that is dependent on God. The focus is on God, not on us or our prayers. When we pray, we only do so in response to the command and the promise which God has given to us.

Careful examination of all of our prayer practices is warranted, lest we drift away from the command and promise given to us by the immutable God. The implementation of "prayer chains" and talk of "prayer warriors" may not be wholly in keeping with God's commands and promises regarding prayer. The focus, intent, and actual practice of such things should be carefully and constantly reviewed. Our prayers are not to be a point of personal "spiritual" pride. Rather, recognizing the immutable God to whom we pray, we kneel before him in humility. At the same time, we take delight in that humility, for we have the command and promise of God and can boldly bring our requests to him in prayer. To see and use prayer as the blessed gift which God has given to us is to recognize the immutable and unchanging God to whom we pray.

Can God be persuaded? That is, can human will be imposed upon God to change or direct His course? In terms of God's immutability, Luther would have to answer "no," because immutability cannot be limited within God. As he pointed out to Erasmus, limiting God's immutability actually denies immutability and also has repercussions regarding the other attributes of God. To say that God can be persuaded would be to introduce a host of misunderstandings and false teachings regarding God.

Yet Luther was no fatalist, and he did not allow himself to be forced into a decision between the polarities of synergism and fatalism. Instead, he held the ground of a Biblical determinist, clearly proclaiming both salvation by grace alone and also universal grace, not because they were logically compatible but because they are in accord with the Scriptures.

Nor did Luther allow himself to be forced into a polarized, logical decision regarding the immutability of God. Instead, he pointed out that the immutability of God presses us into a recognition of the Biblical reality of the hiddenness of God. Luther understood that many of the things we would like to know about God have been kept hidden from us. He further recognized that while the revealed God may clearly proclaim one thing, it is possible that the hidden God may appear to imply the opposite.

Yet Luther did not allow this distinction between the hidden and revealed God to be eliminated from consideration because of its apparent logical contradiction. Here is where Luther's premodernist/post-scholastic genius comes into play: he allowed the paradox to stand because Scripture allows it to stand. When the hidden and revealed God conflict, Luther made it clear that by faith we must cling to the revealed God alone.

This means that faith is not a pointless pre-programmed act of obedience to the pre-determined will of God. Faith is real faith, a trust in the revealed God over against the hidden God. This makes it truly faith, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Prayer is, consequently, an action or expression of that faith. The believer prays trusting in the revealed God against the potential terrors of the hidden God. Through this distinction, prayer is real and faith is real; they are not automated responses to the immutable will of God.

It is in this light, then, that prayer is understood as an act of faith that submits itself to God. This submission is not in the limited sense of “gracious conformation” postulated by Augustine, for that seeks only to change us. For Luther, prayer is an opportunity for believers genuinely to express their needs and desires to God, knowing that they will be answered. Prayer involves taking God up on his invitation to express our needs and desires to him, to recognize that God’s plan and purpose will be done and accomplished, and to desire to be a part of his will.

Will our petitions to God actually change him? God’s revelation of his immutability does not allow us to think so. Ours is not to expect that we can persuade God, for the anchor point of our faith is not in his hiddenness, but in his revelation. By faith, we approach the revealed God in prayer because he has so commanded us and invited us to pray, and promised in his revealed will to hear and answer us.

Can God be persuaded? That is, can man approach God in prayer and impose human will upon God, somehow changing God’s course and plan? Luther’s clear answer is no, God is immutable and does not change.

Does that mean our course is fatalistically bound? Again, Luther’s answer is no. In his distinction between the *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*, Luther provides a richness and depth to our descriptions of God, showing how he transcends our logic and understanding.

May there be a change in God because of our prayers? From what he has revealed, we have no reason to think so. We cannot assume that a change in God is possible based upon the teaching of the *deus absconditus*, for we are not permitted to probe into nor base our faith upon that which has been hidden from us. We are not called to cling to possibilities; we are called to cling to the *deus revelatus*, God as He is revealed to us. God reveals himself as immutable and

unchanging. At the same time, this same God invites and commands us to pray and promises to hear and answer our prayers.

This paradox must stand. Thus Luther kept the doctrine of God's immutability intact and opened its depths and riches to us. Trusting in the revealed command and promise of God, Luther was thus able to leave the outcome of our prayers in the hands of an immutable God, which is precisely where our prayers should be.

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