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The Concept of God in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions

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The Concept of God in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions*

By JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

[This article is the first of a series projected for the year 1955 under the chairmanship of the sainted Dr. F. E. Mayer. As the one presented here, most of these articles have their focus in the Lutheran Confessions.—ED.]

THIS essay concerns itself chiefly with the concept of God, revealed especially in His works of creation and preservation, as the *obiectum amabile*, whom men are not merely to adore, but pre-eminently to love. However, since the *Deus Creator* is also the *Deus Redemptor* and *Deus Sanctificator*, it must, on the one hand, go beyond the narrow scope of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed as explained by Luther in his Large and Small Catechisms, while, on the other, it cannot nearly exhaust the great wealth of weighty truths that come within the compass of the study of the Divine Being as man's Maker and Keeper. The point of emphasis in this article is on the fact that Luther, of whose teachings the Lutheran Confessions are hardly more than an application and elaboration, envisaged God principally in the glory of His grace and love and so as the *obiectum amabile*. He did not approach the theology of God from the point of view of His absolute lordship, or sovereignty, as did Calvin and in part also the mediaeval theologians, but from that of divine love depicted in the Gospel.

1

Following Luther, the Lutheran Confessions adopted officially the ancient ecumenical creeds of the Christian Church by embodying them in the *Book of Concord* of 1580. According to Carpzov

* The writer gratefully acknowledges the use he made for this article of Reinhold Seeberg's *Die Lehre Luthers*, which is Vol. IV¹ of his *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*. (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung), 1933.

(*Isagoge*, 37), the reason why the Lutheran Church made the universal creeds of Christendom her own was "to declare her agreement with the ancient Church . . . and to evince the fact that she preaches no new doctrine, and in no wise deviated from the Church catholic" (*Triglot Concordia*, The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church; St. Louis, Mo., Hist. Introduction, p. 9). This judgment is true. Lutheranism was no sect, but a movement to restore the pure doctrine confessed by apostolic Christianity, both as regards God's essence and works. Its principal purpose was to preach the Gospel of Christ in all its glory.

Now, in the three universal Christian symbols, in the Apostles' Creed no less than in the Nicene Creed and the *Symbolum Athanasii*, the redemptive message of the Gospel is central. In them the blessed Trinity is confessed primarily in the interest of God's saving love toward sinners. They culminate in the triumphant confession: "I believe . . . in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." Similarly, the special Lutheran Confessions center in the Gospel message of full and free redemption made by Christ Jesus, true God and true man, who died for our sins. Thus the Augsburg Confession has for its chief message that of justification by faith (Art. IV), though it begins with an article of the Holy Trinity, to reject from the start all errors, ancient and modern, against this fundamental Christian doctrine. Likewise the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, is ultimately only a vindication of the *sola fide*, the *articulus fundamentalissimus* of the Reformation. The Smalcald Articles, written by Luther against Romanism, declare that on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ "all things depend which we teach and practice in opposition to the Pope, the devil, and the world." This golden thread of God's redeeming love in Christ runs through all Confessions which the Lutherans either received from the ancient Christian Church or which they elaborated in opposition to the denial of the *sola fide* by Romanism and enthusiasm. Man's gracious redemption by Christ is the glory light in which Luther and other authors of the Lutheran Confessions believingly and gratefully behold God. They judge God by His love, for to them God is essentially Love. They indeed stress the divine Law in all its severity as the message of God's wrath over

sin and His righteous punishment upon all who reject the divine message of salvation. But they do this only to induce sinners to repent and seek refuge in Christ, the only and universal Savior from sin. Lutheran theology is fundamentally evangelical as is that of the Bible.

It is hardly necessary for us here to trace to its origin this evangelical approach to God. Nor need we describe Luther's deep despair that made his life one of unspeakable misery until he found comfort in the consoling Gospel words of his superior Staupitz and, above all, in the study of Holy Scripture. But what may be emphasized here is the fact that Luther's overwhelming spiritual dread originated from his wrong view and slavish fear of God, which had been inculcated into him by those who understood only the Law and not the Gospel. Perhaps by some the severity of his inward struggle has been somewhat exaggerated. But the question which terrified him and crushed his spirit admits of no exaggeration: "How can I find a God who is merciful to me a sinner?" When once this anxious question was answered, then Luther, and following him, the Lutheran Confessions, proclaimed the Gospel answer in unmistakable words.

2

This leads us to the question: In what ways did Lutheranism learn to know God as the *obiectum amabile*? To this query we reply: In the first place, by learning to know God solely from Holy Scripture. It is doubtless correct to say that Luther taught the *sola Scriptura* in the interest of the *sola gratia*; the one was the open door to the other, as also its protection. That does not mean that the doctrine of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions concerning the *Schriftprinzip* was a fabrication or at least an academic theory to bolster the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. There are statements in Luther's writings that have been interpreted in such a way as to ascribe to Luther a somewhat "free attitude" toward the Bible. But the fact remains that Luther regarded both Testaments as the divinely inspired Word of God, and as such the Sacred Scriptures possessed, to the exclusion of any other source or agency, the authority to determine doctrines. Only Scripture is able to teach divine things (W. 9,29.46). Only Scripture can fix articles of faith, not the Pope or any church council

(W. 10.2,219.221). Only Scripture is to be believed (W. 15,118; 19,219; 43,145), for my faith must be certain and have a firm foundation in Scripture (W. 15,195). Whatever is asserted without the Scriptures need not be believed (W. 6,508; 10.2,191; 2,297.279.309.315). Into this wine no water dare be poured; against this sunlight no lantern should be held (W. 8,141f.143f.). The doctrine of God, not that of man, Christ and not philosophy, should govern God's people (W. 8,144.146.149.345; Cf. also W. 12,414; 10.2,22f.). And Scripture indeed should be regarded as a perspicuous book and as a "most certain, intelligible, and open interpreter of itself" (W. 7,97), by which the Holy Spirit assures us of the divine truth. The Holy Spirit must address us through the Word of God (W. 29,580). Luther frequently uses the formula *Scriptura et ratio*, as, for example, at Worms (*convictus testimoniis Scripturarum aut ratione evidente*; W. 7,838; cf. also W. 7,101. 135.849; 6,371; 8,484.668). But Seeberg is no doubt right when he says that in Luther's opinion the expression *Scriptura et ratione* ascribes to theological proof a twofold function: to demonstrate something as materially Scriptural and formally as logical. Luther thus required at Worms that his adversaries should prove his doctrine to be both unscriptural and unlogical (Seeberg, op. cit., IV¹, p.414). Luther therefore believed in the divine inspiration of the canonical Scriptures. What Paul declares, the Holy Ghost declares; and what is counter to the Word of Paul is counter to the Holy Spirit (W. 10.2,139f.). Scripture is the Word of God and not the word of man (W. 5,184; 8,597). The Bible is the proper Scripture of the Holy Spirit (W. 7,638; 46,545; 47,133). Neither in Luther's writings nor in the Lutheran Confessions do we find a systematically developed doctrine of verbal and plenary inspiration. But both argue the authority of Scripture from the basic fact that the books of both Testaments are the Word of God. When thus the Formula of Concord declares: "We believe . . . that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas, together with false teachers, should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone" (*Epitome, De Regula atque Norma*, 1), it takes for granted the universally acknowledged faith of the Christian Church that the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are the Word

of God and therefore true, infallible, and reliable. Moreover, it is only when the theologian judges God in the light of Scripture and, in particular, of the Gospel that we can gratefully adore God as the *obiectum amabile*.

Again, the Lutherans recognized God as the *obiectum amabile* by differentiating sharply between Law and Gospel. The clear distinction between Law and Gospel is a distinctive Lutheran contribution. The Roman Church rejected this distinction, as did more or less also the Protestants who followed Zwingli and Calvin. Luther emphasized it, and, following him, the Lutheran Confessions, especially in Articles V and VI of the Formula of Concord, for the very purpose of recognizing in the Gospel the matchless grace of God. The holy and righteous God, who condemns and punishes sin, must indeed be preached, before the gracious and merciful God, who for Jesus' sake forgives sins, can be understood. The *Deus damnans* must be proclaimed by the Law in order that the *Deus salvans et iustificans propter Christum* may be appreciated. Both promulgations must go side by side, but in their proper order and with proper distinction. Luther was not interested in the problem, raised by man's finite reason, how in the one unchangeable God the divine righteousness and divine grace can be harmonized into a perfect unity. He believingly accepted the two aspects of God as revealed in Scripture, and he taught them in their whole contradictory force—*plus quam contradictoria*—assured that only in this way God's eternal counsel of salvation could be realized toward the repentance of sinners. The Law is a preaching which produces sin; it is a thirst-producing and poverty-making preaching; it makes hungry souls, terrified, sorrowing, thirsty hearts and spirits that yearn for God's grace (W. 33,443). That is true despite the fact that the Law cannot work anything good in man and that it can only demand and confirm its demands by threats of punishment (W. 46,661; 33,429f.495f.; 2,532). The real purpose of the Law is to make known to man his sin and its punishment—death (W. 18,766). But where sin is known, there Christ with divine saving grace can accomplish His blessed work (W. 36,690f.). If the Law is abolished, the Gospel cannot be retained (W. 46,664); but where the Law is rightly proclaimed, there also the Gospel performs its saving work; for while the Law

points out the sickness, the Gospel offers the medicine (W. 33,431). Wherever the Gospel, which is not a mere *historia de Christo*, but the living divine Word which imparts the Spirit and grace for the remission of sins (W. 18,692; 8,33), there God is recognized in Christ as the *obiectum amabile*; for where there is true repentance, there is good will and love both toward God and the neighbor (W. 30.2,507) as the fruit of faith. Faith consists in *accipiendo* (W. 20,541), that is, in receiving Christ (W. 40.1, 370.371). It is the inward willingness to be filled and guided by the Spirit of God, to receive and hold fast what He gives (W. 8,589). It is not a doing, but a receiving (W. 36,443), and, above all, the receiving of peace with God through His gracious remission of sin (W. 43,252), which changes the believer's whole view of God and attitude toward Him; for believing and loving go hand in hand (W. 10.1.2,167). According to Luther, only he is a Christian who believes in Jesus Christ as his Savior, and everyone is a Christian who so believes, no matter in what condition of life he may find himself. And wherever a person has become a believer in Christ, there he views God in no other way than as the *obiectum amabile*. This evangelical, loving, grateful view of God, too, is a concomitant and fruit of saving faith.

3

It is peculiar to Luther that he views the whole Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, as the *obiectum amabile* both in Their unity of being and in the threeness of Their persons. While Luther retains the systematic terms of traditional Christian theology, he regards them only as attempts to make known the true God, who has revealed Himself in Scripture. "Trinity" (*Dreifaltigkeit*) and "person" are no more than stammering attempts at depicting the doctrine of God in a manner intelligible to the human mind (W. 41,270.272; 52,338). But what these terms express is Scripture doctrine and must be believed, though it transcends reason (W. 41,271.274; 46,542f.). As the Gospel revelation of God is believed, it gives to the believer what the natural knowledge of God can never give: peace with God, trust in God, love toward God; for through the Gospel man by faith becomes a new creation (W. 20.2,293; 10.2,457; et al.). God indeed speaks to men

through history: the Goths, Vandals, and Turks, for they, too, are God's Word (W. 40.2,230f.). He speaks to men also through the Law implanted in the human heart (W. 16,380). But that knowledge works fear only, because it does not reveal God's gracious will of salvation (W. 40.1,607f.; 19,206; 42,631). Therefore disputations based on man's general knowledge of God are futile and end in mere negations, because man sees God only as the hidden and incomprehensible God (W. 3,124; 4,648; 1,362). This knowledge finally makes God a *Deus odibilis* (W.4,611). What a person fears, he hates, and man's terror of God finally leads him to the wish that God might not exist (W. 4,660f.). But far different is the situation when the believer sees God revealed in Christ. This evangelical view of God draws the believer to God, not indeed by force, but by a sweet love (*dulci affectu*). The Gospel of Christ is the divine revelation which draws man to God. Here the *Deus absconditus* becomes the *Deus revelatus*, who is Love and moves the believer to love toward Him (W. 1,140; 202ff.).

Luther's evangelical view of God as the *obiectum amabile* is clearly shown in his Small and Large Catechisms, which address themselves to Christian believers in general. These Catechisms were adopted by the Lutheran Church as official Confessions, and so Luther's evangelical view of God set forth in them has become that of Lutheranism in general. Luther's expositions of the Ten Commandments in the Large Catechism are relatively long and detailed as compared, for example, with those of the Three Articles of the Apostles' Creed. He realized that without a knowledge of the divine Law the Gospel would not be received by men. He therefore pictures the greatness of God's wrath and of the damnableness of man's sin most severely and convincingly. Nevertheless, since the God who gave to man the Ten Commandments is the same God who, moved by His mercy, gave His Son into death as a ransom for man's sin, he answers the question "What is God?" with the words: "God is, and is called, He from whose goodness and might you expect for yourself all good things and to whom in all adversities and befalling dangers you flee for refuge, so that to have a God means most cordially to trust and confide in Him" (First Commandment, 2). Luther's concept of God is basically that of a kind Father, Friend, and Helper and not that

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of a stern sovereign or merciless Judge. God certainly punishes those who reject His goodness and give His glory to another. Yet His fatherly love is revealed in the very appendix added to the First Commandment ("I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God," etc.), for "while His anger does not cease until the fourth generation . . . on the other hand, His blessing and goodness extend to many thousands" (*ibid.*, 32). Luther's evangelical view of God is demonstrated also in his derivation of the term "God" from "good." "Hence also I think," he says, "that we Germans from ancient times call God (more elegantly and appropriately than any other language) by that name from the word 'good' as being an eternal fountain which gushes forth abundantly nothing but what is good and from which flows forth all that is and is called good" (*ibid.*, 25). It is from Luther's evangelical view of God in Christ Jesus that we are to understand also his exposition of the introductory words of the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father who art in heaven"): "God would thereby [with this little introduction] tenderly urge us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children so that we may ask Him confidently, with all assurance, as dear children ask their dear father" (*Triglot Concordia*, p. 545). No one could have written these words unless through faith in Christ he was sure of God's love toward himself and at the same time loved God in return.

Luther's evangelical view of God renders his exposition of the First Article of the Creed in his Small Catechism a triumphant paean of Christian adoration. As remarked before, Luther, in accordance with traditional theology, ascribes creation and preservation to God the Father, not indeed in an exclusive sense, since creation and preservation are the work of the Triune God, but by what Lutheran church teachers have called "appropriation," that is, ascribing to each person of the Holy Trinity a specific work for greater clarity and emphasis. In this usage, Christian theology follows Scripture, which, too, ascribes to the Father the work of creation in a special way (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6). Luther teaches the Christian believer to regard himself personally as a creation of God together with all other creatures. His birth and coming into the world is not by chance, but "God made me."

So also to the loving Father, who created him, the Christian should give thanks for every blessing of body and soul—his eyes, ears, members, reason, and all senses. As the Psalmists of old enumerate the individual benedictions of God for greater clarity (cf. Ps. 103:136, 147, et al.), so Luther points out the overflowing goodness of the loving God revealed in the believer's many benefactions received of Him. There is no scholasticism in this grand anthem of thanksgiving and no polemics waged against those who deny divine creation and refuse to give God glory for the creative act of divine love. There is here only constructive thought expressed in weighty poetic words. But in his other works, as, for example, in his exposition of Genesis, Luther shows himself very impatient and angry with those who refuse to glorify the loving Creator, to whom they owe life and breath and all they are and possess. From God's loving work of creation Luther passes to His gracious work of preservation: "And still preserves them." That, too, is to Luther a cause of endless praise and thanksgiving that God mercifully keeps man, despite his ingratitude and many offenses, in good health and in the use of his members and senses, and that He adds to him the daily necessities so often overlooked and taken for granted by man—clothing, food, home, family enjoyments, and such resources as from day to day he depends on for his life. "He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life." Then Luther's thought turns to the many evils, perils, and enemies that interfere with man's life and happiness: "He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil." And for all this continuing goodness of the loving heavenly Father, Luther finds no cause in man: "All this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me." As Luther thus describes the ceaseless merciful providence of God, he cannot generalize, he must specialize. He does not speak of "man" or "mankind." He consistently speaks of "me," for the Christian believer is to have a living, dynamic awareness of God's tender mercies by faith, a true "Thou and I" experience in childlike fellowship with God.

So the grand exposition ends with the admonition: "For all which it is my duty to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him." God's love should lead the believer to daily repentance, to daily

new love toward God, to daily new consecration to His service. To this admonition Luther adds his own "Amen" in the words: "This is most certainly true." All that has been said of God's love, which He so richly shows to us in our creation and preservation, and our loving response to Him in thanksgiving and praise, service and obedience, all this is assuredly true. These words only a child of God can utter who regards God lovingly and gratefully as His dear Father — as the *obiectum amabile*. In simple, yet grand words Luther thus describes God's divine providence as *conservatio*, *concursus*, and *gubernatio*. He preserves, He works through means, He governs, and He does it all in love. The scholastic categories are wanting, but the entire theology of God's fatherly care for His saints on earth is here fitly presented.

4

Luther's exposition of the First Article stresses another important thought which renders God dear to the believer as the *obiectum amabile*, and that is His gracious operations through means, or secondary causes. Chief among these are the holy angels who are God's co-workers and helpers in the service of His saints (W. 34.2,231; 245f.). They preserve the world and assist man in his temporal life and work (W. 43,318). Especially do they help the believer in the many temptations and trials that come to him from the devil, preserving the good that the evil foe seeks to destroy (W. 23,9; 43,69.472; 43,325; 44,67). As the holy angels, so also God's other creatures are ordained for the benefit of man, and especially for those who in Christ are His dear children. Luther recognizes the traditional category of God's *potentia absoluta*, by which, as the sovereign Lord and King of the universe, He can at any time employ His omnipotence without means. But the world owes its continued preservation chiefly to God's *potentia ordinata*, by which He ordinarily governs and conserves all things. These means man should use and not tempt God by trying to explore His *potentia absoluta*, rejecting the secondary causes ordained for his welfare.

Luther emphasizes the operation of God by means especially in the realm of grace. Here the efficacious means of grace is the divine Word, in particular, the Gospel; and since this is the only

vehicle of divine grace, man should hear and meditate on it (W. 2,509.95.112.453; 1,698). Let no one therefore go beyond the Word of Scripture in his meditation of God (E. 12,300). Luther repudiates most emphatically the so-called inner word of the enthusiasts, or their alleged private revelations. The external means (the Word and Sacraments) must precede, and the inner (experiences) must follow after and through the external (W. 18,136; 33,189f.; 45,522). Baptism is a means of grace because of God's command and promise. In Baptism the Triune God is present and efficacious, especially the Holy Spirit (W. 47,127; 46,688). Baptism is water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word, that is, the Gospel (Small Catechism). The water itself is no better than any other water, but (the difference is) that God's Word and command are added to it (W. 30.1,213). The divine promise in the Sacrament makes Baptism a divine, blessed, fruitful, and gracious water (ibid., 215). According to Luther, the Gospel, then, is a power of God unto salvation also in its baptismal application. Similarly, the Lord's Supper is an efficacious means of grace because of the divine Word and promise connected with the sacramental eating and drinking. Luther emphatically taught the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament as a fact clearly taught in Scripture. But it is the divine promise: *Given and shed for you for the remission of sins*, that imparts and seals the spiritual blessings of the Holy Supper. Of these the true body and blood of Christ, received with the bread and wine, are a sure pledge. The means by which the blessings of the Sacrament are received is faith. You must desire it and firmly believe that you obtain it (W. 2,743—749). The Lord's Supper is a testament and Sacrament in which there is promised forgiveness of sins and the whole grace of God, sealed by a sign (Christ's body and blood; W. 6,518; 8,511ff.). Thus, according to Luther, God ordinarily works in both the realms of nature and of grace by His *potentia ordinata*, or through means.

And wherever in the realm of grace the Gospel of Christ is believed, there is the church of God, which is the gathering, or congregation of the saints, the pious, believing people, who are gathered, sustained, and ruled by the one Holy Ghost, and are daily increased by the Word and Sacraments (W. 7,219; 10.2,293).

The church is the *communio sanctorum* (W. 30.1,189; 7,219), consisting of all who are regenerate (W. 47,4). It is the kingdom of God, in which Christ rules through the Spirit and faith (W. 43,597—600; 8,656). The church therefore is properly a spiritual communion, hidden in the Spirit and so invisible to men (W. 7,710.719.722; 40.2,105f.; 8,419.491). To the church as the body of Christ belong only true Christians, while the church as an empirical communion includes also many weak persons and even sinners (W. 2,456; 14,191; 43,428f.). Thus the power of God, working by means, both in the realms of nature and of grace, is effective toward executing His divine plans and purposes. It is the same divine omnipotence which operates both with and without means. There is no difference between God's *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* so far as the efficacy is concerned. But by granting us efficacious means for our temporal and spiritual life God in a special way proves Himself to be the *obiectum amabile*, for in them we see God's grace and love toward us.

5

In Luther's theology, which conceives of God consistently as the *obiectum amabile*, the doctrine of Christ is both central and fundamental. A brief description of Luther's doctrine of Christ and of the Holy Ghost belongs into this article, since, according to Luther, it is only because of Christ and through the Holy Spirit that man can think of God as the object of his love. Luther fully accepted the doctrine of the ancient Christian Church regarding the Trinity and the deity of Christ. On this point he was in full agreement with Romanism. There was no quarrel between him and his Romanist opponents on the deity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. But Luther's emphasis in his theology rests upon Christ as the *Filius Dei incarnatus*, and as such because He is the only Savior and Mediator of mankind. Luther's Christology is well summed up in his masterly exposition of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature," etc. (W. 30.1,296.) Forgiveness of sin on God's part, according to Luther, could not take place gratis, or without satisfac-

tion rendered to the demands of God's righteousness. There is no room for mercy and grace to work for and in us; first of all the demands of divine justice must be perfectly satisfied (W. 10.1.1,121). If God's wrath is to be removed from me and I should obtain grace and pardon, this benefit must be paid for by someone; for God cannot be kind and gracious to sinners nor give up His wrath and punishment except sin has been paid for and atoned (W. 2,137; 12,544). The doctrine of Christ's vicarious atonement therefore is basic in Luther's Christology. Christ stepped into our place and for our sakes permitted the Law, sin, and death to fall upon Him (W. 36,693; 25,328). Christ is the sacrifice and ransom for the sin of the world (W. 47,113; 33,310). Luther rejects the adoration of Mary and of the saints as conflicting with and annulling the central doctrine of Christianity, that Christ is the only Redeemer and Mediator of sinners. To the believer He is *verus, unus, solus Deus* (W. 1,400). He forever stands between us and God so that no wrath or punishment can strike us (W. 36,368; 40.2,6). *Pro nobis orat et interpellat* (W. 7,56). It is therefore chiefly from the point of view of Christ's saving love and perfect redemption that Luther sees God as the *obiectum amabile*.

But Luther's emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the *obiectum amabile* in the divine plan of salvation is no less weighty. Christ has secured divine grace for us; but the Holy Ghost must impart and seal it to us by the Word and Sacraments if sinners are to be saved. In his exposition of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed Luther graphically describes the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in detail. In many other places Luther stresses this saving function of the Holy Ghost with even greater force. God carries out His saving and sanctifying work in the souls of men through the Holy Ghost (W. 40.2,293; 10.2,457). He overcomes the works of the evil spirit in the world (W. 45,726). Christ is the Door, but the Holy Ghost is the doorkeeper for everyone who wishes to come to Christ (W. 10.1.1,16). Through the Holy Spirit's operation in the heart, the believer is sure that his prayers are heard (W. 43,399) and that he finally will be saved. He is assured not absolutely by special promise, but through faith in Christ, which is the work of the Holy Ghost in the believer; for it is the very nature of faith that its object cannot fail (W. 18,652). So then not only the

Father, nor only the Son, but also the Holy Ghost is to Luther, as a believing, hoping, triumphant child of God, the *obiectum amabile*. The Father has created heaven and earth with the Holy Spirit. The Son has become man and makes us Christians with the Holy Spirit. It is the proper work of the Holy Spirit that He builds the church (W. 11,53), which alone sees God as the supreme object of love.

Having found comfort in Christ, Luther saw God as the *obiectum amabile* also in His eternal election of grace to salvation. That doctrine had given Luther unspeakable trouble while he was a monk and viewed God legalistically as the *obiectum odibile*. At that stage of his theological *Werdegang* the concept of God as the *obiectum amabile* was foreign to him, because he knew only the Law in all its severity, and not the Gospel in its sweetness of promise. After he had learned to know Christ as the Savior of sinners and, in particular, as his own personal Savior, he judged the divine act of predestination only from the point of view of Christ and His earnest, universal desire to seek and save that which is lost (W. 2,532; 8,610). In his own justification and sanctification he saw God's eternal plan of salvation and so also of his gracious election to life everlasting realized (W. 30,2,659; 40,1,140; 43,457—563). Therefore also predestination, in which through Christ the hidden God becomes the *Deus revelatus*, was to him an occasion to adore God as the *obiectum amabile*. Hear the incarnate Son of God, and predestination will solve itself of its own accord. . . . If you have Him, then you will have the hidden God alike with the revealed (W. 43,461). In this evangelical doctrine Luther found comfort and peace in his trials that came to him because of his former wrong view of predestination. Not in speculations concerning the *Deus absconditus* and some hidden reason past finding out, but in the redeeming Christ the question of predestination must be considered (W. 36,61; 42,670; 43,459f.).

It is chiefly at this point that Luther's evangelical view of God differed from Calvin's legalistic view of Him as the sovereign Lord, to whose glory redounds the eternal election of the saved no more than does the eternal reprobation of the damned. Luther asserted the one, but denied the other, since Scripture does not teach an eternal reprobation of sinners to everlasting perdition. Calvin's

view of predestination is the a priori one; he looked for its explanation in God's hidden plan concerning men and so arrived at a *horribile decretum* of reprobation. Luther's view was the a posteriori one; he judged his election to life from "the open wounds" of Christ, or from the divine pardon offered to all sinners in the redeeming Savior.

6

There remains a final point to be considered — Luther's doctrine of the Christian life in view of the fact that God is the *obiectum amabile*. As one studies the works of Luther, one will soon find that Luther consistently considered theology not as a *habitus demonstrativus*, or *speculativus*, but as a *habitus practicus*. His theology centered in the one goal: to lead sinners to Christ and through Him to eternal salvation. Its primary objective was to kindle faith in the hearts of men and to induce the regenerate to lead a sanctified life in the power of the Holy Ghost, that is, a life of gratitude and joy dedicated to their loving Lord. The Christian life must be a life of obedience, not indeed of legalistic subjection, which serves God in slavish fear, but a life of cheerful, willing, thankful service. Through the Holy Ghost there flows a sparkling love from within, or from his heart, as a fresh brook or spring (W. 36,360). The regenerate is warmed and set aflame by God's burning love (W. 36,429.437). The believer serves God and the neighbor in joyous obedience, willingly and of his own accord as a new creation. In the Christian life faith is the means and love the fruit of justification; and love renders willing service in every area of this earthly life (W. 36,472.474). In short, faith and love (that is, works of love) are the characteristic of the Christian life. They actually are the very essence of a Christian. Faith receives (from God); love gives. By faith the believer allows God to do good to him; by love he does good to others (W. 8,355.362.366.385f.; 47,2; 10.1.1,100.102; 52,375).

The Christian life of course is never perfect. Luther regarded the monkish concept of a *status perfectionis* as a delusion (W. 11,249; 8,584; 40.1,325f.). Sin continues in the mortal body; the corrupt nature of the Christian remains perverse till the resurrection on Judgment Day. So the Christian life must be one of perpetual repentance, that is, one of perpetual fighting against sin or of

mortifying the flesh. It is never a "having become, but only a becoming" (*nit eyn weszen sunderen ein werden*; W. 7,337). On earth there is no more than the beginning and growing; it will be perfected in the world to come (W. 7,30). For this reason the Christian life is also one of constant trial and tribulation. Faith must be proved and tried (W. 8,378). But they are helpful for the Christian life, and to endure them faithfully and patiently is the true service of God (W. 25,11).

Nevertheless, despite its many trials and tribulations, the Christian life is never sorrowful, but always joyous, always an anxious waiting for its perfect realization in heaven with Christ. The whole life which a true believing Christian leads after his baptism is a patient waiting for the final revelation of salvation, which he already has by faith (W. 10.1.1,108; 12,487; 36,581). It is therefore a life of joyous hope and so ineffably blessed. And always it is a life in the *civitas spiritualis*, the Christian Church, the *communio credentium*, which properly is the kingdom of God, because God alone rules it, governs it, speaks in it, works in it, and is glorified in it (W. 43,597.600; 8,656). For this reason the Christian life is one of constant good works, which have their origin in faith and not in the hope of a reward. To the believer it is genuine joy to serve God. Therefore he never does what is good to earn heaven (W. 6,207). Heaven is in us, for faith has given it to us; and faith does good works without demanding merit (W. 10.1.1,108).

Such is Luther's concept of the Christian life, which through faith in Christ always and willingly serves God as the *obiectum amabile*. In this conception there is nothing of the legalism that is found in Calvin's Law-inspired conception of what the life in Christ should be. Luther's conception of sanctification is entirely motivated by the Gospel, never by the Law, just as his conception of God as the *obiectum amabile* in Christ Jesus is wholly rooted in the Gospel. It might well be summed up in the words of St. Paul: *Mibi vivere Christus est* (Phil. 1:21).

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