

# Concordia Theological Monthly



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## REFLECTIONS FOR TRINITY SUNDAY

The question is sometimes asked whether we can define God. The Scholastics attempted to do so and offered a definition of God in line with their respective philosophical orientation. Thus Anselm defined God as the "highest Intelligence," Thomas Aquinas as "pure Act," and Duns Scotus as "absolute Will." Luther rejected every philosophical definition of God which on the basis of purely intellectual speculations attempted to define the nature of God *per se*. He poured contempt on the speculative philosophy of Dionysius to understand and define God, and especially on the syllogistic method of the Scholastics in their approach to the doctrine of God (Koestlin-Hay, *The Theology of Luther*, Vol. I, 137; Vol. II, 275). Like Augustine, Luther refused to define God because "Was Gott heisst, ist ueber Leib, ueber Geist, ueber alles, was man sagen, hoeren und denken kann" (St. Louis, XX:806). Luther does not define God, but describes God as He reveals Himself for our apprehension. Article I of the *Augustana*, which is based on Luther's Schwabach and Marburg Articles, must therefore not be read as a definition of God, but as a description of God's activity and self-revelation as it is presented to us in the Scriptures and was taught by the ancient Church. Luther is concerned exclusively with the *Deus revelatus*, and his description of God therefore always centers in a soteriological view of the Triune God.

The later dogmaticians, for example, Hafenreffer, Gerhard, Dannhauer, also state that, strictly speaking, it is impossible to define God (Baier-Walther, II, 14 f.). Nevertheless, following Melanchthon, they describe God as an *essentia spiritualis infinita* (Calov, Quenstedt), *spiritus independens* (Baier). In their attempt to describe the essence of God they not only list all the revealed attributes of God, both the so-called active and quiescent, but state furthermore that in God essence and attributes are one. Some modern theologians believe that such a description of God is in reality a return to the Scholastic attempt to define God and therefore a departure from Luther, since such a description relegates soteriology into the background (Luthardt *Compendium der Dogmatik*, 15th edition, p. 186 f.; Kantonen, *The Resurgence of the Gospel*, p. 35 f.). It must, however, be kept in mind that, as Pieper points out (*Christliche Dogmatik*, I, 524 ff.), these dogmaticians held that in His revelation God does not concern us in

His absolute simplicity, because we simply cannot understand God as the perfect *ens*, in whom each attribute and the sum of all attributes is God. Therefore these dogmaticians maintained that for our sake God, as it were, divides Himself and permits us to view Him sequentially, i. e., one attribute at a time. They distinguished between the "objective" truth: in God essence and all divine attributes are one, as well as the "subjective" truth, that in His redemptive activity God reveals only one facet of His Being at a time. As "pure object" God remains eternally unfathomable for us; He is the *Deus absconditus*. But in His redemptive activity God uncovers Himself and permits us to see Him as the Triune God and shows as much of His Being at a time (1 Cor. 13:9) as is necessary, so that we sinful men learn to know Him as *our God*, the *Deus revelatus*.

This will also answer a second question, namely, whether, since God is the sum of His attributes, it is possible to find a "unifying" attribute in God. The question may also be formulated thus: In which of God's attributes are we to seek the source of God's activity: in His sovereignty and transcendence? in His justice? in His love? Calvin and Barth would no doubt direct us to God's absoluteness; Rome seems to place God's justice into the center of God's attributes; Philippi, a leading Lutheran, finds in God's love the center and immovable *Grundtion* (*Glaubenslehre*, II, 19); Aulen resolves the tension between God's holiness and love in the concept of God's "sovereign love" (*The Faith of the Christian Church*, 129 ff.).

God's being and attributes can be described only in the light of the revelation of His *entire* activity. Scripture does not contain at any one place an exhaustive dogmatic proposition concerning God's Being, nor a comprehensive statement of God's activity. The sacred record contains accounts of the many and various relationships and activities in which God confronts man. Sometimes He reveals Himself as the absolute God, in whose sight man is but dust; or as the God of eternal and infinite wrath who hates all doers of iniquity; or as the omniscient and omnipresent God to whom all the thoughts of men are an open book. Again, and primarily, God reveals Himself in His gracious, merciful, and loving activity. In short, God reveals Himself as *Deus damnans* or *absolvens*. There seems to be an insoluble tension when we see that God is eternal, infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., both in His justice, vengeance, wrath, as well as in His love, mercy, and grace. This tension can be resolved only when we keep in mind that God wishes to be known in His relationship to man and in our relationship to Him. And the various relationships,

both of God toward man and of man toward God, as they are revealed in Scripture, can best be summarized under the aspect of Law and Gospel.

### SCRIPTURE REVEALS GOD IN HIS RELATION TO MAN:

#### *God as the Law-Giver*

As such He demands of us perfect love and threatens to separate Himself eternally from all transgressors.

#### *God as the Law-Remover*

Through the redemptive activity of the Triune God we have complete freedom from the Law (its demands, threats, dominion) and full restoration of fellowship with God.

### SCRIPTURE REVEALS MAN IN HIS RELATION TO GOD:

#### *Man Under Sin*

hears only God's verdict and judgment upon the sinner, who can see God only as eternal, all-consuming, omnipotent, omniscient wrath, and thus God in His entire Being is in reality *objectum horrendum*. Under sin man sees only the "hidden face" of God.

#### *Man Under Grace*

hears only God's unconditional offer of salvation and sees God only as love, nothing but love, so that if he were to paint a picture of God he would have to paint eternal, infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, all-embracing, perfect love in Christ. Thus God in truth is *objectum amabile*, for under grace man sees only the "open face" of God.

Therefore in describing God we must make sure that we always do so on the basis of God's relation to man and man's relation to God from the viewpoint of Law and Gospel. Any other description of God is a mere figment. Rome viewing God only from the Law sees in Him a Judge who deals with man on a sort of barter basis. Schleiermacher and his disciples in Liberal Theology reduce God to an indulgent father, whose love is to be sought everywhere and is ultimately found nowhere. Dialectical Theology so overemphasizes the transcendence and wholly-otherness of God that it seeks God's grace in vain. In the Christus-Victor theology the work of Christ is viewed primarily as Christ's holy warfare with, and glorious victory over, man's enemies. In their emphasis of the love of God some advocates of this theology have become so enthusiastic as to question the necessity of Christ's appeasing the wrath of God, and to reject the vicarious satisfaction as unscriptural and un-Lutheran. But we must maintain both: Law and Gospel; divine wrath and divine love; Good Friday and Easter. A correct description of God can be offered only by those theologians who properly distinguish between Law and Gospel. (Cp. especially Luther's exposition of Psalm 90.) Melanchthon's famous statement: *Christum cognoscere est beneficia eius cognoscere*, may therefore be applied here if we substitute *Deus* for *Christus*.

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