

# GNOSTICISM, ANTINOMIANISM, AND REFORMATION THEOLOGY

## REFLECTIONS ON THE COSTS OF A CONSTRUAL

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### INTRODUCTION

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It could be said with considerable justification that Martin Luther has been as great an influence on twentieth-century theology as he was on the theology of the Reformation era. The so-called Luther-Renaissance, symbolized by the publication of Karl Holl's great volume of Luther-studies in 1921,<sup>1</sup> coincided with the creative post-war turmoil in German Protestant theology, and contributed to it immeasurably. Few of the influential German Protestant theologians whose thought was formed in that era — the theologians who dominated the academic scene until the 1960s — escaped the influence of powerful new currents in Luther-research, which became a significant scholarly industry in its own right at just that time. Indeed, given Luther's symbolic status as the greatest of the Protestant founder-figures, and that theological generation's widely shared intention to recover the authentic spirit of the Reformation, it is not surprising that for some theologians, the prolegomena to systematic theology became almost identical with Luther-interpretation.

This tendency was strengthened by assumptions inherited from the nineteenth century founders of modern Luther-study. Albrecht Ritschl, and after him, Wilhelm Herrmann, appealed to Luther as the

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1. Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol 1, *Luther* (Tübingen, 1921).

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one who discovered the true theological *epistemology*, the appropriate and valid account of the conditions and character of the Christian knowledge of God.<sup>2</sup> This epistemological focus continued in the Luther-Renaissance, and remains a central theme even today in German Protestant Luther-study.<sup>3</sup> The outcome has been that Luther's influence on twentieth century systematic theology has been located not so much in particular topics, such as Christology or the sacraments, on which Luther's views have often been regarded as outmoded, as in the doctrine of revelation. Luther has been read as offering a distinctively Reformational account of revelation, an intuition of the basic structure of our knowledge of God, and so a structuring principle for theology as a whole.

The influence of a great thinker of the past is, however, always at the same time the influence of his or her interpreters. Luther's influence on twentieth-century Protestant theology has inevitably been mediated by the construal of his thought provided by the modern tradition of Luther-research. In this essay, I want to suggest that the standard modern account of Luther's contribution to a doctrine of revelation has in one central way involved a disastrous *misconstrual* of the coherence of the Christian faith, and that this misconstrual has contributed significantly to the gnostic and antinomian devolution of contemporary Protestantism. While I believe that this standard modern account of Luther is mistaken both systematically and historically, that it is both wrong about the way Christian faith hangs together and a misreading of Luther, in this essay I shall concentrate on the systematic issue. Only in the last section will I begin to suggest a different way of construing Luther's legacy.

The fundamental misconstrual of the coherence of Christian faith implicit in standard modern accounts of Luther's theology can be described quite simply: it is the assumption that a radical antagonism of law and gospel is the ultimate structuring horizon of Christian belief. The matter at issue is not whether or not we should distinguish law and gospel, and I am not arguing that the law-gospel distinction is dispensable. The argument is about the way in which much of twentieth century Protestant theology has come to construe the coherence of Christian faith, the way Christian belief hangs together. What I am contesting is the view that the distinction and opposition of law and gospel constitutes the last horizon of Christian belief, that the opposition of law and gospel to one another is the prime structuring principle

2. On Ritschl and Herrmann, cf. Risto Saarinen, *Gottes Wirken auf uns: die transzendente Deutung des Gegenwart-Christi-Motiv in der Lutherforschung* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990). For Ritschl, cf. especially "Theology and Metaphysics," in *Three Essays*, trans. by Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

3. For a recent example, cf. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), chapter 7, "The Law-Gospel Model."

which bounds and orders the conceptual space within which the coherence of Christian belief must be thought out. I am suggesting that the law/gospel distinction, however indispensable it may be, is *not* the principle in terms of which Christian belief hangs together, and that to assume that it is such a principle has disastrous consequences which we can see all around us.

I suppose that I do not need to argue the point that twentieth century confessional Lutherans have, indeed, widely assumed that the law/gospel distinction is the proper structuring horizon of all Christian thought and action.<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember, however, that this view has not only been operative in theologians who used the traditional Lutheran language of law and gospel; it has also been present, and of crucial importance, in any number of versions, within the work of influential theologians who would not have identified themselves first and foremost as Lutheran confessionalists.

Given the epistemological focus of modern theology's interest in the Reformers, moreover, it is not surprising that the reception of the law/gospel distinction has often taken the form of an account of the distinction and tension of *letter and spirit*. On such an account, the structuring horizon of theological reflection is a distinction between two kinds of discourse, the one inauthentic and enslaving, the other authentic and liberating. This distinction is made against the background of an account of worldly existence and divine transcendence: the discourse of the letter binds us to this world and its powers, while the discourse of the spirit mediates the saving power of the transcendent God.

Thus, for example, Rudolf Bultmann's central antinomy between the "bondage" of objectifying thinking and the liberating discourse of existential interpretation is easily classifiable as a letter/spirit version of the distinction of law and gospel. Bultmann himself claimed that "radical demythologizing is the parallel to the Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of justification through faith alone without the works of the law."<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich's "Protestant principle," according to which the "finite forms" of religious symbolism must always be relativised by the very grace which they mediate, likewise reproduces the law/gospel structure in the register of letter and spirit.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Cf. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, vol. 1, *The Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. by Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962). I make reference to Elert in this essay, even though he is little known outside the Lutheran orbit, because his doctrinal conservatism and arguably "evangelical catholic" stance make him a particularly instructive example and warning. Moreover, by including a conservative, confessional theologian in this critique, I hope to underline that I am concerned not with polemics against theological "liberalism" but with theological choices made at a more fundamental level.

5. Rudolf Bultmann, "On the Problem of Demythologizing (1952)," *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 122.

6. Cf. Paul Tillich, "The Formative Power of Protestantism," *The Protestant Era*, trans. by James Luther Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 212.

One always takes the risk of seeming unjust to particular theologians when one sets out to describe the inner drift of ideas, for then one must abstract from the living persons who make decisions and choices and who are not bound to live out the logic of their judgments by any mechanical necessity.

Nevertheless, ideas do have a drift and a tenor of their own, and basic theological choices do have inherent costs which are not always perceptible initially, and may have to be paid by subsequent generations. As living, breathing human beings, the theologians who bequeathed to us the assumptions I am criticizing would in many cases have been appalled by the contemporary disarray in which I shall be implicating those assumptions. But it may nonetheless be true that our disarray is in some significant part the unintended consequence of theological choices made and handed on to us by those same theologians. At any rate, in what follows, it will be important to keep in mind the distinction between the subjective intentions of theologians and the objective tenor of theological choices.

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#### FORM VS. FREEDOM

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On the view which I believe we must reject, the space within which all other theological concepts and categories must be placed and ordered an interrelated is itself structured by a radical and irreconcilable antithesis. Law and gospel are two irreducibly opposed and incompatible words, and there is nothing behind them or beyond them which unites them except, perhaps, the inscrutable purpose of the hidden God. The antithesis of law and gospel is thus a primitive datum, which theology must simply accept as such and to which it must relate everything else on which it reflects. The antithesis of law and gospel cannot be *mediated* or contextualized in any way; it can only be *terminated* by the gospel's negation of the law, by the victory of the one word over the other. The law is sheer oppression, the gospel sheer liberation, and this total opposition can only be ended by the negation of the law.

Since the law/gospel distinction is placed in no wider context, but is itself the context into which everything else in theology must be integrated, the grounds for the oppressiveness of the law must be sought in the law itself. If the grounds for the oppressiveness of the law lay outside the law, say in our disobedience, then the law would have to be placed in some wider context. Its oppressiveness and its antithesis to the gospel would then not be a primitive datum, and the law/gospel distinction would not be the last horizon. So it becomes necessary to say that the law oppresses *because it is law*, that is, because it is an ordered demand, a requirement, a command. The law oppresses be-

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cause of the kind of word it is, not because of the situation in which we encounter it.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the law is the *first* word, which we have always already encountered; the gospel is the *second* word which comes to free us from the situation *defined* by the law. Therefore, the gospel's liberating character must be defined by its negative relationship to the law. Because there is no larger interpretive context for the law/gospel distinction, and because the law is prior in our experience to the gospel, the only point of reference for our understanding of the "goodness" of the good news is the law itself: the gospel is "good news" because it is not-law, because it terminates the law.

If it is true that the law oppresses simply because of its formal character as ordered demand, then the converse would seem also to hold: anything with the formal character of ordered demand oppresses. That is to say, anything which proposes some particular ordering of our existence or calls for a determinate response from us will be perceived as being, simply as such, the oppressive law from which the gospel delivers us. And since the gospel's liberating character is defined in terms of its antithesis to the law, it will not be our sinful abuse of the law and hostility to the commandment, and God's wrath against us on that account, from which the gospel liberates us. Rather, the gospel will liberate us from the situation of having to hear commandment at all, from having to reckon with any word whatsoever which has the formal character of ordered demand.

Thus the law oppresses because it proposes a determinate ordering of our existence and calls for a specified response, and it follows that the gospel liberates because it delivers from determinate order and specified response. The law/gospel distinction thus conceived expands quite naturally into a kind of ontology of human existence, at whose heart is an antagonism, or at least an irresolvable tension, of form and freedom, of order and authenticity. Form and order impose despair or promote self-righteousness; salvation is liberation from form and order and the law's cruel demand for them.

It should be clear how easily this view is transposed into the register of letter and spirit. The discourse of the letter is that enslaving religious talk that binds us to finite forms, to the particular and describable: Bultmann's "objectifying discourse" or Tillich's demonic "unbroken" myth. The discourse of the spirit, the language of genuine transcendence, disturbs and relativizes concrete form and describable order, and so sets the human spirit free from bondage to them. Here too, the law as the discourse of the letter is the word we have always already

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7. Cf. Elert, *Structure*, 35-43; Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Fortress, 1970), 119-121.

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heard; the gospel as the discourse of the spirit is the second word, which liberates precisely in that it counters and disrupts the finality which the letter ascribes to finite form and order.

It is surely evident that this position is immediately and necessarily antinomian. Indeed, much twentieth century Protestant theology has been antinomian all along; the practical antinomianism now regnant in many churches is simply a long-standing theoretical antinomianism achieving the courage of its convictions. If the law/gospel distinction is a final antithesis, then *any* commandment, *any* call for one ordering of life rather than another, will by definition be the law from which the gospel frees us.

Consider this passage from Elert's *Structure of Lutheranism*:

Only sinners belong to the Lutheran Church: not willful sinners, to be sure, but penitent sinners — yet always only sinners, who in this life can never be anything else .... What its members do or do not do, miss or do not neglect, in an ethical respect belongs in the domain of sociology and has nothing at all to do with the nature of the church. The evangelical human being is answerable for this, not the evangelical church. At best, the evangelical church is answerable indirectly, insofar as it owes the individual the gospel, which engenders his faith and thus becomes indirectly perceptible in the ethical dynamic.<sup>8</sup>

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Are not contemporary mainline denominations absolutely faithful to this teaching of the great conservative confessionalist? We do not even have to recall the sinister role played by this sort of ecclesiology in the German church-struggle to see the connections. Is this not what we are constantly told in the Protestant churches today: that what members of the church do or do not do in an ethical respect belongs in the domain of sociology and has nothing at all to do with the nature of the church? Are we not also told unceasingly that all moral decisions are finally a matter of the way in which individuals "express their faith" and are as such a purely private affair, at best "indirectly" related to the church's proclamation?

Moreover, consider how in this passage the notion of repentance has been stripped of all public consequences. Elert's sinners are supposedly penitent, but this apparently makes no necessary difference to their moral behavior — something that would have been unimaginable to Luther. It is hard to see what "penitent sinners" could mean in this context besides "people who feel bad." We do not, I think, need to press this statement very hard to suspect that already in the tough-minded Elert we are well on the way to contemporary tender-minded rhetoric about all those "hurting people" who need more than anything else to be liberated from all order and absolved of all expectations by the redemptive "inclusivity" of the antinomian church.

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8. *Structure*, 363.

But the principled antithesis of form and freedom involved in this construal cannot logically be restrained within the realm of the ethical. It is also corrosive of the very idea of dogma. A dogma is, after all, a rule; it is precisely a call for a particular ordering of thought and language, for a determinate reflective response to the love of God. Dogma says, "Talk about God as Nicea does, and not otherwise. Talk about Jesus as Chalcedon does, and not otherwise." Within a horizon structured by the absolute antithesis of law and gospel, of form and freedom, dogma must be suspect simply as such, as a form of that oppression and bondage from which the gospel is to liberate us.

It is no accident that even for Elert, who was certainly on one side of his complex temperament a friend of dogma, the doctrine of the Trinity poses a terrific problem with which he labors mightily and somewhat inconclusively.<sup>9</sup> One reason is that the very idea of a "decree" of the church which, as the Augsburg Confession says of Nicea, "is true and should be believed without any doubting,"<sup>10</sup> is impossible to assimilate to the "structure of Lutheranism" as he conceives it. Within the horizon of the absolute antithesis of law and gospel, the very idea of such a "decree" is necessarily suspect.

But there is more to this point. The church's dogma is, after all, her confessing response to the self-giving and self-identification of God in Jesus Christ. The church *formulates* dogma, one might say, in order to acknowledge the concrete *form* of God's self-giving in Christ. The dogmatism characteristic of catholic Christianity arises directly from the conviction that God has definitively and unreservedly given himself to human beings in a particular history, in the person, life and destiny of a particular first century Palestinian Jew.

The root of all dogma is thus essentially christological; Christianity is a "dogmatic" religion because its heart is not general truths or inner experiences — which could of course be "expressed" or "symbolized" in any number of ways — but the hard-edged particularity of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen and exalted as Lord. The church's formulated dogma acknowledges and confesses the concrete christological form of God's self-giving and self-identification.

It is just this acknowledgement and confession which have become unintelligible in many influential quarters of contemporary mainline Protestantism. I want to suggest that the understanding of the law/gospel distinction which I am calling into question is not without a considerable share of responsibility for this situation.

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9. *Ibid.*, 200-222.

10. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert, et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 27.

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inadmissible — witness the charge of legalism regularly levelled at those who insist on honoring the triune name. The problem lies even deeper. If the saving gift of God through the gospel is deliverance from form, liberation from order and the call for order, then the God of the gospel cannot himself be a God who has "taken form" concretely in history. When the law/gospel distinction is absolutized, it becomes at least plausible to regard the triune God, the God who is conclusively self-bestowed and self-identified in the particular history of Jesus, as the oppressive, hidden God of the law, the God who enslaves and torments the human spirit. As Robert W. Jenson has written,

Surely, it is said, God ... cannot be Jewish, or male, or a figure from a long-past century, or an apocalyptic seer, or hung up on legal commandments, or ... Whatever may be true of the human individual Jesus, it is said, surely the "Christ" of Christianity must be a "Christ-principle" or a "Logos-in-itself" or something similarly metaphysical and malleable, that is not Jewish, or male, or crucified, or blessed with a mother, or hung up on righteousness, or etc.<sup>11</sup>

It matters little what feature of the particularity of God's self-bestowal is singled out for offence; the deeper offence is that God should take form in history at all.

The logic is simple: if form is enslavement, then a God who took form in history would be an enslaving God. The liberating God must therefore be a formless God, a God at most dialectically related to any particular form, a God who is everywhere and nowhere, whose faceless elusiveness frees us from the tyranny of the particular and ordered and definitive. This is the God whom, we are told, we must not "limit," that is, whom we *must not* confess as definitively self-given and self-identified in Jesus Christ. This is the God whom we know only in an endless sequence of throwaway "images" whose utility consists solely in their novelty, their capacity to shake us loose from familiar forms. This is the God with whom we commune only on an endless "spiritual journey," an infinite quest with no goal and no purpose except sheer ceaseless movement beyond form.<sup>12</sup>

This is, of course, the theology of gnosticism, about which St. Irenaeus wrote one of the great books of Christian theology in the second century, in which many of our urgent contemporary theological problems are compendiously dealt with.<sup>13</sup> My point is not simply to reiter-

11. Robert W. Jenson, "A Call to Faithfulness," *dialog* 30 (Spring, 1991), 93.

12. "God always remains beyond what has once been grasped, which means that the decision of faith is genuine only as actualized ever anew. God is 'the guest who always moves on' (Rilke), who cannot be apprehended in any now as one who remains. Rather, as the one who demands my decision ever anew, God ever stands before me as one who is coming, and this constant futurity of God is God's transcendence." Rudolf Bultmann, "Science and Existence," *ibid.*, 144.

13. Cf. the selections from Irenaeus presented in *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus against the Heresies*, selected and introduced by Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. by John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990). From the gnostic side, cf. Patricia Cox Miller, "'Words with an Alien Voice': Gnostics, Scripture, and Canon," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 57 (Fall, 1989), 459-483.

ate the common charge that American Christianity today is infected with gnosticism, but to suggest that this gnostic revival has not fallen on us as a bolt from the blue. It is doubtless true that gnosticism has been a powerful and constant subcurrent in American culture at least since the New England transcendentalists. But within American Protestantism the ground was well prepared for the present outbreak. The absolutized law/gospel distinction, construed as the horizon for all Christian theology, has at the very least left us easy prey for the gnostic virus, and has perhaps contributed toward the development of domestic strains of the disease.

The root of the problem is what Tillich calls the "Protestant principle," which posits an irresolvable tension (and finally, I believe, despite Tillich's own intentions, an antinomy) between finite form and liberating grace, concrete particularity and divine presence:

...Protestantism asserts that grace appears *through* a living Gestalt which remains in itself what it is. The divine appears *through* the humanity of the Christ, *through* the historical weakness of the church, *through* the finite material of the sacrament. The divine appears through the finite realities as their transcendent meaning. Forms of grace are finite forms, pointing beyond themselves. They are forms that are, so to speak, selected by grace, that it may appear through them; but they are not forms that are transmuted by grace so that they may become identical with it. The Protestant protest prohibits the appearance of grace through finite forms from becoming an identification of grace with finite forms. Such an identification is, according to the Protestant principle, demonic *hubris*.<sup>14</sup>

I agree with Tillich that this "Protestant principle" does indeed follow from one way of interpreting the Reformation legacy, widespread in modern discussion, which ascribes to the law/gospel distinction a position of systematic epistemological centrality for Christian theology. But as I have suggested, this principle leaves church and theology helpless before the twin temptations of gnosticism and antinomianism: if finite form and graced freedom, concrete particularity and divine power, are ultimately irreconcilable, then we cannot consistently stop short of the full embrace of a god without form and an existence without form.

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At issue here are the viability and intelligibility of two central and closely related notions in classical Christian theology: incarnation and holiness.<sup>15</sup> If the "Protestant principle" holds, then both incarnation and holiness, as traditionally understood, are in fact dreams of "de-

14. Tillich, *ibid.*, 212. I should note that I am citing Tillich as representative of a broad tendency in twentieth century Protestant theology, not proposing a global evaluation of his theology in particular.

15. A third concept could be considered here, if space permitted: that of the *church*. Does grace merely "appear *through* the weakness of the church" or does grace actually take up space in the world *in* the concrete communion of the church? On this, cf. my essay, "Lutherans and the Historic Episcopate: The Theological Impasse and the Ecclesial Future," *Lutheran Forum*, Reformation 1992, and "A Letter on the Church," forthcoming in *Lutheran Forum*.

monic *hubris*" rather than the description of our salvation. Incarnation affirms that the universal God has "taken form" in the human life of a particular, first century Palestinian Jew, who is indeed, in his concrete life and destiny, *identical* with the eternal Logos of God.<sup>16</sup> And the notion of holiness expounds the conviction that by the union of our lives with the incarnate God we may be "formed" to his image in specific and describable ways and, precisely in the concrete particularity of our finite lives, become the bearers of his Spirit. These two affirmations are closely interrelated, for if God has taken no finally valid concrete form in our world, then there is no form which could claim to be the concrete norm of the "formation" of our lives.<sup>17</sup>

It seems difficult to deny that contemporary Protestant church and theology are increasingly uneasy with both these concepts, unable to assert their validity and relevance in the face of the gnostic and antinomian temptations. There are no doubt many reasons for this, but at the level of theological reflection, much of the responsibility must be borne by the absolutization of the law/gospel distinction, and its corollary, the "Protestant principle."

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## TOWARD RECONSTRUCTION

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This essay has been a diagnostic exercise and cannot also propose a full course of therapy. I shall conclude with only a few pointers, in more or less thesis form, to what I believe is the only fruitful way forward. In doing so, I shall draw on the work of Martin Luther to suggest what I cannot in this context argue, that a different construal of his legacy might be possible.

The horizon of any right construal of the coherence of Christian belief is God's concrete self-bestowal and self-identification in Jesus of Nazareth. Acknowledgement and confession of the concrete form of God's self-giving are the root of theology's catholicity and orthodoxy; as St. Irenaeus said, "Not one of the heretics is of the opinion that the Word was made flesh."<sup>18</sup>

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16. The whole labor of the conciliar Christology of the ancient church, from the fourth to the seventh centuries, was directed toward achieving a clear and coherent assertion of this identity. The developed notion of the "hypostatic union" is nothing but a conceptual device for explicating the *identity* of the person of the Logos with his particular flesh. Cf. for example, Maximus the Confessor, *Letter 15*, MPG 91, cols. 549-561.

17. It should not be noted that to interpret either of these concepts "dialectically" or "paradoxically" is simply to negate them, at least as they have been classically employed in the Christian tradition. It is constitutive of the concept of incarnation that the Logos is *identical* with his own flesh; it is likewise constitutive of the concept of holiness that the formation of our lives in Christ is the genuine (though not complete) *realization* of the good of our existence. To interpret incarnation or holiness "dialectically" or "paradoxically" is simply to say that the Logos is not *really* identical with his own flesh and that we do not *really* realize the good of our existence through conformation to Christ.

18. *The Scandal of the Incarnation*, 14.

The *gospel* is the narrative of this self-identification and self-giving, the story of Jesus of Nazareth recounted as the story of God's "taking form" concretely *pro nobis* in the midst of the world. The gospel is not, therefore, defined by any formal contrast with the law; the gospel can only be defined materially, by reference to its content, the particular person Jesus in his singular life and destiny. The particularity of Jesus and the singularity of his career are the focal point in relation to which the Christian faith hangs together; the trinitarian identification of Jesus of Nazareth with the universal God is the horizon which bounds and shapes the conceptual space within which everything in theology must be placed and ordered.

It is interesting to contrast the following passage from Luther with Tillich's description of the "Protestant principle."

You have already heard Christ refer to Himself as the Son of Man. With this term He wants to indicate that He has our true flesh and blood, which He obtained from the Virgin Mary and which contains eternal life. *This is the article of justification.* The Holy Spirit insists that we never teach, know of, think of, hear, or accept any other god than this God, whose flesh and blood we imprint on our hearts if we want to be saved. We must not let ourselves be taught a god who sits in his throne room up in heaven, one who is to be sought only in the godhead. If we do, we find ourselves misled. But if you want to escape death and be saved, then admit no other god than the Son of Man. You will find Him in his flesh and blood, for that is where he dwells. In the Son of Man you will encounter God.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to avoid the impression that Luther is inviting us to seek our salvation in what Tillich calls "demonic *hubris*." For Luther, at any rate, it is inadequate to say that "the divine appears *through* the humanity of the Christ." On the contrary, the divine is found *in* the particular flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, and it is the singular form of this flesh and blood that we must imprint on our hearts to be saved. Here as elsewhere, Luther's rhetoric strains to articulate the utter, undialectical *identity* of the Son of God with the particular man born of Mary, in a vivid and precise restatement of the classical Christology of the ancient church:

We also believe that Christ, our Savior, is the true Son of Mary and the only-begotten Son of God; and yet there are not two sons but only one Son of God the Father and of the Virgin Mary .... Thus this same Son of God, who was from eternity, is also the Son of the Virgin Mary .... [This] gave Mary the right to say, "This Son Jesus, whom I bore and suckled on my breasts, is the eternal God, born of the Father in eternity, and also my Son." And God says likewise, "Mary's Son is my only Son." Thus Mary is the Mother of God .... So God the Father does not have a son apart from Mary's, nor does Mary have a son apart from God the Father's.<sup>20</sup>

19. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 23, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 6* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 129. Emphasis added.

20. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vols. 22, *Sermons on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1-4* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), 323.

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The center and starting point from which faith and theology alike take their origin and to which they continually return is thus the judgment of the centurion in Mark 15:39: "Truly, this person" — *houtos ho anthropos*, this one on the cross — "is the Son of God."

The law must be defined by reference to the gospel, the letter with reference to the spirit, not the other way around.

The law in its distinction from the gospel, the letter in its distinction from the spirit, must be understood within the horizon constituted by this primal judgment of faith. The law must be defined by reference to the gospel, the letter with reference to the spirit, not the other way around. The negativity of the law is not located in its formal character as commandment, as proposal of form and order; its ground is rather in our *disorder*, our sin, our non-conformity to Christ.<sup>21</sup> "The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns *everything that is not in Christ*."<sup>22</sup> The work of the law is precisely to insist that the self-giving of God in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth is our good, and nothing else.

Likewise, the discourse of the letter is not enslaving because it binds us to finite form and concrete order, but because it does not properly relate penultimate form and penultimate order to the unsurpassable form of God's self-bestowal in Jesus Christ. The veil of the letter is removed, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4, when the Holy Spirit discloses the particular face of Jesus Christ as the singular locus of "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" (2 Corinthians 4:6). The discourse of the Spirit is the gospel narrative of the self-identification and self-bestowal of God in Jesus of Nazareth, the coming of the universal Logos in the particular flesh which is the concrete form that measures and orders all the penultimate forms and orderings of human existence.

The reality of the incarnation grounds the reality of holiness: God has truly given his own life to humankind in the concrete flesh and blood of his Son Jesus, and so we may be truly "deified by grace" (as the Fathers teach us) through our *conformation* to that flesh and blood. Luther presents Christ as saying:

The reality of the incarnation grounds the reality of holiness.

If you touch my flesh, you are not touching simple flesh and blood; you are touching flesh and blood which deify (*gottert*), that is, they give the character and power of the Godhead.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike contemporary Protestants, the Reformers, and Martin Luther in particular, were by no means uncertain of the fundamental validity of

21. The assumption that the negativity of the law is grounded in its formal character as law rather than in our sin has contributed disastrously to the co-option of American Christianity by the ideology of "metaphysical victimhood" preached by the contemporary "recovery movement."

22. Martin Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," Thesis 23, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, *The Career of the Reformer*, part 1 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 41.

23. *Luther's Works*, vol. 23, 122, translation altered. On Luther's reception of the Patristic theology of "deification," cf. Simo Peura, *Mehr als ein Mensch? Die Vergottlichung als Thema der Theologie Martin Luthers von 1513 bis 1519* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1990), and Tuomo Mannermaa, "in ipsa fide Christus adest. Der Schnittpunkt zwischen lutherischer und orthodoxer Theologie," in *Der im Glauben gegenwärtige Christus: Rechtfertigung und Vergottung. Zum ökumenischen Dialog* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1989), 11-93.

the traditional Christian concept of holiness, despite their strong polemic against self righteousness:

Now, when faith dwelling within you brings Christ into your heart, you cannot think him poor and destitute. He brings his own life, his Spirit — all he is and commands ... The gospel brings Christ, and Christ brings the Spirit — his Spirit. Then the individual is made new; he is godly. Then all his deeds are well wrought.<sup>24</sup>

Contrary to the implications of the "Protestant principle," Luther preached that the grace of the transcendent God can be concretely and undialectically manifested in the finitude of a believing life:

This is how it goes: beyond the grace by which a person begins to believe and holds to the Word, God also rules in the person through his divine power and activity, so that the person becomes more and more enlightened, richer, and mightier in spiritual understanding and wisdom, to know, judge, and evaluate all sorts of doctrines and situations. Such a person also grows and progresses daily in life and good fruits, and becomes a kind, gentle, patient person, who serves everyone with teaching, advice, comfort, and giving, is useful to God and humanity, and for whose sake countries and peoples are benefited, and in short, a person through whom God speaks, lives, and works what the person speaks, lives and works. Such a person's tongue is God's tongue, such a person's hand is God's hand, such a person's word is no longer a human word, but God's word.<sup>25</sup>

It is these notions of incarnation and holiness, and the nexus between them, in all their scandalous flouting of the "Protestant principle," that mainline churches and theology must recover if the gnostic and antinomian decomposition of their identity is to be arrested and reversed.<sup>26</sup> The Christian future belongs not to the corrosive dialectical anxieties of modern Protestant sophistication, but to a theology and a church both catholic and evangelical that will not flinch from the radical affirmations of the Gospel. □

*The Christian future belongs to a theology and a church both catholic and evangelical that will not flinch from the radical affirmations of the Gospel.*

24. Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. by J. N. Lenker, trans. by J. N. Lenker et al., vol. 6, *Sermons on Epistle Texts for Advent and Christmas* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983; original edition 1908), 135.

25. Martin Luther, WA 21, 458-459. The tension in the Christian life is not, for Luther, a "dialectic" which would relativize the actuality of holiness, but rather a *conflict* between real, undialectical holiness and real, undialectical sin, in which the believer is sustained by the mercy of God and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

26. As well as the notion of church, which I have not had space to consider here. Cf. Bruce Marshall, "The Church in the Gospel," *PRO ECCLESIA* I (Fall, 1992).