

‘And there’s no other God’: Being Honest to God about God

When Paris Hilton, the celebrity who became a celebrity by becoming a celebrity – when Paris Hilton walked into the Central Regional Facility in California last year, she was clutching a Bible and a book. The book, *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, had been championed by Oprah Winfrey, who said that her favourite quote was in the first chapter: ‘Man made god in his own image. The eternal, the infinite and the unnameable reduced to a mental idol that you had to believe in and worship as my God or your God’. Ms Winfrey later observed that ‘Jesus cannot possibly be the only way to God’ – and given the god she and Tolle were talking about, she was quite right. To *that* god Jesus is certainly not the Way.

The Power of Now, published in 1999, was on top of the best-seller list for several years. According to one reviewer, ‘there is not very much new about *The Power of Now*: it is Buddhism mixed with mysticism and a few references to Jesus Christ, a sort of new age reworking of Zen’. Tolle’s follow-up book *The New Earth* (Amazon moved 3.5 million in one month), is an extended riff on the same subject. Says a reviewer: The ‘encapsulating idea... is that by abandoning your ego, you become present in the immortal being.’

Tolle and his books remind us of the religious context into which many of us are called to make our confession to God in the world. We won’t explore that context today, but it might be useful these days for us to keep in mind this telling image: Paris Hilton going before the judge, in her hand a Bible and *The Power of Now*.

1

The title of this presentation is a line from the second verse of Martin Luther's famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God* (composed 1527- 28). The verse as I learned it in Confirmation class goes like this:

With might of ours can nought be done,
Soon were our fall effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One,
Whom God himself elected.
Ask ye: Who is this?
Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God –
He holds the field forever.

About whom is Luther singing here? Who is the Valiant One whom God himself elected? It is Jesus Christ, true man and true God. Other than this one, there is no God. That is Luther's response to the problem of the hidden God. It's Luther's solution and the Lutheran solution. In Article 8 of the *Formula of Concord* Lutherans confess: 'Apart from this man [Jesus Christ] there is no God' [FC SD VIII.81].

The hidden God, the God about whom we creatures in our arrogance speculate, *is* a problem, a massive headache for us. We can't see this God, we can't control or manipulate this God, we can't get at or get to this God, no matter how hard we try. Is this God of magnificent abstractions for us or against us? We don't know. The hidden God is a terrible threat to us.

It would help if we could see God, have certain and sure knowledge of God, then we'd know what God thinks of us, and we could work out how best to please God and get God off our backs and on our side. The longing to see the immortal, invisible, God

only wise is as old as humanity. Moses asked: 'Show me your glory, I pray.' God said: 'You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live'. What God *did* do was to show Moses the divine backside. Just that. Many centuries later Jesus' disciple Philip repeated Moses' request : 'Show us the Father', Philip said. Jesus' response was simply: 'If you've seen me you've seen the Father'. That response was echoed centuries later by Luther and the Lutheran Confessors when they said: If you want to see and know God, look at Jesus Christ. There is no other God.

Faith in God is always and only faith in the Christ. This fact junks all philosophical speculations about God and all preconceived notions about how God is or should be. The reality is that if human beings are truly to know God, then all human preconceptions and constructs of God must first be destroyed through the cross of Christ. The natural human expectation is that God will be revealed in the supernatural and the miraculous, in signs of power and glory...like the shock and awe of Sinai or Carmel. We expect God to meet our criteria for what God should be and how God should make Godself known to us. Instead, of course, we find that the carpenter's son from Nazareth is God's full and final revelation to us. That's how God has chosen to reveal God to us, so that's the revelation we are stuck with, to put it bluntly.

That's a bigger shock than Sinai or Carmel! Look at Jesus of Nazareth and read God off from him ... well, look! That babe, nursing at the breast, totally dependent on his mother, helpless, defenceless, lowly – that's God. The young lad, obedient to his parents, learning the Word of God in the synagogue, that's God. The grown man, nowhere to rest his head, ministered to by a group of women, walking in Palestine at our pace, that's God, our three-mile-and-hour-God. That man, kneeling to wash his disciples feet, bending down to defend a troubled woman, that's God, our kneeling God. That worm of a

man, stripped naked in full view of all – his private parts at the eye-level of passersby, bruised, bleeding, thirsty, dying, dead and buried – that's God! It can't be, and yet it is, and that's the only God who is any good to you.

God with a human history.

Even the resurrection, without which the crucifixion is meaningless, even the resurrection was at the time no public triumph. The risen Jesus was not seen by those who killed him or were complicit in his death; as far as we know, the only human enemy he appeared to was Saul of Tarsus. The resurrection of Christ is a triumph and a revelation of God only to the eyes of faith. That's the nature of faith: it always deals with what is hidden, not seen. *Some things have to be believed to be seen.*

What's going on here? Paradoxically, God is revealed in deepest hiddenness, the hiddenness of opposites. This concealment is actually for the sake of revelation. Hidden revelation removes the one big obstacle to effective revelation, namely human pride. If somehow I could come to know a saving God through my own observations and deductions, or if by my own efforts I could get the God I want, or if God's self-revelation was plain and open and easily grasped and very attractive, then there'd be no need for faith, indeed no room for faith, and my pride would be so inordinate that I would become in fact an enemy of God.

Room for faith. Faith has to do with things not seen. To make room for faith, God hides everything which is to be believed – hides it deeply under its opposite. The place where everything is hidden is under the cross. Under the cross. Level ground there. Room for faith.

In a sermon on the comfort of the Holy Spirit in times of persecution, Luther speaks movingly of the man Jesus as the revelation of God:

To recognise Christ means that he was given for us and has taken my sin upon himself, that is, that I consider that all my things are nothing, that I drop all that is mine and believe alone that Christ has been given to me as a gift, that his suffering, his godliness and all his goodness are altogether mine. When I recognise that, I can do nothing but love him, for I must be dear to a man like that. Then I climb further on the basis of the Son to the Father and see that Christ is God and has placed himself into my death, my sin, my misery, and also gives me his love. Then I recognise there the Father's friendly will and his highest love which no heart can fathom; so I take hold of God where he is softest and think: well, well, that's God; well, well, that is what God's will and good will are like, that Christ does all that for me. So in his [Christ's] face I feel the highest inexpressible mercy and love of God...Thus God must be recognised in Christ alone.

Note, first, that Luther is not concerned with showing that Jesus is God – he takes that as a given. He wants us to know *what this God is like and what God's attitude to us is*. To know those things, Luther says, look at the human being, Jesus of Nazareth and see that God is for you, not against you. Note, secondly, the references to the 'blessed exchange' which is so integral to our understanding of the atonement. Christ as man takes my sin and I receive his righteousness. In this, Christ's humanity is central: Christ's human suffering, his godliness, his human obedience, his moral goodness are transferred to me, 'are altogether mine' as Luther says, just as my sin is his and my punishment.

Ah, what comfort! When you are up against it and can see no meaning to your life, the God of nature and the stars is exposed as useless, as are the tarot cards and the crystals, the mystical stones and all the other paraphernalia of superstition. But the triune God comes and says in person, 'I care for you. I

reveal all my authority and power to you in a way that you can grasp it, so that you do not have to be afraid of me. I, your God, allow myself to be done to death for you'. You hear this and you begin to see that your life is not a meaningless meandering. It has a purpose and goal. Jesus Christ is God's first and last word to you, yes, when God seems to be silent; yes, when God shakes Wall street; yes, when everything seems to be against you and hope-less. Yes. Here is God at our level, a God who proves God's love for us so conclusively that we are persuaded that nothing in all creation can separate us from that love.

To conclude the first part of this paper, I want to refer briefly to a set of 28 theses which Luther prepared in 1518, and in which he unveiled the main elements of his emerging theology of the cross. Three key theses are actually more about the theologian of the cross than the theology of the cross. First, Luther says that the person who claims to be able to figure out the nature and logic of God by looking at the world God has made and God's actions in the world, does not deserve to be called a theologian. Secondly, a true theologian is one who comprehends what is visible of God through suffering and the cross. Thirdly, the opposite of a theologian of the cross is a theologian of glory. He or she calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross says what a thing is. Calls a spade a spade.

The difference between the two kinds of theologians, notes Gerhard Forde, is first of all in the way they look for God in the world, in their 'seeing' (19,20), then secondly and consequently, in their speaking (21). Faulty or misdirected sight results in false speaking.' (*On Being...*, p 71)

We have seen that for Luther, true knowledge of God is found only in Christ. In these theses, Luther is more specific: the sole authentic locus of one's knowledge of God is the cross of

Christ, in which is revealed God's powerful weakness. Looking at God through the lenses of the cross is, as Luther rather crudely puts it, like looking at God's backside (Exodus 33). It's an indirect, even hidden revelation, but a genuine divine revelation nonetheless, even though God is not immediately recognisable as God. The cross is not where God is supposed to be and not where we really want to find God...because if that is where our God is to be found, that's where we have to go: to death, to the end of us and all our pretensions.

So knowledge of God is found at the very point where God's path on earth ends in apparent failure: in the suffering and dying humanity of Christ. Theologically and pastorally, this is crucial. We are in danger of missing God completely if we look for God in places of our own choosing (the mountain top experience, signs and wonders, revelations, 'glory' places) and avoid the only place where God's full divinity has in fact been revealed: down at our level, down among all the dirt, the grime, the injustice, and the pain of our lives and the world's.

True theology and recognition of God is in Christ crucified. Christ *crucified*. God is particularly known through suffering. A deep spiritual truth is being confessed here. It is not merely that God is known through suffering (whether the sufferings of Christ or of the individual), but that God actually *makes Godself known* through suffering. God is active in this matter, rather than passive, inasmuch as suffering and temptation are means by which we are brought to God. For us friends of the cross, then, suffering is not a senseless intrusion into the world; it is, rather our most precious treasure, for in it is revealed the living God, working out our salvation.

One final thought: the theologian of the cross is hope-full, because of the resurrection. Indeed, a theology of the cross is impossible without a theology of the resurrection: the two are

inseparable. A resurrection presupposes a death: Christ's death, and our death with him. We fight that death tooth and nail, but if we don't die with him we won't live with him.

2

Let's return now to where we began: the single line from Luther's hymn: *A Mighty Fortress*, in which Luther confessed that there's no other God than the man, Jesus. I quoted the English translation which I learned in my youth: 'And there's none other God'. According to one website, there are extant more than 100 different English translations of Luther's hymn, the first of them being by Myles Coverdale in 1539. Poets such as Thomas Carlyle and Catherine Winkworth have offered translations. Apparently the most popular English translation is by Frederick Henry Hedge (1805-1890). His rendering of the relevant line of Luther's hymn is: 'from age to age the same'. Hmm. My hymnbook said: 'And there's none other God'; Frederick Hedge said: 'from age to age the same'.

What did Luther actually write? He wrote: 'Und ist kein andrer Gott'. Some of you speak and/or read German. Which translation is the better rendering of Luther's words, 'Und ist kein andrer Gott? Fact: 'From age to age the same' is nothing like what Luther wrote. What's going on?

Frederick Henry Hedge was professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard Divinity School, and one of the editors of *The Christian Examiner*...and he was pastor of various Unitarian congregations. There, I reckon, is our answer. Unitarianism rejects the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. The criteria for belief and practice are reason and conscience. It is understandable then (but not excusable), that Frederick Hedge should replace Luther's confession concerning God and Christ with words which reflected his own heterodox beliefs.

But what of English Lutheran hymnals compiled and published in North America? The 1941 LCMS hymnal had 'and there's none other God'. The 1982 edition gave two readings: 'and there's none other God' and 'God's only Son adored'. The 1930 ALC hymnal had two versions: 'our only King and Lord' and 'True God from heav'n he came'. The 1958 *Service Book and Hymnal*, used by most of the predecessors of the present ELCA, adopted Hedge's Unitarian mutilation: 'from age to age the same'. Isn't that odd. Why would Lutherans choose to give up the sound Lutheran confession and follow a Unitarian? The 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship* of the ELCA has 'God's only Son adored'. Why did the members of that hymnbook committee reject the accurate translation and good confession which was available to them in some English hymnals: 'and there's none/no other God'? If some members of the committee are still alive, maybe you can ask them.

Fact: many Christians, including many Lutherans, have a problem with confessing before the world that apart from the man Jesus there is no God, and that the saviour God is to be found in the man Jesus alone. Why is that?

Part of the answer lies, I believe, in the challenge presented by two other 'no others' which are integral parts of the Christian confession.

The first 'no other' is found in Acts 4:12, where Peter says that there's no other Name by which we are saved. The context is this: Peter and John had healed a crippled beggar and had been arrested for 'proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead'. They were asked: 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' The apostles answered: 'It is by the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed...salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name...'

You can't miss the reference to 'the name' (x3; 5x in vv7-18). For OT believers, the Name means first and foremost God. It has a revelatory content. It means primarily God's revealed nature and character – the Saviour God. God is Saviour and Lord, *kyrios*. Before his birth the angel said the child's name would be Jesus, 'for he will save his people from their sins', and he will be called Immanuel, which means 'God with us'. Paul confesses that God has given Jesus God's own name: *kyrios*, and at that name all shall bow and all confess: 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.

We confess that God is Saviour and Lord. We say the same about Jesus Christ: he is our Saviour and Lord. He and no other; he alone delivers us from the power of sin, death, law and the wrath of God.

Luther in his hymn echoes Scripture's exclusivistic claim concerning Jesus Christ: 'there's no other God'. Scripture makes a further exclusivistic claim about that same Jesus Christ: he has a monopoly on salvation. In him and in no other is life and salvation. His exclusivity as Saviour consists in his inclusivity: he is the only Saviour who died for all and offers God's life to all who believe.

Both claims are offensive to reason and to those of other faiths, both speak of an exclusivism which jars sensitivities in 2008. Christians are tempted to try to wriggle out from under both claims. Surely there are other ways apart from Christ for the saving God to be known, just as there must be other ways to salvation apart from Christ. In both cases we, however, can only proclaim: No other: no other God, no other Name.

The third 'no other' in the trilogy of 'no others' is 'no other gospel'. You'll recognise the reference to Galatians 1:6. 'I am surprised at you!' Paul says to the recent Galatian converts,

'In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel' –and here the apostle's grammar runs away with him (but as Joseph Sittler once observed: 'Where grammar cracks, grace erupts'). Paul corrects himself: 'Actually there is "no other" gospel, but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ' (Gal 1:6,7 TEV).

Those who are called are, in Paul's language, those whom God has made God's own. God's grace or unmerited favour had worked the change in their lives; grace was the element in which they were now living, the air they were now breathing. From grace they were turning to a perverted gospel. The gospel of God's grace is an exclusive thing; any other way of salvation, any modification of grace means a different gospel. Grace and gospel are complementary terms. No grace no gospel.

The peddlers of 'another gospel' which should not be called gospel, were robbing the Galatian Christians of the comfort and certainty of salvation which only the authentic gospel gives.

Later on in the letter Paul proclaims this gospel. He writes:

The Law has nothing to do with faith. Instead, as the scripture says, 'Whoever does everything the Law requires will live'. But by becoming a curse for us Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law. It promises life only to people who obey its commands. Christ rescued us from the curse that the Law brings...Christ did this in order that the blessing which God promised to Abraham might be given to the Gentiles by means of Christ Jesus, so that through faith we might receive the Spirit promised by God (Gal 3:12-14, TEV).

Note two things in these verses: First, the recurring reference to 'promise' [in the next five verses 'promise' is referred to five times]. We are reminded that God deals savingly with us

always through promises, promises which we are moved by God's Spirit to trust. We cling to God's saving will as revealed in Christ, and to God's promising word. Note, secondly, the reference to the 'blessed exchange'. Deeper aspects of this whole transaction are found in 2 Cor 5:18-21, where it is clear that God has been reconciled not by some payment given to God, but rather that *God* has paid the penalty. God suffers the curse which God's own law demanded. God takes sides with us against Godself. God against God. For us.

I won't enlarge on what the gospel is for Paul or for us; you know it well, thanks be to God. Suffice it to say that the notional or grammatical subject of all gospel sentences is God-in-Christ. 'God so loved the world...' 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'. And so forth. A reversal of subject and object, where we become subject and God object, results in a counterfeit gospel, in which we do something to satisfy/please/ manipulate God so that God must forgive us, bless us, serve us or whatever. Clearly that's no good news. It neither magnifies Christ nor comforts troubled consciences. And there's no room for faith in Christ.

The false gospel which Paul was combating did have room for faith, but not *faith in Christ*. It required faith in one's works of law, which the apostle sets in strong contrast to the 'hearing of faith', that is trusting God's promises fully filled in Christ Jesus. In Gal 4:21 Paul speaks of those who 'desire to be under the law'. He was opposing those who taught that one entered into and maintained a relationship with God by one's own righteous works. The author of the letter to the Hebrews, who was probably battling something like what Paul was battling, makes it very clear in chapter 7 and 8 of that letter that trying to know God and relate to God in the way Paul's opponents

proposed is a return to the old covenant, the law, and is a rejection of the promise.

Essentially this false thinking is behind all 'other gospels' we hear today. Paul would turn in his grave! The gospel is changed into law, or the law is mixed with the gospel – and that's the death of the gospel. Gospel Plus or Gospel Lite are not variations on the gospel. They are not gospel. Bertram: 'Gospel-plus is gospel-minus, no gospel at all'.

It is distressing to see how other gospels permeate the proclamation and practice of the church today. According to Ed Schroeder, who has an inbuilt OG [other gospels] detector, current mission theology asserts that the gospel is not about the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, but about God transforming the broken world 'into an eschatological Eden of peace, justice, and the integrity of creation' (Schroeder, ThTh #369).

Everyday, garden-variety 'other gospels' are represented by such pulpit platitudes as: God accepts you if you try to do your best, if you are sincere in your intentions, if you open your heart to God and let God into your life. Or: God will be merciful to you if only you have recognised just how much you need God. Or: be sure to repent and confess your sins, for when you do, then God is moved to forgive you and make you God's own child.

And thousands more. The bottom line is: you do this and that to please God, then God will do this and that for your good. In the matter of salvation, other gospels say, there's got to be *something* which we do, which we gotta do, to supplement God's saving action. Counterfeit gospels enslave; the true gospel liberates.

Purveyors of 'other gospels' are unhappy with the idea that

everything to do with our salvation is all from God and only from God. Have you noticed that many preachers of 'other gospels' are suspicious of the sacraments, downplay them or even reject them. The sacraments simply are not part of their proclamation. Why might that be? Because the divine actions in the Washing and the Supper are outside of our control. God does what God has promised to do and we have no say in the matter; we don't lift a finger, nor can we. There are no ifs, no provided thats, no negotiations between us and God. Infant baptism is a classic example of what I'm talking about.

God's actions are done to us, from outside ourselves. We don't baptise ourselves; we are baptised, we are passive in the event. God just does it to us, washes us, forgives us, makes us children of God, gives us the faith which grasps the saving promise in the sacraments, and so forth. And still you hear complaints: You mean I have no choice? What about free will? Such complainers just have to have a finger in the salvation pie.

Consider the Supper. We hear the words: this is my body, my blood given for you. Christ gives us himself and his righteousness. It's an alien righteousness, so called because it comes from outside of us. Everything to do with our salvation comes from outside of ourselves. That's a killer blow for the proud old Adam in us, but that's how it is. Who's complaining? We hear Christ's words in the sacrament – given for you, shed for you – we eat and drink, trusting the words, and say: Yes, for me, for me. Amen. Thankyou Jesus. Thankyou. What a blessed relief! God is for me, God is on my side.

No wonder pedlers of 'other gospels' don't like the sacraments. The sacraments are pure gospel. Unmixed. Pure. Pure gospel is the enemy of all false gospels and all false gods. It dethrones all idols.

No other God, no other Name, no other gospel. These three 'no others' go to the heart of our proclamation. The God whose promises we trust is known only in and through Jesus Christ. Apart from this man Jesus there is no saving God. God chose to bring us salvation through this man and through no-one else. Clearly, then, there is salvation in no other than in this Name, the Lord Jesus Christ. And the gospel which we proclaim has at its centre and circumference the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is the 'yes' which affirms all of God's promises (2 Cor 1:20). There is no other Name... no other gospel ... no other God.

JGStrelan

Slacks Creek Queensland

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