

Luther on the Unique Mediatorship of Christ

Robert. W. Bertram

[Address at the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, Tampa, Florida, February, 1987. Later published in The One Mediator, The Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII, 249-262. Edited by H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992. Used by permission.]

NOT AS A MEANS OF GRACE

First we should warn against anachronizing Luther's sixteenth-century terminology. Christ was Mediator, of course, but not in the sense, say, of "mass media." Christ did not mediate in the manner that the "means of grace" (*media gratiae*), the word and the sacraments mediate. About these Luther could say, they are "a means and a way and, as it were, a pipe, through which the Holy Spirit flows and comes into our hearts."¹ Gospel and sacraments are the public means, thus the mass media upon which faith depends, much though our innate *Schwärmerei* (enthusiasm) tempts us to denigrate them in favor of an immediate, privileged subjectivism. As a remedy for such false *Innerlichkeit* (subjectivity) the biblical God "has always observed the custom of giving a visible sign, a person, place or spot, where he desired to be found without fail."²

In Luther's enumerations of such biblical *Gnadenzeichen* (signs of grace) or *Gnadenmittel* (means of grace) he is not in the habit of including Christ, whose mediatorship is of another sort and unique. Christ is not just a revelatory transmitter of grace from God to us-ward, much less the first in a series of such mediations. Rather, he is the only Mediator between God and humanity in "both" directions, also God-ward. At least it would not be typical of Luther to proceed in the manner of a Christian Neoplatonism, ancient or modern, with Christ as a primal emanation or as a "sacrament of the encounter with God," who in turn founds a church, which in turn institutes sacraments, and so on, until the divine has finally trickled down to our nether level. That much the "intermediary" Moses might do, though—in the absence of another quite different kind of mediator—with disastrous results.³

If what we today mean by mediation is the communicating of God's love as something already assumed as a given, waiting only to be made known, then Luther by contrast would probably not speak of Christ as Mediator in that sense, as God's "self-revelation." For that matter, Christ needs revealing quite as much as God does, both of them by the Spirit through the word. But first of all there must be a divine love worth revealing, one which so loves sinners out of their sin as to vindicate God's love as just. True, Luther does say that in Christ is the divine "majesty sweetened and mitigated to your ability to stand it."⁴ And true, such Luther quotations have been invoked to support recent revelationist theologies, though usually only by omitting Luther's

¹ WA 17/2: 460.

² WA 16: 209.

³ WA 40/1: 495-507; LW 26: 319-27.

⁴ WA 40/1: 78-79; LW 26: 30.

prefatory statements about this “human God,” “no other God than this man Jesus Christ.”⁵ Notice, “*human* God, not Barth’s “humane” God.

Yet if it is that “human God” that the gospel mediates to us, in the sense of transmits or reveals, then that in turn only begs a prior mediation of another, not a revelationist sort. What Luther, but perhaps also his papal opponents, still believed to be necessary is a Christ as Mediator in the sense of a medium of exchange, a fair exchange. Christ is the point of transference, the crossover at which God replaces sinful people with righteous ones, thus doing justice, of all things, precisely by doing mercy—not the one without the other. In this “human God” humans become pleasingly God’s, even become junior gods, yet in a way that squares or reconciles God’s compassion altogether with God’s honesty. No one else but Christ provides that kind of mediation, not even his mother or his saints.

When mediating, however, means revealing or transmitting or communicating, then it might be said by Lutherans today as well as by Roman Catholics that Mary and other departed saints do indeed function for us as mediators of revelation or even in an overextended sense as “means of grace.” They are, as the Apology said, “examples of [God’s] mercy, revealing [*significaverit*] his will to save humanity.” “When we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we are encouraged [*erigimur*] to believe that grace does indeed abound more than sin.”⁶ For that communicative, transmissive function a mediator does not need to be a “human God.” Even the Holying Spirit, to whom all such communicating is credited, does not need to be that, God incarnate. But Christ does if he is to be the “one mediator between God and humanity” (I Tim 2:5).

THE JOYOUS EXCHANGE

Probably the one passage not only in the Lutheran Confessions but in all of Luther’s writings that most Lutherans would choose as their favorite image of Christ as “mediator of redemption” is the Small Catechism’s explanation of the second article of the Apostles’ Creed. There the catechumen says of Christ—“true God, ... also true man, ... my Lord”—that “he has redeemed me ... in order that I may be his own.” Notice, both assertions, that Christ is “my Lord” and that I am “his own,” are complementary, inseparable realities in a single mutual relationship. Christ becomes ours, and we his—*der fröhliche Wechsel*. What is rightfully ours—“lost and condemned [creaturehood], ... all sins, ... death, ... the power of the devil”—Christ has not only identified with but has taken on incarnately as his own identity—“with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death.” Conversely, however, and thus exceeding a merely one-directional, imputational atonement, we in turn now “live under him in his kingdom and serve him.” From our side, too, we gain as ours what is rightfully his: “everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” “Even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity,” so therefore do we.⁷

OUR SIN BECOMES CHRIST’S

⁵ WA 40/1:78; LW 26:29.

⁶ AP 21:4-5; BC 229; BS 317.

⁷ Small Catechism 2, 4; BC 345; BS511.

What follows is a sampling from Luther's "joyous exchange" Christology, restricted in the interest of brevity to only one side of the transaction, namely, to how God in Christ, the "kindly Mediator," so intervened historically as to "purchase and win" us as "his own" and, since "us" here means us sinners, how he assumed our sinnerhood. Even such a restricted sample requires that we turn to something more extended than Luther's Small Catechism (which on this subject amounts to only one sentence), piecing together some scattered references from Luther's lectures on Galatians in 1531.

We confront a problem in predication. By reason of what can Christ be both the sinless God-man and at the same time a sinner? And we encounter Luther's characteristic solution. What finally makes the predication meaningful and real is that it is soteriologically necessary. Unless Christ was our sinner, we ourselves must be; but since through him we are not sinners, it follows that he was a sinner and had to be. "Our sin must be Christ's own sin, or we shall perish eternally." "If he is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them. 'But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!' Amen."⁸

Just as Luther's affirming Christ's sinnerhood is necessitated by soteriological, not only christological considerations, so the opponents' denying Christ's sinnerhood is likewise inspired by their contrary soteriology. And there, for Luther, lies their "infamy and shame." The papists' real motive for clearing Christ of sin, Luther claims, is not to honor Christ but rather to promote "justification by works." "They want ... to unwrap Christ and to unclot him from our sins." However, "to make him innocent" is "to burden and overwhelm ourselves with our own sins, and to behold them not in Christ but in ourselves." And the reason the papists do this is that they prefer to have their sins removed and replaced, not in Christ but within their own selves—"by some opposing motivations, namely, by love" or by the sort of faith that is actualized in love. It is this wish of theirs to be valuable inherently and biographically that prompts them to protest that he "is not a criminal and a thief but righteous and holy," or that "it is highly absurd and insulting to call the Son of God a sinner and a curse." But, says Luther, "this is to abolish Christ and make him useless."⁹

Ironically, it was the Scholastics' (and the Scriptures') whole profound understanding of moral predication, that same grammar of legality which insures that our sins are ours and no one else's and least of all the Son of God's, which now furnishes Luther with the key for discovering the way that sin, our sin, belonged instead to the Son of God. True, our sins did not belong to him in the sense that he committed them. Still, it is that kind of culpability, a guilt by active commission, to which Luther appeals for a comparison to underscore how real a sinner Christ was. Our sins "are as much Christ's own *as if* he himself had committed them."¹⁰ Our sins are Christ's not by means merely of some transcendent, superhistorical imposition in which God simply "regards" our sins as his or simply "imputes" our sins to him, but by means also of his

⁸ WA 40/1:435, 438; LW 26:278, 280. Much of what follows appeared earlier and in greater detail in my *How Theology Is About Man: Luther Since Barth* (unpublished doctoral dissertation; The University of Chicago, 1963)195-221.

⁹ WA 40/1:432-46; LW 26:279-86.

¹⁰ WA 40/1:435; LW 26:278.

own immanent, historical “bearing” of those sins. He did not commit them, of course. But that does not mean for Luther that there is only one other way by which our sins can then be his, namely, by divine imputation. No, Luther comes as close as he can to saying our sins are Christ’s by reason of his committing them yet without actually saying that. And as we shall see, Luther adopts this procedure not only for rhetorical effect but for an important theological purpose.

SIX WAYS TO PREDICATE SIN OF CHRIST

How much our sins truly are “Christ’s own” Luther elaborates in at least half a dozen ways, recalling strangely the very ways in which our sin ought ordinarily be “our” own. These half-dozen variations on how our sin is rightfully and culpably predicated of Christ (culminating in the reminder that his guilt was after all intentional) will occupy us in the next six sections of this essay. Then in the essay’s concluding section we shall note how it was precisely this recourse to ordinary moral predication in his portrayal of Christ’s sinnerhood that enables Luther finally to explode that type of predication in his discussion of Christ’s surprise victory. In other words, it was just because Christ “was made under the law” that he could be the death of the law—the law and its whole tyrannizing mode of predication.

For in the end Christ’s intentional self-incrimination, which rightfully rendered him guilty before the law, was the selfsame intention that in turn incriminated and annihilated the law—his intention, namely, of invincible divine mercy. Here in the selfsameness of Christ’s loving will, willing to be a sinner in order to be a Redeemer, Luther finds the secret bond that unites the personal subject with its paradoxical predicate, the sinless God-man with the sins of all sinners. When that merciful determination of God becomes immanent in this Man in this law-bound world, it becomes a guilty will, but only temporarily—for an ulterior “delightful” purpose.

UNDER THE LAW

For example, first of all, our sins are so much Christ’s own that we dare not say he bore merely our punishment. What he bore was our sin. If he did not, the law had no reason to punish him. Luther refuses to explain away Paul’s statement that Christ was made a curse for us or that he was made sin for us, by so diluting “sin” and “curse” that they mean merely the “consequences” of sin. The critics who “want to deny that [Christ] is a sinner and a curse” prefer to say rather that he “underwent the *torments* of sin and death.” But that is not all that Paul says, and “surely these words of Paul are not without purpose.” Neither are the words of John the Baptist, about “the Lamb of God.” And remember the way Isaiah speaks of Christ: “God has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Of course, for Christ to bear iniquities, Luther agrees, does include his bearing our punishment. “But *why* is Christ punished? Is it not because he has sin and bears sins?” What is it that causes the law, the whole retributive order of things, to retaliate with punishment at all? What else but the culprit’s sin and accursedness? It is for that reason that the law says to Christ: “Let every sinner die! And therefore, Christ, if you want to reply that you are guilty and that you bear the punishment, you must bear the sin and the curse as well.” For that reason Paul was correct in applying to Christ “this general law from Moses.” To predicate sin and accursedness of Christ is lawful and rational: “Christ hung on a tree, therefore Christ is a

curse of God”¹¹—a lawfully accursed sinner, not merely the innocent bearer of sin’s punishments.

FRATERNIZED WITH SINNERS

Second, our sins are so much Christ’s own that, when he fraternized with sinners, he stood himself condemned for the company he kept. And rightly so. For, says Luther, “a magistrate regards someone as a criminal and punishes him if he catches him among thieves, even though the man has never committed anything evil.” “Among thieves,” indeed. Jesus was consorting with the enemies of God. He was a *socius peccatorum*. Of this Christ Luther complains, “the sophists deprive us when they segregate Christ from sins and from sinners and set him forth to us only as an example to be imitated.”¹² They err in their too aloof definition of Christ, but also in their too sanguine definition of “the world,” in which Christ dwelt. For what is required here is that “you have two definitions, of ‘world’ and of ‘Christ.’” That is to say, we must remember that Christ delivered us “not only from this world but from this ‘evil world,’” “from this evil age, which is an obedient servant and a willing follower of its god, the devil.”¹³

What links sinner to sinner in this worldwide syndicate of evil is not merely that they all misbehave in the same way, or even that they all aid and abet one another. Rather, they are all under the tyrannical jurisdiction of a common demonic lord so that, whatever their efforts at good behavior, “the definition still stands: You are still in the present evil age.” What makes it evil is that “whatever is in this age is subject to the evil of the devil, who rules the entire world.”¹⁴ The company of sinners is a kingdom, a realm, of evil. This realm, being under divine curse, is off-limits. Yet it is into this realm that Christ came. “He joined himself to the company of the accursed.” “And being joined with us who were accursed, he became a curse for us.” “Therefore when the law found him among thieves it condemned and executed him as a thief.”¹⁵

“I HAVE COMMITTED THE WORLD’S SIN”

Third, our sins are so much Christ’s own that, no matter who committed them originally, all of them have now been committed in effect by Jesus Christ personally. The sins he bore, as John says, are nothing less than “the sins of the world.”¹⁶ And “the sin of the world,” as Luther understands the phrase, is not sin in general, an abstract universal. It is exhaustive of every actual sinner and sin in history: “not only my sins and yours, but the sins of the entire world, past, present, and future.” Luther represents Christ as saying, “I have committed the sins that all men have committed,”¹⁷ “the sin of Paul, the former blasphemer, ... of Peter, who denied Christ, of David, ... an adulterer and a murderer and who caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord.”¹⁸

¹¹ WA 40/1: 432-36, 448; LW 26:276-79, 287.

¹² WA 40/1:434; LW 26:277-78.

¹³ WA 40/1:96-97; LW 26:41-42.

¹⁴ WA 40/1:94-95; LW 26:39-40.

¹⁵ WA 40/1:434-40, 451; LW 26:278-81. 290.

¹⁶ WA 40/1:261. LW 26:151.

¹⁷ WA 40/1:438, 443; LW 26:278-81, 290.

¹⁸ WA 40/1:433; LW 26:277.

Still, even in the face of such specific enumerations, we in our false humility are wont to exempt Christ from our sins, at least from those sins of ours that seem to us more than Christ should be expected to bear and which, alas, we alone must bear.

It is easy for you to say and believe that Christ, the Son of God, was given for the sins of Peter, Paul and other saints, who seem to us to have been worthy of this grace. But it is very hard for you, who regard yourself as unworthy of this grace, to say and believe from your heart that Christ was given for *your* many great sins.

But false humility is what this is, and disdain for Christ. Luther shows small sympathy for the neo-pharisaic pseudo-publican who prays, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” and yet who means no more by “sinner” than the doer of trivial sins, “an imitation and a counterfeit sinner.” “Christ was given, not for sham or counterfeit sins, nor yet for small sins, but for great and huge sins, not for one or two sins but for all sins.” “And unless you are part of the company of those who say ‘our sins,’ ... there is no salvation for you.”¹⁹

Conversely, it is only because “the sin of the world” is no mere abstraction but an enumerative totality of every real sin and sinner that Luther can perform the inference he repeatedly does: Christ is “the one who took away the sins of the world; if the sin of the world is taken away, then it is taken away also from me.”²⁰ Accordingly, Luther describes the Father sending his Son: “Be Peter the denier, Paul the persecutor, ... David the adulterer, the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise, the thief on the cross; in short, be the person ... who has committed the sins of all men.”²¹

SIN ITSELF

Fourth, our sins are so much Christ’s own that, by his acknowledging them as his, he himself—not only the sins he bore, but he who bore them—becomes a sin and a curse. This drastic conclusion is suggested by Paul’s strong use of “curse” in its substantive rather than its adjectival sense. Christ is said to have been made a curse and not merely accursed, not just a sinner but sin itself. And is not this the way it is, Luther recalls, whenever “a sinner really comes to a knowledge of himself?” He can no longer distinguish nicely between his sin, on the one hand, and himself, on the other, as though the two were still separable. “That is, he seems to himself to be not only miserable but misery itself; not only a sinner and an accursed one, but sin and the curse itself.” And not only is that what he *seems* to be. “A man who feels these things in earnest *really becomes (fit plane)* sin, death, and the curse itself.”²²

Luther is all but saying the same thing of Christ. Although Christ did not commit sin, he so acknowledged our sins as his own and himself accursed because of them that this very

¹⁹ WA 40/1:86-87; LW 26:281, 284.

²⁰ WA 40/1:261; LW 26:151.

²¹ WA 40/1:261; LW 26:280.

²² WA 40/1:449; LW 26:288. Italics added.

acknowledgment alienates God and makes Christ a sinner “not only adjectivally but substantively.”²³

All our evils ... overwhelmed him once, for a brief time, and flooded in over his head, as in Psalm 88:7 and 16 the prophet laments in Christ’s name when he says: “Thy wrath lies heavy upon me and thou doest overwhelm me with all thy waves.” And: “Thy wrath has swept over me, thy dread assaults destroy me.”²⁴

Luther can even say of Christ: “He was not acting in his own person now; now he is not the Son of God, born of the virgin, but he is a sinner.”²⁵ For that is the way it is with the law. “All it does is to increase sin, accuse, frighten, threaten with death, and disclose God as a wrathful judge who damns sinners.” And “where terror and a sense of sin, death, and the wrath of God are present, there is certainly no righteousness, nothing heavenly, and no God.” In the case of Christ, the law raged even more fiercely than it does against us. “It accused him of blasphemy and sedition.” It frightened him so horribly that he experienced a greater anguish than any man has ever experienced.” Witness his “bloody sweat, the comfort of the angel, his solemn prayer in the garden, and finally ... that cry of misery on the cross, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’”²⁶ “A man who feels these things in earnest really becomes sin, death, and the curse itself.”²⁷

IN HIS BODY

Fifth, our sins are so much Christ’s own that he bore them not only psychologically but also, as we do, bodily—“in his body.” That prepositional phrase, sometimes quoted directly from I Pet 2:24, occurs so often and so habitually in Luther’s christological discussions that its very frequency demonstrates how somatically Luther conceived of sin, whether ours or Christ’s. There is for Christ no bearing of our sins without his doing so “in his body.” Why?

The function that Luther most usually ascribes to Christ’s bearing our sins “in his body” is that by his bodily dying he put those sins in his body to “death.” “He bore and sustained them in his own body,”²⁸ where, by his death and apparent defeat, they were exterminated. Christ “conquers and destroys these monsters—sin, death, and the curse—without weapon or battle, in his own body and in himself, as Paul enjoys saying (Col 2:15): ‘He disarmed the principalities and powers triumphing over them in him.’”²⁹ “All these things happen ... through Christ the crucified, on whose shoulders lie all the evils of the human race— ... all of which die in him, because by his death he kills them.”³⁰

²³ WA 40/1:448; LW 26:288.

²⁴ WA 40/1:452; LW 26:290.

²⁵ WA 40/1:433; LW 26:277.

²⁶ WA 40/1:554, 565, 567; LW 26:363, 370, 372.

²⁷ WA 40/1:449; LW 26:288.

²⁸ WA 40/1:449; LW 26:288-289.

²⁹ WA 40/1:440; LW 26:282.

³⁰ WA 40/1:273; LW 26:160.

Something else remains to be said. Christ bears our sins in his body not only because they are thereby destroyed but also because they are ours. There is no question in Luther's mind that Christ could have vanquished the tyrants without submitting to the cross, by an outright exercise of his divine sovereignty. But such an alternative completely overlooks how intimately his victory was to be ours and how it was therefore to be achieved "in our sinful person."³¹ Luther has Christ saying,

I could have overcome the law by my supreme authority, without any injury to me; ... but for the sake of you, who were under the law, I assumed your flesh; ... I went down into the same imprisonment ... under which you were serving as captives.³²

That is why "all men, even the apostles or prophets or patriarchs, would have remained under the curse (1) if Christ had not put himself in opposition to sin, death, the curse ..., and (2) *if he had not overcome them in his own body.*"³³ For Christ does not bear our sin as ours unless he assumes "our sinful person," and our sinful person is inseparable from our bodies.³⁴ "The old man ... is born of flesh and blood."³⁵ John Osborne has captured a characteristic insight of Luther's in the line, spoken by Hans to his son: "You can't ever get away from your body because that's what you live in, and it's all you've got to die in."³⁶

SPONTANEOUSLY

Sixth, our sin is so much Christ's own that, since it is his by choice, it incriminates his motives, his innermost self. Because he attached himself to our sins "willingly" (*sponte*), he has only himself to thank for the fact that he is liable for them. "Because he took upon himself our sins, not by compulsion but by his own free will, it was right for him to bear the punishment and the wrath of God."³⁷ The deliberate, intentional character of Christ's sinnerhood seems to illustrate most graphically for Luther how truly Christ bore our sin "in himself." And it may be that at this point Luther's meaning comes closest to being intelligible to an age like our own with its definitions of selfhood in terms of "responsibility" and "decision." "Modern man," Bultmann reminded us, "bears the sole responsibility for his own feeling, thinking and willing."³⁸ Similarly, in his lectures on Galatians Luther can agree with the moral philosophers that what characterizes a man's actions as really and personally his is the ethical quality of his motives, his rational will.³⁹ In an earlier quote we heard Luther speak of Christ as a *socius peccatorum* and heard him explain, "Thus a magistrate regards someone as a criminal and punishes him if he catches him among thieves, even though the man has never committed anything evil." But in the

³¹ WA 40/1:443; LW 26:284.

³² WA 40/1:565; LW 26:370.

³³ WA 40/1:447; LW 26:287. Italics added.

³⁴ See how, in connection with Gal 2:20, Luther understands *persona* (WA 40/1:281-82; LW 26:166) as inseparable from being "present in the flesh, living your familiar life, having five senses, and doing everything in this physical life that any other man does." WA 40/1:288; LW 26:170.

³⁵ WA 40/1:45; LW 26:7.

³⁶ John Osborne, *Luther* (New York: The New American Library of American Literature, 1963) 50.

³⁷ WA 40/1:443; LW 26:284.

³⁸ H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth* (trans. R. H. Fuller; London: SPCK, 1957) 6.

³⁹ WA 40/1:434, 436; LW 26:277-79. Italics added.

case of Christ this was no arbitrary guilt by association. Christ could not plead that, though he was indeed among sinners, he was there in innocent ignorance or against his will. For as Luther adds immediately, “Christ was not only *found* among sinners; but of his *own free will* ... he *wanted* to be an associate of sinners.” Accordingly, “the law came and said: ‘Christ, if you want to reply that you are guilty and that you bear the punishment, you must bear the sin and the curse as well.’”⁴⁰

A MOST JOYOUS DUEL

It was not for nothing that Luther invoked every biblical description of Christ’s sinnerhood which would show that, according to the moral grammar of predication, Christ was rightfully and legally subject to the law’s condemnation, that our sins “are as much Christ’s own as if he himself had committed them.”⁴¹ For by granting the legal order its maximum due, it is now drawn into the fray, not at its worst—not as the emasculated legalism of the “Scholastics,” not as some miscarriage of justice by the Sanhedrin—but at its best. As a consequence, it is the divine law in its own holy integrity—that is, as it justly condemns every sinner, no matter how pious, as the enemy of God—which now does what it has to do to this *peccator peccatorum* (sinner of sinners). And it is this same law at its holiest and best which, in the *mirabile duellum* that ensues, is eternally discredited. The other antagonists as well—sin, devil, curse, wrath, death—are present not as caricatures but at the height of their power.

It is only because the enemies involved are the real enemies—the ones, in other words, with whom people have to reckon for life and death before God—that the *mirabile duellum* becomes indeed a “very joyous duel,” *iucundissimum duellum*.⁴² Here we find Luther applying his own hermeneutical rule, exploiting the antithesis of the opponents in order not only to “reveal their infamy and shame”⁴³ but to celebrate in turn our “knowledge of Christ and most delightful comfort.”⁴⁴ The whole legal mode of predication, so elaborately employed for what seemed a merely negative detailing of Christ’s sinnerhood, now “by contrast serves to magnify the grace of God and the blessings of Christ.”⁴⁵

OUT OF GREAT LOVE

“The grace of God and the blessings of Christ”—that is the secret of the *iucundissimum duellum*. Or rather what is the secret is that this divine grace, “the blessing,” is locked in mortal combat with the curse “in this one person.” “Now let us see,” asks Luther, “how two such extremely contrary things come together in one person.”⁴⁶ The answer, as might be expected, is that when they do come together it is the divine powers—divine righteousness, life, and blessing—which

⁴⁰ WA 40/1:434, 436; LW 26:277-79. Italics added.

⁴¹ WA 40/1:435; LW 26:278.

⁴² WA 40/1:279; LW 26:164.

⁴³ WA 40/1:238; LW 26:136.

⁴⁴ WA 40/1:434; LWw 26:278.

⁴⁵ WA 40/1:238; LW 26:135.

⁴⁶ WA 40/1:438; LW26:280-281.

of course prevail over the lesser contraries, sin and death and the curse.⁴⁷ But the secret, indeed the prerequisite, of the victory is that it all occurs “in his own body and in himself.”⁴⁸ Both sets of contraries are really his. If the sin had not been his, as truly as the righteousness was, the law could easily have avoided its blasphemy against him by cursing only the one and not the other. However, “he joined God and man in one person. And being joined in us who were accursed, he became a curse for us; and he concealed his blessing in our sin, death and curse, which condemned and killed *him*.”⁴⁹

Christ’s intentional self-incrimination, his personal decision to attach himself to the enemies of God—the reason he was cursed, and rightfully—was the selfsame decision of the selfsame person (the merciful decision of the divine person) which for the law to curse would incriminate the law as blasphemous. The wonder, therefore, is not just that the curse was conquered by the blessing. The prior wonder is: Why should the curse, the law, want to attack the blessing in the first place? Luther’s answer is that because God’s blessing, and our sin were so intimately joined in this one person (as intimately as the “person” and his “work”⁵⁰), therefore the curse, which had no choice but to condemn our sin, necessarily condemned the divine blessing as well. “This circumstance, ‘in himself,’ makes the duel more amazing and outstanding; for it shows that such great things were to be achieved in the one and only person of Christ.”⁵¹

We began the essay by asking, as a problem in theological predication, by reason of what can such a contradictory predicate as sin, our sin at that, really and meaningfully belong to Christ, this “purest of persons, ... God and man?”⁵² Luther’s answer must finally be, by reason of Christ’s love. He “did this because of his great love; for Paul says [of Christ, in Gal 2:20]: ‘who loved me.’”⁵³ In the last analysis the explanation of Christ’s paradoxical sinnerhood is simply that “he is nothing but sheer, infinite mercy, which gives and is given”; “the kind of lover who gives himself for us and ... who interposes himself as the Mediator between God and us miserable sinners.”⁵⁴

Yet to speak of Christ as the “Mediator between *God* and us miserable sinners” seems to suggest that while Christ may lovingly have predicated our sins of himself, “God” may not concur in such a predication. Accordingly, the final explanation, which really and meaningfully predicates our sin of Christ, is that same loving will which he who “is God by nature” shares with his Father. “The indescribable and inestimable mercy and love of God” who saw “that we were being held under a curse and that we could not be liberated, ... heaped all the sins of all men upon him.” The culpable decision by which Christ attached himself to the enemies of God is simultaneously the decision of this very God. “Of his own free will and by the *will of the Father*

⁴⁷ “For if the blessing in Christ could be conquered, then God himself would be conquered. But this is impossible.” WA40/1:440; LW 26:282.

⁴⁸ WA 40/1:440; LW26:282.

⁴⁹ WA 40/1:451; LW 26:290. Italics added.

⁵⁰ WA40/1:560; LW 26:367.

⁵¹ WA 40/1:440; LW 26:282.

⁵² WA 40/1:448; LW 26:287-88.

⁵³ WA 40/1:297; LW 26:177.

⁵⁴ WA 40/1:298-99; LW 26:178-79.

he wanted to be an associate of sinners.”⁵⁵ In fact, it is “only by taking hold of Christ, who, by the will of the Father, has given himself into the death for our sins” that we are “drawn and carried directly to the Father.”⁵⁶

The human heart is too limited to comprehend, much less to describe, the great depths and burning passion of divine love toward us. Indeed, the very greatness of divine mercy produces not only difficulty in believing but incredulity. Not only do I hear that God Almighty, the Creator of all, is good and merciful; but I hear that the Supreme Majesty cared so much for me ... that he did not spare his own Son, ... in order that he might hang in the midst of thieves and become sin and a curse for me, the sinner and accursed one, and in order that I might be made righteous, blessed, and a son and heir of God. Who can adequately proclaim this goodness of God? Not even all the angels.⁵⁷

In his Apology to the Augsburg Confession Melanchthon accused the current cultus of promoting departed saints from “mediators of intercession” to “mediators of redemption,” thus displacing Christ or, worse, reconceiving him as a dreaded judge “approachable” only through nearer mediators. Quite a different danger that neither Melanchthon nor Luther seems to have reckoned with, nor yet needed to, is the sort of reductionist Christology in which the saints are not so much promoted to christological responsibilities as Christ is demoted to theirs. In this alternative all Christ does is what the saints admittedly do, too: transmit, communicate, reveal us-ward—in that sense “mediate”—a pre-assured divine grace that would have obtained anyway, with or without Christ, except that we might not have known about it.

On such a view, from the outset there never was any real alternative to divine mercy being like divine judgment or wrath, which only in Christ—that is, in God as a human being—is historically overcome for all other humans. Against such a tepid christological background the danger of the saints competing with Christ is probably a nonproblem because by contrast with more classical Christologies this revelationist Christ has little to do that is all that unique and might not just as well be shared or delegated among his members. The question that does remain—and the old controversy over the cultus of the saints may help to reinstate that question—is this: What is it about Christ’s mediatorship that is unique to deity, incarnate deity? That question faces today’s Lutherans as well as Roman Catholics.

Robert W. Bertram

⁵⁵ WA 40/1:437, 434; LW 26:280, 278. Italics added.

⁵⁶ WA 40/1:99; LW 26:42.

⁵⁷ WA40/1:455; LW 26:292.