

Concordia Theological Monthly



OCTOBER

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1951

Human Will in Bondage and Freedom

A Study in Luther's Distinction of Law and Gospel

By F. E. MAYER

INTRODUCTION

LUTHER'S re-discovery of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel may be viewed as the starting point of the Lutheran Reformation. The proper distinction between these two doctrines is the heart and core of Lutheran theology, or in the words of the Formula of Concord, Art. V, "the specially brilliant light which has come to us through the Reformation." Where this distinction is properly observed, the Scriptures will be correctly explained and understood; conversely, where these two doctrines are mingled, the merits of Christ are obscured, and the Christian is robbed of his comfort. The Lutheran Reformation may be viewed as the same glorious victory which the Gospel herald Paul won over the Judaizing Law people. It is no doubt for this reason that Luther considered as his "dear Kaethe" St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, in which the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is so clearly set forth. The Lutheran Reformation is in essence a continuation of the conflict between Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, the Pharisees and Christ, Paul and the Judaizers. And as the Gospel people have always gained the victory over the Law people, so the Lutheran Reformation may be viewed as Luther's glorious victory in his encounter with the various Law people of his day.

There was, first of all, his encounter with the Roman Catholic theologians. The issue between Luther and his Roman Catholic opponents has been summarized in the two German words: *Begnadigung* and *Begnadung*. For Luther the Gospel is the message of God's grace in Christ which proclaims the sinner's pardon without any merit or worthiness on his part (*Begnadigung*). The Roman theologians held that the Gospel is in reality a series of "evangelical counsels." With the aid of divine grace man is able to

keep these and thus make himself acceptable in God's sight. The Romanists held that grace is not God's favor for Christ's sake, but a "superadded gift" which enables man to do good works (*Begnadung — gratia infusa*). In his controversy with this class of Law people, Luther was compelled to point out that Rome had actually changed the Gospel into a new law and thereby destroyed both the Law and the Gospel. He further had to show in the strongest language possible that the chief office and function of the Law is "to reveal original sin with all its fruits and show man how very low his nature has fallen. . . . In this way man becomes terrified, is humbled, desponds, despairs, and anxiously desires aid, but sees no escape. He begins to be an enemy of God and to murmur, etc." (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. II, 4.) In his controversy with the Roman Law people, Luther had to give the Scriptural definition of such basic concepts as "sin," "contrition," "repentance," "grace," which he does so admirably in the Smalcald Articles.

The second group of Law people whom Luther encountered were the Zwinglians. Zwingli considered both the Law and the Gospel as a revelation of God's gracious will. He saw in the Law God's guide and rule for man's conduct, and so completely erased the difference between Law and Gospel that he spoke of the Law as "good news." As a German Humanist he saw in the Moral Law an expression of God's essence; and as a fervent Swiss patriot he hoped to lead his nation to a higher level of morality by the "pleasant means" of the Law. In his opposition to such mingling of Law and Gospel, Luther found it necessary to show the distinction between Law and Gospel particularly from the viewpoint that the Christian is a member of two realms, one of which is under the Law and the other under the Gospel.

And the third group of Law people were the "enthusiasts" and Spiritualists of his day. They insisted that the Holy Spirit works directly upon the hearts of men and therefore abrogated the Law according to its primary function and thus eliminated the preaching of the Gospel. In this controversy, Luther had to show that we are indeed free from the Mosaic laws and regulations, but that God does not work conversion without means, but only through Law and Gospel.

Law and Gospel was mingled in its crassest form by the Antinomians. Misunderstanding completely the freedom which the Christian enjoys under the Gospel, the Antinomians maintained that the Law dare not be preached at all in the Christian Church. In this controversy, Luther pointed out that the abolition of the Law denies the reality of sin and thereby the necessity of a Redeemer. In unmistakable terms he showed that death, sin, and the Law always go hand in hand.

In these controversies, Luther brought into sharp focus the distinction between Law and Gospel, which, as he said, he had gained in the sweat of his brow, yes, in a bath of tensions. For him this matter was not an academic question, but the only answer of a good conscience toward God, in fact, the heart and core of his entire theology. And this could not be otherwise, because Luther's theology was existential in the true and full meaning of this word. He was not a philosophizing theologian who can glibly talk about God's essence and attributes or to whom God is no more than an abstraction. Luther's theology was born of his personal encounter with God. He had experienced to the full that God confronts man in a personal "I-Thou" relation. But Luther had learned from the Scriptures and his own experience that there are always two ways in which God confronts man and one of two conditions in which man encounters God. God confronts man either as the Lawgiver or as the Law Remover. In the former relation He demands perfect love and threatens to separate Himself from all transgressors. When God thus confronts man as the Lawgiver, He is a "hidden" God, because on account of our sins He must condemn and punish us eternally. Here He is the "veiled" God, enshrouded in His majesty and wrath. As the Law Remover, God confronts us as the loving and lovable God who has drawn us with the everlasting arms of His love. This is the "revealed" God of the Gospel. In the Law, God is *Deus propter peccata damnans*; in the Gospel, God confronts us as *Deus propter Christum absolvens*. This means that man in his relation to God is either under the Law or under the Gospel. To be under the Law means that we are debtors to the Law, servants of sin, subject to God's wrath. Under the Law, God is to man a dreadful God, whom man hates and from whose holy presence he wishes to hide himself com-

pletely. To be under the Gospel, however, means to be free from the demands, the threats, the punishment of the Law and to run to, and seek refuge solely and alone in, God's everlasting grace.

It was Luther's firm belief that the entire Christian doctrine will remain pure if this distinction between Law and Gospel is maintained in every detail. It is undoubtedly true that the many theological controversies which have divided visible Christendom may ultimately be traced to a mingling of Law and Gospel. It is likewise true that the key to the union of divided Christendom will be found only in maintaining the proper distinction between these two Scripture truths. For this reason Luther was so concerned that the proper distinction between Law and Gospel should always be observed. At the same time he repeatedly expressed the fear that the teachers of the Church would deprive the Christians of the Gospel by mingling Law and Gospel. Man is by nature inclined to do this very thing, for "the Gospel is a rare guest in men's hearts; the Law, however, is a star boarder in man's heart, because by nature reason knows the Law." Therefore Luther admonished his co-workers to strive with might and main to maintain this precious truth. But already in his own day he saw evidences that even the Church of the Reformation would not retain this article in its truth and purity. What Luther foresaw has been realized fully in the subsequent history of the Protestant Church. In fact, the entire history of doctrine in Protestantism can be viewed as a continuous mingling of Law and Gospel. The same antitheses which Luther encountered are still plaguing the Church today and come to the surface in various forms of Protestant theology.

Here is where the great divide between Lutheranism and Calvinism is to be found. Governmental officials usually place all non-Roman Christian denominations into one category under the nondescript term "Protestants." They are not aware of the basic difference which divides Protestantism into two definite camps, Lutheran and Reformed theology. These two theological camps are separated by such a deep chasm that it is impossible to bring the two together. Prof. J. P. Koehler states correctly:

All the peculiarities which distinguish Calvin from Luther constitute an organic whole and, according to evangelical judgment, are in closer relation to Catholicism than to Lutheranism. . . . It is

often stated that Calvinism is much more radical in its opposition to Rome than Lutheranism. However, Calvinism shares with Rome the legalistic spirit. Lutheranism is not a mediating theology between Rome and Calvinism, but stands in direct opposition in its way of salvation to both Rome and Geneva. (*Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, par. 192.)

In its mingling of Law and Gospel Calvinistic theology views the Old Testament, and to a large extent also the New Testament, as a codified Law which man is to observe for the greater glory of God. According to Calvin's theology, the so-called third use of the Law is the prime function of the Law. He held that the Law was given to man primarily to reveal the will of God as the standard by which man is to live. The basic question in Lutheran theology is: What has God done for my salvation? while the Calvinist asks: What must I do to the greater glory of God? Both go to the Bible for their answer, but the Lutheran goes to the Gospel, while the Calvinist finds his answer in the Law as the will of the sovereign God.

The distinction between Law and Gospel is virtually obliterated in Arminian and Modernist theology. Observing the distinction between Law and Gospel, Lutheran theology places the emphasis upon the "justified" man. Methodist-Arminian theology and Pelagianizing Modernism place the emphasis upon the "perfected" man. Arminian theology teaches that personal holiness is the indispensable cause of salvation and therefore prescribes a way of life by which man is expected to attain such holiness. Modernism wishes to do away with the Law entirely by denying the holiness of God and reducing God to the Schleiermacher concept of "*der liebe Gott*," whose loving-kindness will lead man ever onward in his evolutionary process until mankind ultimately reaches social perfection.

Currently the mingling of Law and Gospel has taken on a new form in dialectical or Barthian theology. The basic premise of all forms of dialectics is that a thesis and antithesis confront each other in an insoluble paradox; every "Yes" must have its "No" and every "No" its "Yes." There is always a head-on collision between two absolute opposites. But, paradoxically, at the very heart of the Christian doctrine Barth's dialectical principle of paradox fails to

function. There are no greater opposites than Law and Gospel. The one always excludes the other; the one is the "Yes" and the other is always "No." The Law says: "Ye are all sinners"; the Gospel says: "That is not true; for Christ's sake you are holy." The Law says: "Cursed is every transgressor"; the Gospel says: "That is not true; Christ has removed the curse." Law and Gospel stand in a truly dialectical relation. In Barthian theology, however, the dialectical tension between Law and Gospel is completely removed. Barth maintains that any revelation of the "Wholly Other" to finite man — even the revelation of His divine majesty and will — is a gracious condescension on the part of God and therefore "Gospel." What Lutheranism calls the Law is the Gospel in Barthianism. According to Barth, God first confronts man with the message of the divine will, and this he calls the Gospel; then man responds to this encounter with God and submits to the divine will, and this he calls the Law. For this reason he strenuously objects to the Lutheran term "Law and Gospel" and insists that the order must be inverted to read "Gospel and Law." (Karl Barth, "Evangelium und Gesetz," *Theologische Existenz Heute*, No. 32. H. Diem, "Luthers Predigt von den Zwei Reichen," *T. E. H.*, No. 6, 1947.) According to Barth the "Gospel" — which in reality is the Law — enables man to fulfill the divine demand. Such mingling of Law and Gospel is disastrous. It leads man to a false security,* since man is left under the impression that God's demands are also the enabling factor to meet these demands. Furthermore the Barthian mingling of Law and Gospel will at best place man into the position of God's obedient slave, but not into the blessed Father-child relation. Thirdly, Barthianism cannot view the Gospel as the liberation from the Law. On the contrary, the Gospel merely continues, complements, and supplements the Law. The New Testament is merely a continuation of the Old. The Christian Church is still living in the Advent season, is still looking forward to Christmas, is still in the Old Covenant, is still under the Law, is still in reality the old Testament theocracy.

* The term is here used in its basic etymological meaning, *se-curitas*, i. e., without a care. In *securitas* man feels safe, not because he has made the proper provisions for his security, but merely because of a devil-may-care attitude, expressed in the colloquial phrase "I should worry," a defense mechanism to cover up one's anxiety.

The World Council of Churches also mingles Law and Gospel, as is evident particularly in the underlying principles of its social program. The premise on which the Church's message on social problems is predicated is very largely the following:

Since the world at large will not accept *all* [italics ours] of God's revelation, therefore the Church must at least proclaim the Law as the rule by which all men should live. (*Ecumenical Review*, 1949, No. 1, p. 83 f.)

In view of the constant mingling of Law and Gospel in modern Protestantism, the Lutheran Church has a tremendous obligation. C. F. W. Walther's *A Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* is today as much as ever a tremendously relevant book, *ein aktuelles Buch*. In the Church's witness to the unbelieving world the proper distinction between these two doctrines must be maintained. The Law must be preached without any diminution to convict men of sin, righteousness, and judgment. The Gospel must be preached without any mingling of the Law in order to give man the full comfort of Christ's atoning work. In the pastoral care of souls the pastor must constantly give to both Law and Gospel their proper place lest he lead his parishioners to a false security or to devilish despair.

Scripture employs various analogies to describe the irreconcilable tensions between Law and Gospel, e. g., in the strife between Ishmael, the son of the bondwoman, and Isaac, the son of the free-woman (Gal. 4:21-31); the veiled face of Moses and the uncovered countenance of Christ (2 Cor. 3:6-18); the first and the second Adam (Rom. 5:14-21). But the proper distinction between Law and Gospel probably becomes evident most clearly in a study of the human will in bondage and in freedom. What the Scripture says on the bondage of the human will is the Law in its most condemning character, and what Holy Writ reveals to us concerning the liberation of man's will is the Gospel in its sweetest form. Here the irreconcilable tensions between Law and Gospel can be set forth in all their relevance. Luther did this in his two famous treatises: *On the Bondage of the Will* and *The Liberty of the Christian Man*. Luther himself considered *The Bondage of the Will* his greatest literary effort next to the Catechism, and his *The Liberty of the Christian Man* offers all the essentials of the Gospel

in their application to the Christian. These two treatises will serve as the basis for a practical study of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel.

I

THE MESSAGE OF THE LAW: THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

On the basis of Luther's treatise *Concerning the Bondage of the Will* the message of the Law will be presented under the following three headings: (1) Man's Will in Total Bondage; (2) God Is the Only Free Will; (3) The Holy God Confronts the Sinner in His Bondage.

1. *Man's Will in Total Bondage*

Luther believed with all his heart in the *sola gratia* expressed so well by Augustine: *Gratia non est gratia ullo modo si non est gratia omni modo* (grace is not grace in any way if it is not grace in every way). This brought Luther into sharp conflict with the official teaching of Rome that man of his own powers and his own free choice can do something toward his own salvation. In the Heidelberg Theses, published in 1518, Luther shocked the doctors of the Church by his bold assertion that man has no free will, that free will is merely an empty phrase, that in spiritual matters man is totally unable to do anything but to sin. The leaders of the Church sensed that if Luther's views were not immediately suppressed, his doctrine on the total bondage of the will would usher in a Copernican revolution which would destroy the very cornerstone on which for a thousand years Roman Catholic theology had been built. But their attempts to refute Luther were in vain. After much persuasion by his friends the famous Humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam finally consented to write the *Diatribes* (1525) to refute Luther's doctrine of the bondage of the will. Erasmus defended the thesis that in spiritual matters we must ascribe as much as possible to God and at the same time as much as possible to man. He maintained that man possesses the capacity and ability to choose whether or not he will accept God's grace (*facultas se applicandi ad gratiam*). Erasmus stated that there are two causes of man's salvation, "God's grace" as the chief cause and man's free will as the secondary cause. Erasmus defined free will as the choice between good *and* evil. That definition may apply in the field of philosophy.

In theology, however, free will is the spontaneous, cheerful, unconditioned choice of that which is pleasing to God, never a choice between the service of God and of sin. By bringing his philosophy into the arena of theology Erasmus had completely mingled Law and Gospel, so that both had lost their meaning and significance.

Luther was shocked when he read the *Diatribes*, for he recognized immediately that the very heart of the Christian theology was at stake. In defense of the Gospel, Luther answered Erasmus in the famous treatise *De Servo Arbitrio*, a masterpiece of literary style and argumentation and one of the Reformer's most heroic deeds.

It is true that in this treatise Luther makes statements which are extremely painful and distasteful, yes, even offensive, to many theologians and laymen. Criticisms against Luther's treatise usually come from one of two sources. The philosopher claims that Luther's philosophical arguments for the total bondage of the will are untenable in the light of logic and philosophy. True, in this treatise Luther at times seems to resort to philosophy. But he does so only to meet his opponent, who was operating exclusively with reason and philosophy. But Luther is never a philosopher, he is always the theologian, and he always remained in this sphere. Somewhere he states that for the lawyer a person is one who possesses property; for the physician a person is one who is sick; for the theologian a person is one who is guilty of sin, separated from God, and in need of forgiveness. When Luther therefore makes such challenging statements as seem to border on metaphysical determinism and Oriental fatalism, he does so only in the interest of his theology. His treatise is not a philosophical dissertation, and Dame Reason has no part in the discussion of the bondage of the will from the theologian's viewpoint. The doctrine of the bondage of the will, being essentially the message of the divine Law, is an offense to reason and philosophy.

The legalistic theologian rejects Luther's treatise *in toto* because he has not experienced the majesty of God in the thunder of Mount Sinai nor his own utter helplessness in spiritual matters. Luther's treatise grew out of his twofold experience—his own helpless and hopeless condition and the all-embracing mercy of God. In the conclusion, Luther summarizes the purpose of *De Servo Arbitrio* as follows:

If we believe that it is true that God has foreordained and predestined everything in eternity and that this foreknowledge of God cannot falter nor be interfered with; if we believe that nothing happens except through God's will, as even reason must confess, then also reason must recognize that there is no free will, neither in men nor in angels nor in any creature of heaven and earth. Furthermore, if we believe that Satan is the prince of the world who attacks the kingdom of Christ and who will not release men whom he holds in bondage except through the power of the Holy Spirit, then it is furthermore evident that there can be no free will. Furthermore, if we believe that we have inherited original sin from Adam, which has completely corrupted us so that it is also a tremendous burden on Christians, then it is very apparent that one who does not have the Holy Spirit has absolutely no powers of himself to turn to good. There is in man nothing but evil lust and inclination toward that which is evil. Furthermore, if the Jews who sought with all their powers to find righteousness only fell the more deeply into sin and blindness; and the heathen without any merit on their part received righteousness: then it is established not only in Scripture, but also in experience that man without the grace of God is unable to do anything except that which is evil. In summary, if we believe that Christ has redeemed man by His precious blood, then we must confess that he is totally lost in sin, otherwise Christ would be of no need; then Christ would be the Redeemer only partially, and that would be blasphemy and sacrilege. (St. Louis XVIII:1966 ff.)

Man's spiritual bondage can probably be set forth best by emphasizing two facts: (a) By nature man is spiritually blind and dead, and (b) by nature man is a slave of tyrannical powers.

a. The Scriptures teach in unmistakable terms that man is spiritually blind and unable to "see" and understand God's will. The Formula of Concord states:

Although man's reason or natural intellect indeed has still a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the Law, Rom. 1:19 ff., yet it is so ignorant, blind, and perverted that when even the most ingenious and learned men upon earth read or hear the Gospel of the Son of God and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot from their own powers perceive, apprehend, understand, or believe and regard it as true, but the more diligence and earnestness they employ, wishing to

comprehend these spiritual things with their reason, the less they understand or believe, and before they become enlightened and are taught by the Holy Ghost, they regard all this only as foolishness or fictions. (*Triglote*, p. 883.)

Man is also blind to his own sin. He cannot understand the true nature of his sin, nor the justice of God's judgment over sin. He draws the "veil of Moses" over his face lest he see the strict demands of God's Law and his total inability to ascend the scale that leads to God. Since he does not know God's Law nor his own wickedness, the Cross of Christ is foolishness to him. Either he denies the death of Christ entirely, or he develops his own theory concerning Christ's redemptive work. He is offended at anything which would rob him of his highest treasure, his own righteousness. This means, as Luther says, that in spiritual matters natural man is like a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife, like a dead image which has neither eyes nor mouth, neither heart nor emotion.

Natural man is also spiritually dead. Spiritual death, like physical death, is not merely a quiescent or a negative state. There is a positive side to death, the activity of decomposition. Spiritual death is man's violent, willful, hostile resistance to God and His holy Word. Fully in accord with Luther's Schwabach and Marburg Articles, the Augustana describes original sin as both lack of the fear of God and as concupiscence. In the Smalcald Articles Luther calls original sin the capital sin (*Hauptsuende*), the source and fountain of all other sins. In the Synodical Catechism original sin is described as the complete lack of concreated righteousness and the constant inclination toward evil. The dogmatical distinction between original and actual sin dare never create the impression that while original sin is serious, actual sin is the real sin. The two ecclesiastical terms "original" and "actual" serve only to point to the origin and to the outward manifestation of sin. In both instances sin is the complete lack of fear and love toward God and rebellion against God.

Sin as rebellion against God leaves absolutely no room for free will in spiritual matters. Man cannot choose the good, because his entire being is in rebellion against God. Only he who does not know the true character of sin can claim freedom for man, even the smallest fraction of freedom. In fact, the very claim for some free-

dom is in the judgment of the divine Law man's bondage. Man is in bondage because of his rebellion against God, and this bondage drives him to greater rebellion. For what is the true nature of sin but egocentricity, eccentricity (ex-centric), and self-worship, or *autolatria*? In relation to God, man's self-love manifests itself as rebellion and unbelief; and in relation to the neighbor as lovelessness, as St. Paul says 2 Tim. 3:2. In his bondage, man has only one focus of interest: his own glory, his own well-being; he seeks the ultimate goal of life in his own earthly bliss, expressed adequately in the German word *Weltseeligkeit*. But man's egocentricity is nothing short of hatred toward God and, in the final analysis, an attempted deicide. For this reason man's bondage dare not be viewed lightly. The depth and wickedness of our rebellion against God can be judged solely in the light of the greatness of Him against whom man has sinned. The guilt of our bondage cannot be fathomed as we compare ourselves with others nor even with Satan's wickedness. The guilt of our bondage is infinite because in this bondage we have sinned against the Infinite. (Cp. the many quotations from Luther on this point in Theo. Harnack, *Luthers Theologie*, 1927, Vol. I, 204, and especially Luther's exposition of Psalm 90.)

In his bondage, man refuses to see sin in its true nature, both as a complete lack of the desire and the ability to seek God and as a constant and total rebellion against God. That is only another phase of man's bondage, that he fails to see that he is completely and eternally separated from God. The only word which comes to us from hell is the rich man's emphatic "No." This is symbolic of the eternal opposition of man's will to God's will. The human heart is desperately wicked, and unless it is liberated from its bondage by the grace of God, it remains in its hostility against God throughout eternity.

Erasmus and all free-will advocates are offended at this. They want to leave at least a spark of good in man. Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, however, declare on the basis of Scripture, that man has no free will in spiritual matters, and is unable to do anything toward his conversion, "either wholly, or half, or in any, even the least or most inconsiderable, part" (Formula of Concord, Art. II, 7). The Scriptural doctrine of the bondage of the will is Law in all its pointedness and sharpness.

b. By nature man is in the slavery and bondage of the world's greatest tyrants, the Law, sin, Satan, and death. The Law, with its demands, threats, and curses, exercises an indescribably dreadful tyranny. The Law is unrelenting in its demands. From the moment of our birth the Law stands over us as the cruel taskmaster in a slave-labor camp demanding the impossible of man. And because man fails utterly to meet the demands, the Law imposes penalties which are beyond human endurance. There is no way of escape from the slave-labor camp. Man knows and feels something of the tyranny which the Law exercises over him, but is completely unable to break the shackles which the Law has put upon him, and thus the Law can produce in man nothing but sin (Rom. 7:7). The more man realizes the demands and the punishments of the Law, the more he rebels against doing the things which the Law demands.

Thus sin is the second tyrant who rules over man. This tyrannical power is indescribably cruel, because sin at first approaches man in a most appealing form. But no sooner has it gained entrance, it shows itself in all its hideousness, and what is still worse, it so completely enmeshes man in its clutches that man cannot extricate himself. But worst of all, sin becomes such a "habit" that man loves his own sin and delights in seeing others tyrannized by their sin. In fact, the fundamental sin is the love of sin.

And through our sin we have become the abject slaves of Satan. As the "god of this world" and the declared enemy of God he exercises his satanic tyranny over men. Luther states:

Men who are under the god of this world, that is, the devil, can only do what the mighty conqueror prompts them to do, so that all their thoughts and actions are sinful and under the domain of the devil. If man were coerced to do that which is wrong, then he would not will it at all, for how can one will if one is coerced to do something. When the Holy Spirit takes possession of a heart, then the Christian spontaneously and willingly does what the Spirit of God prompts him to do. Man is like a saddle horse. If the devil sits in the saddle, the horse will go as the devil directs it. If God is in the saddle, man will run as God graciously determines. (St. Louis XVIII:1717 ff.)

Man's last tyrant is death. Some men have attempted to escape

the tyranny of death by claiming that death is extinction and annihilation. Death, however, is an "eternal dying." Our life is a Bataan death march. In the moment of our birth we have entered upon a journey which leads to death; not to death as an end, but to that dreadful condition "where their worm dieth not and their fire is not extinguished." The end of our years will not bring about the transition from one life to another. Death under the tyranny of the Law is the very opposite of life, it is the complete and eternal separation from life and from the Author of life. Death is the state in which man cannot live and cannot die. Death is too serious a matter ever to jest about it, and no one who realizes the terrible tyranny of death will ever glibly speak of his or someone else's death.

And to make matters still worse, man is fully responsible for this condition. By His almighty Word, God calls us into life, and with His creative voice He places into our hands the weapon with which we rebel against God. In our rebellion, God calls us to account and tells us that it is entirely our own fault. Thus the holy and righteous God confronts man, who has willingly and by his own choice subjected himself to the tyranny of the Law, sin, death, and the devil. (W. Elert, *Der christliche Glaube*, p.189.)

Man is conscious of his guilt. The hidden God has revealed His wrath from heaven. His mighty works, such as the destruction of Sybaris, Sodom and Gomorrah, Jerusalem, the terrible destruction in Europe, the recurring catastrophes throughout the world, and the final Judgment are a revelation of His judgment. And man knows that he is guilty, for man has a conscience. This conscience becomes the point of contact by which the majestic God confronts the sinner in his total incapacity to do that which is good and in his total bondage under the tyrants that rule him. The Barthian theology, which would erase in man this knowledge of responsibility to God, has no place in Scriptural and Lutheran theology. The bondage of the will under sin, total depravity, death, the condemnation of the Law, and man's sole responsibility for this condition is the first phase of the Law's message to man, and this message is indeed dreadful, for it will stop every mouth and make all the world guilty before God (Rom. 3:19). This will be the burden of our discussion in the next section.

2. *God in His Majesty Is the Only Free Will* *

God in His majesty is the only Free Will. This high and lofty concept is expressed in the Scriptural term "the holiness of God." The basic meaning of "holy" in the Old Testament (*qadosh*) denotes complete separateness, absolute transcendence, awefulness. There is no standard by which man can judge God. God requires nothing either within Himself or outside of Himself for His own perfection. There are no latent possibilities in God whose development would add to His own perfection. All of God's attributes are absolute; they are outside the realm of comparison, e. g., God's omnipotence is not a power greater than some other power. It is absolute, in a class by itself, infinite. In His majesty and holiness God is removed from any cause outside Himself and is perfectly free to do as He wills. There is an unbridgeable chasm between God and man, the Creator and the creature.

Man has always attempted to erase the difference between the absolute God and himself by bringing God down to his own level. In His absolute transcendence God appears to man as a capricious God, who in Oriental despotism does as He pleases. Omar Khayyam expresses this sacrilegious view of God as follows:

Impotent pieces of a game He plays
Upon this chessboard of nights and days;
Hither and thither moves and checks and slays,
And one by one back in the closet He lays.

On the other hand, man endeavors to elevate himself to the level of his own preconceived idea of God. This is the case in all forms of paganism and in all systems of pantheism, exemplified in the theology of some Modernists who view man as a potential god, or in the various forms of New Thought.

* Luther often speaks of the "hidden" God, *Deus absconditus*. It seems that Luther uses this term rather loosely. Sometimes the "hidden" God is for him the absolutely transcendent God, who is entirely outside our knowledge and experience. Our human language is so inadequate at this point that it is impossible to find an adequate term to describe God in His transcendence. The closest we can come to this description of God is in the term "the secret God"; the Latin *Deus nudus* is probably more adequate. This is the "veiled" God, whom even the angels cannot behold. This will be discussed under point 2. Luther, however, uses the term *Deus absconditus* also when he speaks of God as revealing Himself in the Law. Luther states repeatedly that when God confronts man with the demands and threats of the Law, He hides behind a mask and does not show His open countenance. This will be the central thought in point 3.

The holiness of God as complete transcendence implies naturally also God's absolute sinlessness. Scripture nowhere attempts to prove the holiness of God, but states categorically: "The Lord is holy in all His works" (Ps. 145:17). God is holy because He is as He wills to be. He fixed His own standard and norm for His actions. Every divine act is holy because God has willed it. To charge God with capricious or even sinful actions is a denial of God Himself. The will of God is always a holy will.

By ascribing holiness to Himself, God has put Himself completely outside our experience, and whatsoever is not revealed concerning God is "off limits" for us. This must be kept in mind in a discussion of Luther's presentation of the "hidden" God, the God who alone is a Free Will. Erasmus apparently wanted to maintain this, for he said that it would be presumptuous to speak of the hidden God. But his purpose in avoiding the discussion was in the interest of his pet idea, that man is not entirely dependent on God, but in his alleged freedom is able to do something toward his own salvation. Luther, however, maintained that it was necessary to concern ourselves also with the sovereign God, the "unknown" and the "hidden" God, the Cause of everything. As the farmer must know his land in order to cultivate it properly, so we must occupy ourselves also with the "hidden" God, in order that we may learn that in our total impotence we are indebted to God for everything. (St. Louis, XVIII:1687—1689.) But Luther warns very earnestly against attempting to understand or to explain this "hidden" God. He distinguishes sharply between the "God who has revealed Himself" in His Word and the God "who is not revealed." In His Word, God has revealed Himself to us as the God who has bound Himself by His threats and promises, and He is under necessity to fulfill these. But as the "hidden God" He is free of every necessity, He is above all things, His ways and judgments are inscrutable, Rom. 11:33. According to His revealed will God seeks the salvation of all men; according to His inscrutable will He wills the death of the sinner. Human reason attempts to solve the apparent conflict between the revealed and the hidden God. But Luther reminds us that God in His majesty has drawn a veil over His face and that no man dare investigate the hidden and inscrutable will of God. Luther's maxim was: What is above us is of no concern to us; we are to concern ourselves only with the God who has

revealed Himself in His Word. But proud and arrogant Dame Reason seeks to pry into the secrets where reason has no business, and at the same time she spurns those truths which God has so clearly revealed for our salvation. Reason wants to speculate about God's absolute majesty but refuses to accept God's revelation in Christ Jesus. The natural man, and too often the Christian, is intrigued by philosophy and finds no delight in theology. In his vaunted wisdom the natural man accepts Isaac Newton's principle: What cannot be understood is no object of faith. In his witness the Christian often finds himself completely stymied, because natural man can operate only in the realm of philosophy, and the wisdom of God's being and actions is foolishness to him.

Luther was a theologian, and that means that he saw himself constantly in a personal relation to God. God had confronted him, and in this personal encounter with God he had learned in deep humility that God is absolute, majestic, transcendent. In this encounter with the "hidden" God, Luther had learned that he — Martin Luther — had no free will, for God in His transcendence and majesty is the only Free Will. He had learned in true humility that everything, especially his salvation, comes solely from God. He states:

Man cannot know himself truly nor correctly humble himself unless he knows that all his works, ability, preparation, will or good intentions are entirely in vain. He must learn to know that his salvation comes entirely from God's help alone. Only he who has learned that all our salvation is in the hand and will of God will totally despair of his own ability and powers; he will not seek to find his own works with which he might please God. He only awaits how God will work in him. For this reason it is necessary to teach what Scripture tells of God's majesty so that the elect may truly humble themselves before God, learn their complete impotence, and thus be saved. Others who despise such humility are opposed to teaching men that they are nothing in the sight of God. They desire that we leave for man a free will. However, secretly they think so highly of themselves and of their good works that they go counter to the free grace of God. (St. Louis XVIII:1715, cp. 1689.)

In support of the revealed truth that God is absolutely sovereign and man totally impotent, Luther takes up six points.

a. The majesty of God in His transcendence teaches us that "all things which we do, although they seem to us to be done accidentally, are really done necessarily and immutably if thou lookest upon the will of God" (St. Louis, XVIII: 1692).

With this Luther does not mean to say that we must become fatalists and stoically say: "What is the use? for what is to happen will happen." Nor does Luther mean to imply that man's will does not act at all. Of course, man wills; man never acts by coercion and by force. Luther does not deny that man has the ability to will. On the contrary, he points out that the human will never acts under coercion, but with joy and delight does those things which his will prompts him to do. Even though a man is forced externally to do something contrary to his will, internally he opposes him who interferes with his will. This is true of the unbeliever who loves and wills his sin. The more his sin is rebuked, the more he persists in sin. He is determined to pursue his life of sin. Nor does the Christian act under coercion. His new will delights in the works he does, and he does them cheerfully and willingly, even though all the devils and the gates of hell oppose him. As fire becomes the greater the more the wind blows against it, so the Christians and the martyrs stand as a firm wall when someone forces them to act contrary to their new will. Luther points out furthermore that of all creatures only man is so constituted that his will yields willingly to the influence of another's will. Luther finally maintains that to a certain extent man has a free will in all those things that are subject to reason. Man is no "Charlie McCarthy."

However, the point at issue between Luther and Erasmus was the question whether or not man has by nature the ability of his own powers to turn to God. In this connection Luther states most emphatically that all things are done necessarily and immutably from the viewpoint of God. As God looks upon man, and as we must see ourselves in our relation to God, there is no free will whatsoever in man. On the contrary, man is bound to think, say, and do what God has foreknown and has willed. Man is not the maker of his own destiny, the captain of his soul, under the viewpoint of God's immutable knowledge and will. Let us consider for a moment what a free will implies. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that in a theological discussion the term "free will" is not

the choice between good and evil. To be really free, unconditioned, absolute, completely independent, a will must be outside and above every law; above every physical law, such as the laws of cause and effect, time and space; above every moral law, such as that a good deed will be rewarded and an evil deed be punished. No man has a free will. Even in the purely philosophical realm there is no free will, for everyone's will is conditioned by such a relatively minor matter as his environment.

There is only one free will, and that is God Himself. When Luther speaks of the "hidden" God, who is outside and above every law, his sole purpose is to refute with incontrovertible evidence the philosopher's claim that man can do something toward his own salvation. In this deeply theological interest he states that God, that all the divine attributes, are "all will." It is God's very being to will. From one viewpoint God's will is God's essential omnipotence, and whatever happens occurs because and as God has willed. (Strictly speaking, the use of the past tense is anthropomorphic.) If this were not true, says Luther, we could not trust God's promises. To say that something happens "accidentally" is the highest form of unbelief and wickedness, essentially, the denial of God.

b. Luther progresses in his argumentation. Whatever God foreknows and wills must so happen as He foreknows and wills it. This lies in the very nature of God. God does not take a vacation or attend a banquet like Homer's gods. God is a "restless actor" who is constantly at work in all His creatures. As God He cannot do otherwise. God is unchangeable: His will cannot change. God is in His very being divine Omnipotence; His will can never rest. God is divine Knowledge, Love, Righteousness: they are eternal, unchangeable, always at work. If God were to surrender anything of that which belongs to His nature, He would no longer be God. If we could fathom God in His being and will, He would no longer be the "Holy One," the Absolute.

God has condescended to our level and permits us to speak of Him in the frame of our references. Thus Scripture presents God as dealing with reprobate sinners according to a "consequent" will, which is predicated on the following temporal sequence of events: God wills the salvation of all; man rejects the Gospel; God wills the reprobation. However, we must maintain that in His essential

being there is no sequence of time or sequence of wills in God. This is indeed the hidden God, whose majesty we can at best only adore and worship.

c. In order to eliminate the last vestige of free will, Luther maintains that every act of man is done by necessity, that nothing happens accidentally. The philosophers distinguish between a logical necessity and a conditional necessity, that is to say, we must distinguish between a *necessary* connection of cause and effect and a *conditional* necessity, which arises from changeable causes; e. g., a person must necessarily die if he has taken poison; however, he can take a remedy which will make him expel the poison, and so there is no absolute necessity. However, in the theological interest of *sola gratia*, Luther argues that the foreknowledge of God requires necessarily that a thing must so happen as God has foreknown it and that there is no free will to change or modify God's prescience. (St. Louis, XVIII:1692 f., 1717 ff.)

This raises a tremendous problem for the Christian's faith. Judas sins by necessity, and yet his betrayal of the Lord is not done by coercion, but, as Luther points out, by a necessity of immutability, for the will of man wills—and wills willingly—what it does. However, his will is so depraved that he can will only what is contrary to the will of God. True, God is the Author who supplied Judas with the initiative and power to act. But God does not thereby become the cause of Judas' sin. Judas remained fully responsible for his betrayal of the Lord. As the carpenter is unable to do a good piece of work with a dull ax or saw, so God's activity in Judas—who is wicked and wants to be wicked—results in Judas' sin. To be at once under total bondage and full responsibility presents an insoluble problem. Take the case of God's hardening Pharaoh's heart. There is no free will in Pharaoh, for God works all in all. Pharaoh's will is alienated from God. But Pharaoh still has a will, he is a responsible being, and God is still the Creator, who works in Pharaoh as well as in all other creatures. But—and that is Luther's contention—God works in Pharaoh as He finds him. In Pharaoh's hardening God's continued activity comes to the surface. Though man has separated himself from God, God cannot and will not abdicate His omnipotent activity. This results in man's open rebellion and in God's hardening. The more Moses

admonishes Pharaoh, the more hardened he becomes. The almighty Creator confronts him with His Word, which is contrary to his nature, and he is driven as though he were possessed of the devil. (St. Louis, XVIII:1839.) The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is in the final analysis nothing different from what goes on in every unbeliever. The only difference is that in Pharaoh's case the opposition to God becomes more violent and God's activity in the reprobate more patent. It should be added that from our viewpoint Pharaoh hardened his heart before God hardened his heart. However, from the viewpoint of God, God foreknows and wills the hardening of Pharaoh. (St. Louis, XVIII:1834.)

The philosopher can never accept this. Christians must be willing to follow Luther, who left the problem of sin and evil unsolved and is satisfied to let this stand as a divine mystery. It is not Biblical and therefore not legitimate to ask why God deals with man as He does; why the Divine Majesty does not remove the viciousness of our will. Luther advises the Christian to refer all such questions to Satan, who can ask God for an answer. (St. Louis, V:772.) The Christian is content to know that God so wills; he reveres this will, loves it, and adores it. He knows that the creature cannot put the sovereign Creator into his pocket. Luther's sole concern was to confess with St. Paul: "I am what I am by the grace of God, and the grace of God has not been in vain in me."

d. Reason asks: Why did God permit sin to enter the world? How can God hold us accountable for Adam's sin? Why does God not improve the instrument on which He is working? The sociologist seeks to find the answer in the biological and social solidarity of the human race, and the deterministic philosopher in an alleged inherent and concreated wickedness in man. The fact is that we are at a loss to answer these questions. These problems belong to the secret of His majesty. We are to adore the mysteries of God's ways and find in them an occasion to exercise our faith, just as the dog sharpens his teeth by chewing leather. According to Luther the very essence of faith is such that it occupies itself with paradoxes. It is necessary that everything which is believed is hidden, and nothing can be hidden more deeply than that which is the direct opposite of what appears to be the case.

e. The free-will advocates argue: Since God has given His com-

mandments to do good and to turn to Him, it must be within the power of man, at least in part, to turn to God. Luther answers in brief: It would be ridiculous to advise a traveler: "You are standing at the crossroads, and you have the choice to go whichever way you want, but only one way is open to you." The fact that God has given commandments which man is unable to fulfill does not prove that man has a free will. On the contrary, it teaches that man has no free will at all and that he lives by grace alone.

f. It is frequently stated that Luther was a determinist and that his doctrine of the total bondage of the will places the responsibility for man's damnation as well as his salvation exclusively upon God. The concept determinism, however, is not in the vocabulary of a true theologian. Like Luther he distinguishes between the "preached" God, the God revealed in His Son and proclaimed in the Gospel, and the "unpreached" God, the God of majesty. This "unpreached God" does not reveal His true attitude toward poor miserable sinners. In His majesty God neither deplores nor abolishes death. However, we are to concern ourselves only with the God who has sworn by Himself that He does not desire the death of the wicked. The determinist endeavors to find a synthesis between the "hidden" and the "revealed" God, mingles Law and Gospel, and finally teaches a double election. He forgets that the question: Why are some elect and others not? is not Biblical and therefore neither theological nor legitimate. We have no business asking such a question. The "preached" God has decreed from all eternity to redeem me in Christ, call me through the Gospel, preserve me in faith through the power of the Holy Spirit, and ultimately to glorify me. The will of the "unpreached" God is none of my concern, is not the object of my faith. The attempt to investigate God's being is the height of human presumption.

According to the Gospel, God does not will the sinner's death; according to His inscrutable will, the Law, He does will it. But we are not to inquire as to the content and the basic character of this hidden will, nor dare we ask how it is related to God's revealed will, nor are we to reconcile these two wills. It is enough for us to know that there is such an inscrutable God and to abide by the maxim: "What is above us is no concern of ours."

But why should Christians concern themselves with God's

majesty and transcendence? Is this not a purely academic question with little or no significance for the Christian? Scripture reveals the fact of God's transcendence to lay man low, to set forth the unbridgeable gulf between the holy, transcendent God and sinful, finite man, to bring into the sharpest possible focus the complete bondage of man. In short, the majesty of God is the message of the Law in the holiness of its demands and the righteousness of its threats. And this is the burden of the next section.

3. *The God of Absolute Freedom Confronts Man in His Total Bondage*

God does not dwell in some air castle, in some fool's paradise. In His holy Law He confronts man. And in the resultant encounter the sinner meets the God of absolute holiness and righteousness, eternal omniscience and omnipotence, who searches the innermost recesses of men's hearts. In this encounter God's majesty confronts the sinner as holy wrath.

Modern theologians are today taking cognizance of the fact that the Scriptures speak of God's wrath. The recent catastrophes have taught this lesson. At the same time the Scriptures endeavor to maintain the eternal love of God. Instead of observing the sharp antithesis between the wrath of God as revealed in the Law and the love of God as revealed in Christ, many theologians endeavor to find a synthesis and to establish an unholy alliance between God's wrath and His love. They maintain that every judgment of God reveals God's love; that God's every "No" to the sinner always implies a "Yes"; and that ultimately God's love will gain the victory even over the damned in hell. (Cp. P. Althaus, *Christliche Wahrheit*, II, 163 ff.; 489 ff.; K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II, 2, 325, 464 ff., 528). This is a dreadful mingling of Law and Gospel: the Law loses its eternally condemning character, and the sinner is given a false security, a godless *securitas*; the Gospel loses its essential character as the all-sufficient sacrifice of the God-Man Jesus Christ.

The message of God's wrath as an eternal, infinite, omnipotent, holy wrath always has been an offense to man. No theologian since the days of the Apostles has set forth the wrath of God so existentially as Luther, because he observed the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel. Under the Gospel he can say: "There is

no wrath of God. Whoever imagines that God hates has invented an idol and makes the devil his God, for the devil hates from the beginning." But from the viewpoint of the Law he exclaims: "O dreadful and righteous Judge, how mysterious and terrible [*gar greulich*] are Thy judgments! How secure is Pharaoh until the Red Sea drowns him, not realizing that his security is in reality God's wrath!" (WA 10, II, 57.) Luther took God's wrath seriously. He saw it as holy wrath, entirely different from man's wrath, which is evil and vindictive. That is the way the devil hates, and to ascribe such devil's hatred to God is blasphemy.

God's wrath against sin and the sinner is an offense only to those who deny the very nature and essence of God and the true character of sin. Luther points out that sin is in diametrical opposition to God and that the sinner is the object of God's wrath (Eph. 2:3; Rom. 5:10).^{*} It is therefore false to say that God's wrath is only a veiled manifestation of His love. God's righteousness is such that in His relation to the sinner God is the jealous and the angry God. In fact, righteousness and God's wrath are almost synonymous terms. Sin is hostility toward God's righteousness and toward God Himself, and God's righteousness cannot condone sin nor love the sinner. God loves righteousness, and therefore His very nature is hatred of everything which is contrary to righteousness. Nor is God's righteousness ever a quiescent attitude. God is always active, never an idle spectator; He wills that which is good and is actively opposed to him who wills sin. The wrath of God is no light thing like the wrath of man, for God has kindled a fire in the hearts of men which shall burn forever (Jer. 17:4). This is proclaimed most clearly in the words of Moses: "We are consumed by Thine anger, and by Thy wrath are we troubled" (Ps. 90:7). Moses stands at the end of the long journey from Mount Sinai to Mount Nebo. In retrospect he beholds the countless skeletons of his people who had been consumed by God's anger. God's wrath was the cause of this tremendous dying. In the exposition of this Psalm, Luther points out that the death of man is incomprehensibly more dreadful than that of animals. Animals die because of God's ordinance; man dies as a result of God's wrath. In the midst of life we are

^{*} Many commentators take *ἐχθροί* as an adjective, not as a noun, and translate: while we were hateful, sc., to God.

constantly surrounded by death. Death is a most unnatural thing, because it is a sign of God's wrath. Death is not a biological necessity, as the divine healers and liberal theologians maintain. Death comes because God turns man to destruction and says: Return, ye children of men! Luther comments as follows:

Is this not a terrible statement? The wrath of God is so dreadfully great that man must die of God's wrath; man, the most noble of all the creatures, man who is subject neither to angels nor to devils, but to God's majesty alone, is appointed by God's wrath unto destruction. That which was intended for life is now dedicated to death, and all because of God's wrath. (Comment on Ps. 90:7.)

In passing, Luther points to the apparent contradiction between God's command: "Multiply and fill the earth," and His sentence: "Thou shalt die by My wrath." This paradox only serves to accentuate the reality of God's wrath. God's wrath is a furnace of such intense heat and of such enduring terror that only the damned in hell will fully understand the wrath of God. Modern man in his easy conscience does not believe this. He is continually planning and building, as though he were to live here forever. Luther points out that in the light of God's endless wrath life is not a well-regulated course, even though life may last seventy or eighty years; man is catapulted by God's fierce wrath through life. Through the brief, the very brief, span of life man travels at terrific, supersonic speed, all because of the wrath of God which lasts throughout eternity. Only man must endure God's wrath, not grass, not the flowers, not the beasts of the earth. By God's wrath over sin man's death is horrible beyond description. Luther states:

Outside Christ, God is toward the sinner a consuming Fire, a zealous God, such a Fire which never rests, but which devours to eternity, such a God who will also devour and do away with you if you are godless. And there is no more difficult passage in the Scriptures than: "We are consumed by Thy wrath." Would to God that the world believed this and recognized the fact that God truly hates sin! . . . At the time of Noah the world did not wish to believe that God is such a consuming Fire, neither did Sodom and Gomorrah wish to believe it, and yet they had to experience the consuming wrath of God. In His zeal God does not play with sin, and He will not let such sin go unrevenged. It is

therefore a terrible statement that toward the sinner God is a jealous God. . . . It is indeed in all earnestness that God says that He is a consuming Fire. Fire is the most vehement among the elements. We use fire to melt or soften elements which cannot be made pliable in any other way. For that reason God compares Himself with fire, as though He wanted to say: You will not escape Me if I once begin to make a visitation. If anyone sins against My commandments, I am sure to find him and will know how to punish him. Thus in the term "God's holy zeal" we find both the power and the will to punish the sinner. (Quoted in Theo. Harnack, *Die Theologie Luthers*, p. 231 f.)

God's wrath is an eternal wrath. Luther observes that it is the manner of important people to use few words when they are angry, but every word which they speak weighs a ton. How infinitely weighty is the very brief sentence of the majestic and angry God: "Depart from Me"! Nevertheless we treat these terrible words as though a fool or a child had spoken them, and we laugh and blaspheme God as though His holy anger were merely a joke, forgetting that He speaks in His great infinite anger and wrath. Should we not truly tremble and be filled with fear and flee from His holy presence as the mountains and the water flee from His presence? Unfortunately, no creature is so adamant and bull-headed as man, who does not hear God, but ridicules Him. At best, man believes that all divine punishments are merely gracious chastisements. It is true that God has two whips, one of His mercy and the other of His wrath, that God punishes in a twofold way: once in grace as a kind and gracious Father, and such punishment is only temporal; but also as a strict and righteous Judge, and this punishment is eternal. There are two ways in which we behold God: In Christ we see God as the loving Father, but outside Christ we see the "hidden God" of wrath and judgment. The "hidden God" is eternally present to the damned with His judgment. The description of hell as a place of fire and brimstone is apt to minimize the real meaning of hell. Hell in its real essence is to see the angry face of God through all eternity and to experience in one's conscience the guilt and responsibility for having revolted against the holy and righteous God. For that reason, Luther identifies the evil conscience with hell and states:

Conscience is a much greater thing than heaven and earth. If it

were not for conscience, hell would be no fire, nor would there be any torture there; but this wild beast, conscience, ignites death and hell and quickens the voices of the angry God, so that it is impossible to see or experience the least ray of hope. (Harnack, *loc. cit.*, 241 f.)

Luther virtually identifies the wrath of God, the Law, death, and hell. Without the wrath of God, death would indeed be only a sleep, but it is the wrath of God which makes death unbearable. Therefore when we speak of death, we must not only think of the coffin and the grave and of the dreadful mode of existence into which the body enters in the decomposition, but we must think of death in terms of the wrath of God. Is it not therefore a terrible thing that man who was created for life is now delivered unto death and to the wrath of God, and all of this because God's wrath over sin? No one knows what the wrath of God is excepting the damned themselves. The fire is kindled by the mere viewing of God, but the Day of Judgment does not last for a moment, but is an eternal, a continuous judgment.

This is the encounter of the majestic, sovereign God with man in his total bondage. This is the message of the Law, a revelation of the "hidden" God, the God of majesty as He confronts man the sinner. In this "revelation" or encounter, God clothes Himself in a veil, wears a mask. This is the God whose very being demands, wills, and causes the damnation of the unrepentant sinner. How God wills the death of the sinner, how He punishes sin, how He remains the righteous Judge of the world, that is not our business to investigate. It is not the business of the servant to question his master's plans. Any attempt to remove the mask from God — a mask in which He has hidden Himself — is the devil's temptation to become like God.

Erasmus had protested against preaching about the majesty of God and man's encounter with God, since — as he said — this confuses people. He had said that this doctrine was similar to the Corycian Cave, the home of a nymph who at first attracted people by the apparent luxury and ease displayed in the first part of the cave, only to frighten them with the horror and the majesty of the deity which dwelt in the deeper recesses (St. Louis, XVIII: 1603). To this Luther replied as follows: (1) People are confused

only if this entire matter is treated as a philosophical problem (XVIII:1713). Scripture indeed speaks of the "hidden" God, but solely for evangelical purposes. Scripture is concerned solely with creating faith in God. How can we trust God entirely for our salvation if we ascribe a free will to man and thus deny the absolute sovereignty of God? In the hours of terrible tensions (*Anfechtungen*) Luther had learned from God's Word that he was saved BY GRACE ALONE. Therefore he could state:

Even if it were possible for me to have a free will, I would not desire to have one granted me. I would not want my eternal salvation to rest in my own hands and be dependent upon my own effort. I know that I am constantly subject to the dangers that surround me and to the many attacks of the devil, who would rob me of my salvation. Primarily, however, I would always be uncertain, since my conscience would never, even if I were to live and labor forever, be certain and fully satisfied that I had done all that God would have me do. All self-righteous persons, and I include myself, have held this view for many years to their own soul's injury. But now God has removed my salvation from my will and has placed it into His own hands and has promised to save me not because of my working and running, but by His grace; therefore I am calm and secure, because He is faithful and powerful and great. It is by the grace of God that many are saved, whereas by the power of man's own free will, not one would be saved. (St. Louis, XVIII:1961 f.)

(2) Secondly, Luther maintains that it is the very nature of faith to believe that which is paradoxical, to believe that which is not seen. He states:

In order that faith may be faith, everything that is believed must be hidden, but it cannot be hidden more deeply than when the exact contrary is presented of what we experience. For instance, God makes alive by killing, and thus He conceals His eternal mercy under eternal wrath, His righteousness under injustice; it is therefore the highest stage of faith to believe Him to be merciful who saves so few and condemns so many, to believe Him to be just who by His own will makes us subject to damnation, so that He appears to delight in the miseries of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than of love. If in some way I could comprehend how God, who has such wrath and anger, can be merciful and just, then I would not need faith. But this

cannot be comprehended by reason. And this paradox in God gives us an opportunity to exercise our faith, as when we hear that God kills, our faith in the gift of life is exercised in the midst of death. (St. Louis XVIII:1715 f.)

On another occasion, Luther observes that he had more than once taken serious offense that God hardens and condemns men purely of His own will. This had brought him to the very brink of despair, and he wished that he had never been created a man. But in the midst of this despair he realized how near he was to grace, and thus his despair at the majesty of God became the means to make him truly humble, to renounce all his own righteousness, to give up his reason, and to trust with childlike faith in the redemptive work of Christ.

(3) And, finally, it is Luther's concern that the Christian will always humble himself in the presence of God and extol the grace of God which accompanies him on every step of his life. Thus even the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, a revelation at which reason stumbles, is for the Christian a great consolation. It showed the Children of Israel that even such a mighty man as Pharaoh, whose insolence and defiance seemed to have no bounds, had no will of his own, but in God's hand became the tool to save His people. As the Christian stands in the presence of the majesty of God, whose one concern is to save His elect, he will exclaim with St. Paul in wonder and amazement:

For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all. Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His way past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been His counselor? Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen.

Thus the message of the Law as the encounter of the Divine Majesty in absolute freedom with human will in total bondage serves but the one purpose of bringing the bound sinner to Christ for his liberation.*

St. Louis, Mo.

* The second part of this study, scheduled for publication in an early issue, will discuss the Christian's glorious liberty under the Gospel.