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Sin as the Cause of God's Wrath

BY WALTER NAGEL

EDITORIAL NOTE: Following is a translation of one in a series of essays read at a conference of American (Missouri Synod) and German theologians, who met in July in the Wichern Saal of the Ev. Johannisstift, Berlin-Spandau, Germany, to discuss the over-all subject, "The Wrath and the Grace of God in Contemporary Preaching." Each phase of the subject matter was considered in the light of Luther's theology and that of the Lutheran Confessions.

The original manuscript is thoroughly documented. However, since most of the references, outside of the Confessions, are to German works, they have been omitted in the translation. Special note, though, must be taken of Theodosius Harnack's *Luthers Theologie*, in its revised edition of 1927, as being basic to the whole present discussion. Prof. M. Scharlemann has prepared the translation.

Every system of Christian doctrine and dogma treats the subjects of man's sin and its opposing element, God's wrath, as being in some way basic to an understanding of the Christian life. Both matters, however, receive their full due only in the theology of Luther and in our Confessions.

The space devoted to these particular points and the stress put upon them vary from one system of theology to another. This difference in emphasis results from divergent views on the nature of sin. Everything depends on whether a hamartio-centric theological formulation is rejected from the start; whether sin is really branded as sin, or whether it is described as being no more than a "zero"; whether sin is taken seriously as the cause of God's wrath; again, whether a discussion of God's wrath is considered to be mere theological trifling, or whether God's anger is thought of in terms of the ax already laid at the root or of the thunderclaps rolling off Mt. Sinai. It is at this point that churches part company. In this area confession diverges from confession, and one set of doctrinal views differs from another. All other points in Christian doctrine, whether they have to do with the person and work of Christ or with the Sacraments or with anything else for that matter, take their cue from here.

I. STARTING POINT: THE CONCEPT OF GOD

In his Small Catechism Luther has the words, "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon

the children unto the third and fourth generation." This wrath is God's own; for His glory will tolerate no "shadow of turning."

Luther's thinking always starts with God. We note this already in his marginal notes to the writings of the Lombard. God makes His demands without condition; they are not circumscribed or limited in any way whatsoever. In his first course of lectures on the Psalms, Luther describes the sternness of God, which motivates Him to insist on the complete surrender of the individual. "That God who is angry with us because of our sinfulness is not at peace with us," he said.

In the teaching of the Roman Church interest centered on man's innate powers instead of a straightforward inquiry into the nature of God's will. In his lectures on Romans Luther condemns every attempt to remonstrate with God. Who are you, mortal man, that you should dare to rise up against God? In *The Bondage of the Will* he raises the complaint that

in every other matter men readily ascribe full glory to God; however, when it comes to the question of His sitting in judgment, we stand ready to deprive Him of His majesty. And to this day we do not bring ourselves really to the point of believing that He is just and righteous, even though He has assured us that, as soon as He will have unveiled His glory, all of us will not only see but fully realize that God was just all along and that He still is righteous.

In the same tenor he writes in his *Homilies* of 1527: "God cannot look higher than Himself; there is nothing above Him. Nor can He look to someone next to Him, for no one is equal to Him in rank."¹ God remains the Lord of history also after man's fall into sin. Luther's thoughts and sermons find their center not in any human notions about God but in God's actual relationship to us and in His concern for us.

II. MAN'S RELATION TO GOD

The Fall did not then and does not now destroy God's interest in us and His concern for us. Nor does that event detract in the least from His divine nature. But the Fall did change man's relation to God to the degree that it brought on destruction and damnation. For that reason the Formula of Concord speaks of a "passive capacity" that is man's after the Fall. Also after he fell into sin,

man — he who wanted to be like God! — remains subject to God. And that embraces the whole person of the individual! In good time Luther came to realize that the total ego of the individual is corrupt. He properly criticized the scholastics for treating "flesh" and "spirit," or, as we might say, the old and the new man, as two separate and independent entities, thus losing sight of the fact that man is a single unit, comprised of both. The whole man, as a single entity, falls under the judgment of God. No part of him is either excepted or excluded.

Man's relation to God in this area is quite different from that of the rest of creation. The world of things is described in Luther's interpretation of Romans 5:12 as being insensitive and insusceptible to sin. It is not this material world that sins and dies; it is man that commits iniquity and goes down to death. For that reason Luther speaks of the death of other creatures in terms quite different from those he applies to man's dying. In his exposition of Psalm Ninety, as he takes up the problem of their death, he says simply, "God is pleased to do it this way." But man, fallen from God and therefore subject to God's wrath, is the subject matter of all of Luther's theology.

No limits to God's all-encompassing greatness nor any dilution of man's responsibility for his own guilt is involved in Luther's differentiation between two kinds of things in his discussion of free will. He distinguishes those matters that lie beyond him and the scope of his own will from those other areas where the exercise of a free will is granted as a possibility. The latter are things which rank lower than man himself, such as his money and his property, although even these move in directions determined by God's free will. The Confessions, therefore, distinguish between "civic righteousness" and that righteousness which avails before God.² The Formula of Concord, however, supplements this statement with a description of these natural faculties as "very much weakened." Later on Hollaz refers to this whole area of life as being a "lower hemisphere." These are matters of external achievement, which he designated as "sickly and puny."

III. SIN AS MORTAL SIN

Luther views man only in the light of God's perspective. In his lectures on the Psalms he insists that the believer, not

knowing whether he is justified or not, should be ready to declare himself ready to become a castaway, in his whole person. This is not artificial exaggeration, but a simple facing of facts, an awakening from a world of dreams. This is learning to see with God's eyes, when a man discovers, with the aid of an insight granted him through a knowledge of God, that the distance between himself (i. e., his sinfulness) and God is infinite. From this vantage point God alone appears as righteous.

In explaining Romans 1:24 Luther remarks, "Whenever a man falls prey to such emotions and lusts, this is a sure sign that he has turned his back on God and has taken up the worship of idols, trading truth for a lie. A lack of the fear of God is the course of every kind of inclination to evil." In *The Bondage of the Will* he makes the statement:

The source of God's wrath is the fact that men are altogether godless and ungodly in their life and behavior; and that is what brings down God's wrath. Man does not know God and despises Him. This is the wellspring of all evil, the ferment that produces sin, the bottomless pit of iniquity, we might even say. What evils are bound to exist where God is not known and despised!

Unbelief is reckoned as the greatest sin of all. For faith gives glory to God. That is man's most precious offering to God. Unbelief is just the opposite. Luther takes a lack of faith more seriously than he does all the mortal sins listed by the Roman Church. The sin known as pride (*superbia*) Luther describes as the refusal to accept, without condition, the forgiveness of sin that God proffers. The Confessions fall in line with this conception when they say:

All men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence.³

Luther is, of course, quite familiar with the diabolic nature of sin. Says he in effect: Man and Satan, both having fallen from God, cannot possibly do anything except what is not good. Satan and man have a nature of their own and a will of their own. They are not just "zeros." In his lectures on Genesis, however, Luther makes a distinction between the transgression of the devil and that of man. A greater measure of condemnation has over-

taken the devils; they will not be redeemed. For Satan's sin originated in enmity toward God, but man's sin is derived from unbelief and disobedience. But, of course, such lack of trust and failure to obey turns into enmity toward God. As a consequence man is subject to the same condemnation as the devils. The question, therefore, of relative guilt and degree of responsibility, as these apply to man's transgression, would receive from Luther an answer quite different from the one usually given today.

The fact remains that a chasm has been fixed between God and man. It is caused by man's sin and sealed with God's wrath. It cannot possibly be removed. There is enmity between God and man.⁴ Sin wields its power over the human will and man's reason. Man's natural and spiritual powers have not only been corrupted; they have been fully eradicated. Man has totally perished as by a flood and has become the devil's very own. Man has lost his freedom; he is a slave to sin and cannot escape his lot. Occasionally he can accomplish something that looks gratifying; yet it is the product of a slave, and not of a son and heir.

And so the situation remains unchanged: "without fear of God, without faith toward God, and with concupiscence." This is the will of an entire ego-centric person (*incurvatus in se ipsum*), who uses everything, even God, for his own ulterior purposes. This will of the individual ego never rests; it permeates every action of the individual. From this it is evident that everything, even what a believer does, is nothing but sin when weighed and measured in terms of God.

Luther never lost sight of this fact even when he used the terms "venial" and "mortal," as these words were currently employed to categorize sins. He is rather fond of using this distinction in his lectures on the Psalms. But he himself never experienced, in his own case, that a specific sin was less than mortal. Where shall we draw the line between venial and mortal sins? "As long as I read the scholastic philosophers, I never understood just what a venial [forgivable] sin was, and how big it could be." In reality, every mortal sin is "venial" in Christ, and every venial sin is really a mortal sin. In reply to the scholastics, Luther holds that no sin is forgivable, as far as its own nature and essence are concerned; one misstep can undo any amount of good that may

have been accomplished. All three of the "theological virtues" become invalid as soon as only one of them is missing. Luther's theology as well as that of the Confessions knows only the concept "sin." It rejects the traditional distinction between major and minor sins. Later Protestant theology for a time imagined that it could not get along without some similar distinction between sins of weakness and glaring vices. The difference in terms did not, however, serve its intended purpose, and so it was abandoned as inappropriate and useless.

IV. SIN AS ORIGINAL SIN

In Luther's theology sin is defined as a lack of faith, as enmity against God, as the will of the ego (*concupiscentia*), and, in a general way, as mortal sin. But that is not the whole story. Sin is spoken of chiefly as original sin. The Reformers recognized this as a basic truth; their opponents called it a perversion of the Gospel, and they remained hostile to this teaching of Luther and our Confessions.

Man's fall into sin is a historic fact. It must have taken place: it affords the explanation for the origin of evil in man. The Fall must have occurred, because sin is at this very moment an active historic phenomenon and not just a general condition of affairs. The present fact of sin indicates that man took the possibility of falling into evil and turned it into actuality. The ever-recurring commission of actual sins corroborates the Scriptural record in this matter.

The connecting link between our sin and Adam, and of his sin with us, is contained in the term "*habitus*." The Confessions give us the classical statement on this matter:

Also they teach that since the fall of Adam, all men, begotten in the natural way, are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost.

And again:

This hereditary sin is . . . a corruption of human nature. . .

Moreover,

It (original sin) is not just a lack of (original righteousness); it is in fact a corrupt *habitus*.⁵

Luther quotes St. Augustine on this point in his lecture on the words in Romans (5:12: "In whom all have sinned"):

It is certainly evident that a person's own sins, committed only by the individual whose sins they are, are quite something different from that sin in which all men have participated, since they were one with the man who did the wrong.

From these words of St. Augustine, Luther concludes that original sin is the primordial transgression committed by Adam.

For he does not understand the statement "All have sinned" as referring to a mere transfer of guilt, but rather to the actual deed. You are a sinner because you are the child of a sinful man.

Luther takes this and, with the help of Is. 43:26, exclaims:

Speak up, if you have something for which you want to be justified. Your father sinned before you. . . . St. Paul conceives of the word "sin" as a comprehensive term, justifying the use of the singular rather than the plural of the word. The Scriptures do this as a matter of normal practice. For that reason the Apostle is very explicit, using such expressions as "by one man's sin," "damnation for one man's transgression," "by the trespass of one," "because of the disobedience of one man," etc. Augustine adds: "We were all in that one man, since we were that very individual." . . . According to the Apostle and by virtue of that simple understanding we have in Christ Jesus, original sin is not only the loss of a certain quality about the human will; it is not only the loss of mental acumen, or a decline in the power of money, but a total loss of every vestige of right-being, and of every physical and spiritual capacity in the whole man, inside and out. And, on top of all that, it is a propensity to evil, a squeamishness toward what is good. Original sin consists of a will that opposes light and wisdom, but is fond of darkness and error. It is ashamed of honorable deeds, but delights in chasing after that which is evil. Original sin is the "tinder," the "law of the flesh," the "law of the members," a weakness of nature, a tyrant, an inherited contagion.

In the Smalcald Articles Luther says:

The fruits of this sin are . . . the evil deeds which are forbidden

in the Ten Commandments, such as unbelief, false faith, idolatry, to be without the fear of God, presumption, despair, blindness, and, in short, not to know or regard God; furthermore, to lie, to swear by God's name, not to pray, not to call upon God, not to regard God's Word, to be disobedient to parents, to murder, to be unchaste, to steal, to deceive, etc.⁶

The authors of the Formula of Concord were fully aware of their agreement with Luther when they spoke of original sin as being "infix'd in human nature"; and that means more than just actual sin (*peccatum actuale*)! Original sin is not a sin which one commits. It resides in the very nature and being of man so that, even if not a single evil thought ever passed a person's mind, no idle word ever crossed his lips, and no evil deed issued from his hands, man's nature would still be corrupt because of this sin. It is born in us and is the source of all actual sins, whether they consist of evil thoughts, words, or deeds.⁷ Actual [acted] sins as the sum total of our acts of rebellion against God are described as "proceeding from original sin." Now, of course, this is a distinction which, as is the case with all others made in Luther's theology, is discerned only with the eyes of faith.

No blame accrues to God for original sin. He created man so that he was good; but man himself became evil. He forsook God and abandoned himself to his own fate. And all men, including King Pharaoh, are the children of this one corrupt individual. God's work of creation continues, but with seed that is corrupt, as though a person made statues out of rotten wood. Nevertheless it is seed, or wood, and the attributes of "corrupt," "defective," and "rotten" must be applied to the substance of men, though they were not created by God. Here is found the real reason for rejecting the doctrine of Flacius, which caused the authors of the Formula of Concord more headaches than it does to our present generation of theologians.

The Lutheran Confession places the emphasis on the question of the process and manner by which original sin is passed on from generation to generation. Ever since the Lombard had sought the solution in man's conception, maintaining that concupiscence is to be understood merely as libido, the discussion of the whole problem found no end. The *imputation* of original sin — here we meet the

word which is used as the converse of the term as employed in Article Four of the Augsburg Confession! — takes place mediately through conception, and immediately through our oneness with Adam. In his *Romans* Luther says,

Sins of commission were introduced into the world and are even now brought on by the devil, but original sin entered the world through man. Sin and death have spread from one to all through the process of propagation; Adam is the first link of this means of transmission.

The Formula of Concord declares:

God does not create and make sin in us, but, with the nature which God at the present day still creates and makes in men, original sin is produced from sinful seed, through carnal conception and birth from father and mother.⁸

Original sin cannot be eradicated by human means, either by knowledge or will power. Because of it man has become subject to the devil's rule, abandoned, bewildered, and debauched.⁹ Original sin has brought about a loss of status; and that applies to every child that is born into the world. Original righteousness, or the image of God, has been lost. The *stupiditas*, which renders man incapable for things divine and spiritual, has taken its place.

The Apology found it necessary to take up in detail a discussion of the question to what extent Baptism removes original sin.

Here our adversaries inveigh against Luther also because he wrote that original sin remains after Baptism. . . . He always wrote thus, namely, that Baptism removes the guilt of original sin, although the material, as they call it, of the sin, i. e., concupiscence, remains. He also added in reference to the material that the Holy Ghost, given through Baptism, begins to mortify the concupiscence and creates new movements (a new light, a new sense and spirit) in man. In the same manner, Augustine also speaks, who says, "Sin is remitted in Baptism, not in such a manner that it no longer exists, but so that it is not imputed."¹⁰

V. SIN AS GUILT

Sin involves guilt; original sin is inherited guilt. Guilt is the perpetuation of sin, its lasting element. Sin and guilt are infinite quantities. Guilt remains, the deed is transient. Obliterating the consciousness of guilt would constitute the sin against the Holy

Ghost. In Luther's theology this is the lethal aspect of sin: A wrong once done cannot be made good. At this point an iron curtain rises between Luther and all those men from whom he received guidance and inspiration during his formative years. The spiritual conflict experienced by Luther reached an intensity unknown to his contemporaries. Here is the dividing line even today between us and certain other systems of theology, those that discuss sin as something transient in the customary terms of mysticism (Tauler), or those that refer to sin as a "zero" (K. Barth). True, Luther as a monk already had an awareness of guilt; but, as far as his own experience went, he found in himself only a hopelessness of wanting and not being able to. The tested techniques of curing souls offered to him by the Church did not help him. This is the noose in which he was caught and which threatened to choke him to death.

Every one has a part in his sin of origin and, therefore, shares in the guilt. Luther takes his position in this matter squarely on the Church Fathers from Cyprian and Ambrose forward.

As a son owns the property he inherits from his father, even though he has not earned it, just so he is duty-bound, at the death of his father and in terms of the same justice, to pay the debts incurred by his father, since the son is the owner of the property. Such is the case with original sin. Even though it was our parents, and not we, who committed the actual sin, we still have to help pay for it.

This sin and eternal death, its consequence, is the curse under which we would be lost forever, were we not blessed by Christ.¹¹

Because of this sin — and that is a constantly recurring theme in Luther! — the whole world is subject to God's wrath and lives in the kingdom of the devil, in the power of temporal and eternal death.

The whole weight of the presentation as contained in the Confession is placed on original sin as *our* sin, for which *we* are guilty.

This hereditary evil is the guilt with which we are charged (*culpa seu reatus*) and by which all of us, who through the disobedience of Adam and Eve have become the objects of God's anger, are by nature children of wrath. This guilt is not incurred because of someone else's transgression; it is our guilt because of the corruption of our own nature.¹²

Luther concedes that, if original sin were only one of origin, an inexorable fate as it were, pushing man on to his actions, there could be no talk of guilt or responsibility on the part of the individual. How could someone feel guilty for something in which he himself had no part? Responsibility in this matter goes back to the inward conditions in man which prompt him to action. No man can ever claim that he had no choice except to do wrong. Even when he regularly succumbs to temptation, the individual is still cognizant at all times of the fact that he should and could have chosen to act otherwise. In fact, he never succumbs without the consent of his will to do what should not be done. And the various attitudes involved in the doing of such things, be it a light-hearted and careless rush into sin, or be it a stubborn surrender to an evil power that has outmaneuvered and overpowered him, demonstrate that man has the power to resist. Hence the Augsburg Confession says: "The cause of sin is the will of the wicked. Man sins of his own accord and with the consent of his own will."¹³ That is a summary statement of the matter. Of course, we must add that Luther allows for the fact that no one really loves evil for the sake of evil. We of today have a different point of view here.

It was Adam's misdeed; and yet it is our own. The guilt is Adam's, and yet it is ours. For that reason Luther likes to speak of original sin at times as a "person-sin." Perhaps this expression would be accepted in certain quarters with less suspicion! Adam's sin is our sin, otherwise we would not be condemned for it. Adam's guilt is ours by way of imputation, just as Christ's merit becomes ours by being imputed to us.

But that does not answer or solve everything. We wait in vain for the solution in certain keywords, such as "chastisement" or "visitation," perhaps. The paradoxes between man's nature and his responsibility remain. The Confessions decline to explore these problems further. Here and there Luther says a few things on these subjects. For instance, he points out that God does not command sin to be committed, but He withdraws His protective presence for a while, and man falls into the hands of the devil.¹⁴ In *The Bondage of the Will* he discusses some of these related matters. Why doesn't God change the evil intentions which man initiates? That belongs to the halo of mysteries surrounding the

divine majesty. God alone has the answer. If there were a yardstick with which God had to measure His own actions, He would no longer be God. Many things are right and proper before God which the world may call evil. . . . The elect are edified by God's Word; the lost are brought to ruin by the same Word and go down to destruction, being without faith. The blame falls on the human instruments. God's omnipotence impels them to be active at all times and never to let up. And so the good achieve good, the evil produce nothing but evil. Man's reason could comprehend God only if He were good and righteous according to human standards. Indeed, if we could say, "He blinds no one, damns no one; He has pity on all and gives them all salvation; there is no future punishment" — then God would be good! But faith, by way of contrast, says: "God is righteous even though He would totally destroy mankind." Luther understands very well why Erasmus is the spokesman for those who conclude that, if such is the case, then His commands and threats are pointless, since God actually condemns those who are forced to sin.

In this connection Luther can point to the mysterious phenomenon of human obduracy. God is equally harsh both when He hardens a man's heart and when He does not bestow His Holy Spirit on an individual. Isn't God, then, the cause of obduracy and responsible for it? In the case of obduracy, God is not the cause of sin, He executes judgment upon it. "This is an act of divine judgment whereby God, in full justice, allows a man who has steeped himself in the habit of sin (*hominem habitualiter malum*) to fall into even more grievous vice, because of some antecedent avoidable transgression committed with full individual consent." This last quotation from Hollaz states more clearly than the more detailed exposition of this matter by Luther in *The Bondage of the Will* what is involved in the case of an obdurate heart.

VI. WHENCE THE NEEDED INSIGHT?

Man himself, looking from his own point of view, neither does nor can comprehend these things. The rolling thunder of God's Word declares that the whole world is guilty before Him. But we are too deaf to hear and too dense to take note. Natural man

knows the wrath of God as little as he does sin. Neither God's goodness nor His anger, neither man's creatureliness nor his corrupt state, can be discerned from the realm of ordinary realities. God is totally obscured to man through an admixture of creatureliness and corruption within man. The individual feels satisfied with himself for keeping the Second Table of the Law. At the same time he does not notice that there is a First Table, which commands us to love God. The devil is hard at work here; he keeps man's nature blinded and in his service. He deceives man with godless and false notions and prompts him to perpetrate sins of every sort.

Sin and guilt are revealed for what they really are only to faith [the believer]. The true nature of sin and the full weight of its enormous guilt, Luther teaches, can be determined only in terms of God Himself.

Sin stands in opposition to God's will and insults Him to His face. Sin, therefore, like the wrath it calls forth, and like the death that follows in its wake, does not come to an end. Sin is not something we can discard at will; for sin is separation from God. And anyone who has once begun to take flight as a renegade continues in that direction forever. Measured in terms of God, sin grows greater each day; for God's greatness is immeasurable. Adam violated the majesty of God and the person of Christ. Sin is the crime of lese majesty. Righteousness, viewed as God's majesty and holiness, is the source of His anger. Sin rises up in insubordination against God and has earned His wrath and His severest punishment. Sin always merits punishment. Luther proceeds from God's wrath to our guilt, and from our guilt to our sin.¹⁵

Another source of insight into the nature of sin and guilt is God's Law, particularly when used as a mirror (*usus elenchticus*). Luther took this position already in his lectures on Romans. Sin existed beforehand, but it took the Law to reveal it. Law is subsequent to sin. In this way we reach the answer to the question raised above by Erasmus as to why God's Law, with its attendant threats, should have been given. The Law makes consciences guilty and threatens wrath (Rom. 4:15). Through his conscience the sinner knows something about sin. He feels it, even experiences some moral impulses, and has a desire for liberation.¹⁶ In his

lectures on Psalm One Luther says, "This kind of natural desire is found in human nature, because an interest in, and a concern for, what is good cannot be extinguished in man, although, of course, it is dulled in many respects." Such a conscience, however, is cowed, frightened, and imprisoned by the Law and remains as incapable of escape and freedom as before. It knows that God's anger is aroused, but it does not know how to get right with God. Luther says that original sin has settled so deeply in man's nature that it can be discovered only through the Scriptures.¹⁷ Men need the Bible not only to be shown God's grace, but also to become familiar with the Law. It is from the revelation of Scripture that sin and guilt are known for what they really are.¹⁸

The chief source, however, of knowing sin, guilt, and wrath is the Cross of Christ and His death. He is the omen of that wrath of God which threatens the sinner. The proof of sin, according to Luther, is found in the way in which the Cross of Christ is rejected. In his *Romans* he says:

The Apostle directs himself against the mighty and the wise of this world, because they have themselves so violently opposed the Gospel and the message of the Cross of Christ and have, at the same time, inflamed others to hostility. For that reason God pronounces judgment on them for their sin and guilt and declares His wrath against them, as though they were the only ones involved. There are no persons to whom the preaching of the Cross seems more foolish than to men of thought and men of power; for the Cross runs counter to their interests and feelings.¹⁹

The size of our guilt cannot be determined by the number and quality of good works we may want to do to make good. It can be understood only in terms of the indescribably high cost of Christ's sacrifice.²⁰ The size of the ransom paid reveals the enormity of our guilt. In sacrificing His Son, God has credited sin with great power. We ourselves do not reckon sin to be very serious. We carelessly do wrong as though it did not amount to anything. We ought to take a look at the size of the priceless and unbounded treasure it cost to atone for sin. If we do, we shall soon realize that sin is a most grievous matter. If it had been possible for me, a lost and condemned creature, to be ransomed with something of less value, why did the Son of God have to be offered up for me?

Luther evinces the full range and depth of sin as well as the lost estate of man from the fact of Christ's redemption. He brought a whole-offering to counter the claims of a total death.

VII. GOD'S WRATH IS HIS REACTION TO GUILT

In the present context we always find a threesome: sin, wrath, and death.

The three belong together so completely that it is impossible to separate them; to wit, I have sinned and transgressed God's command; with that I have aroused God's wrath and have fallen under His judgment; and so I must die.²¹

Sin is the reason for my being guilty. God's wrath condemns and punishes. Death and the devil are the powers of destruction to which the sinner is abandoned by way of God's wrath. God has been insulted; there can be only the reaction of anger. As the almighty God He owes us neither His Word nor His Spirit nor His grace.²² Outside of Christ, God is only anger and destruction; in Christ, He is Love and Grace. The whole human race merits the enmity of God; because of sin God hates us and is bitter against us. God is a consuming fire, devouring those who are evil. This is no joke nor make-believe, but God's most serious intention with sin and sinners. God's wrath is like a thunderbolt.²³ His wrath is the unfailing consequence of guilt, both punishment and sin (*poena et peccatum*).²⁴ Adam's misdeed is punished in Adam's descendants, but without failing to be the sin and guilt of these very descendants. Guilt and the inability to do otherwise than sin, guilt and a lack of understanding, responsibility and nature, are not mutually exclusive terms in the theology of the Reformation.

In his exposition of Romans, Luther speaks of God's allowing sin to happen as a means of punishment. Sin in itself is already a penalty. Sin is shame and disgrace. The Lutheran Confessions state that the revelation of Law alone (*lex sola*) is God's wrath at work, whether man knows it or not.²⁵

But God's wrath is still greater in scope and concrete reality. Suffering and sorrow are a part of the wrath and judgment of God. Luther expresses his thanks for the fact that sorrows come to men. They show that God is actively at work. He is grateful to God for

that, and if God should ever remove them and grant a time of undisturbed quiet, he would ask God to send sorrow, disturbance, unrest, and even destruction. The modern idea of a social utopia never occurred to Luther. In his exposition of Psalm Ninety he views man's physical death as the expression and consequence of the eternal and unending wrath of God. The process of imputation mediates not only guilt but also death. Spiritual, physical, and eternal death are our fate as a matter of God's judgment over us. Also the believer, the justified person, remains a sinner until his body disintegrates in death. For that reason he must die physically and return to the dust so that he can continue to live eternally.²⁶ This hope becomes real, however, only in connection with Romans 6, since Christ's resurrection is to be our rising again.

VIII. GOD'S WRATH AND HIS LOVE

To the spectator this all looks like one continuous drama, this series of events that started on the sixth day of creation and reaches its conclusion on Judgment Day. And we do not notice that, in the course of this dramatic action, each one of us is either deprived of or given life and salvation. The suspense is great, to discover what God really wants. In the sermon for the Sixth after Trinity, Luther describes temporal death as a sign of God's love, because now the second death can have no power over us. Christ is not the unrelenting Judge of the world, as Luther had been brought up to believe. He is the Redeemer. Forgiveness of sin is promised us most assuredly. "Remission of sins is possible, sins can be redeemed; i. e., their obligation or guilt can be removed, or the wrath of God appeased."²⁷ The remission of punishment is possible if and when the remission of guilt has been accepted.²⁸

As the hidden God (*deus absconditus*) the Lord hides His eternal goodness and mercy behind His eternal wrath, His righteousness behind unrighteousness. He Himself, however, is unchanging and unchangeable. God's wrath does not work this way now and another way tomorrow, as is the case with men. He is not capricious in His anger as men are. He executes His judgments by way of pestilence, war, death, and destruction, in conformity with His majestic will.

At the same time He is Love and proffers us this love in Christ. That truth must be maintained in conjunction with the statements about His wrath. These must be viewed as a whole, even though reason cannot grasp this combination. The wrath and the love of God, however, do not have the same range. His wrath does not extend beyond the Judgment. But His love belongs to His own from that time on forever.

We do not know whether we have described God fully in these words, or whether the terms "wrath" and "love" are adequate to describe His activity. God is bigger than our terminology. But of one thing we are sure: God employs His wrath to achieve His ultimate purpose, which is, to remove all obstacles that would prevent His saving will from reaching through to man and mankind.

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NOTES

(Quotations from the Confessions are given in the translation of the *Triglotta*.)

- ¹ Homilies of 1527, Visitation of Mary.
- ² Augs. Conf., XVIII; Apology, XIX; Form. Conc., Sol. Decl., I, 11.
- ³ Augs. Conf., II; Apology, I.
- ⁴ Homilies of 1527, Ascension.
- ⁵ Augs. Conf., II; Apology, I; Smal. Articles, III, 1.
- ⁶ Smal. Articles, III, 1.
- ⁷ Epitome, I, 21.
- ⁸ Sol. Decl., I, 7.
- ⁹ Sol. Decl., I, 13.
- ¹⁰ Apology, II, 35.
- ¹¹ Homilies, 1527, The Annunciation.
- ¹² Sol. Decl., I, 5, 9, 17.
- ¹³ Augs. Conf., XIX. The J. A. of 1930 contains the addition "sponte et voluntate."
- ¹⁴ Lecture on Rom. 1:24.
- ¹⁵ Homilies, 1527. Sixth after Trinity.
- ¹⁶ Exposition of Gal. 3:20.
- ¹⁷ Smal. Articles, III, 13.
- ¹⁸ Sol. Decl., I, 8.
- ¹⁹ Exposition of Rom. 1:18.
- ²⁰ Apology, II, 50.
- ²¹ Commentary to Gal. 2:17.
- ²² Sol. Decl., XI, 60.
- ²³ Smal. Articles, III, 3.
- ²⁴ Apology, I, 41, 47.
- ²⁵ Apology, IV, 40.
- ²⁶ Homilies, Sixth after Trinity.
- ²⁷ Apology, III, 143.
- ²⁸ Apology, III, 146 f.