

On the Question of Salvation Outside the Church: Luther vs. Luther (Part 1 of 3)



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Co-missioners,

Time was when would-be Lutheran pastors were required to learn a smattering of Latin on their way through school. Those who did will have encountered the following phrase at some point in

their studies: *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. “Outside the Church there is no salvation.” Later they ran into grief with their confirmation classes (or at least the brighter and sassier members thereof) when they taught this as dogma, for dogma it was. In much of the Church it still is. Not so in mainline Protestant circles, where an alternative doctrine of universalism is fast ascending to dogmatic status. Bob Bertram complained about this in a series of theses entitled “Postmodernity’s CRUX,” published posthumously in 2008 as the appendix to *A Time for Confessing* (Lutheran Quarterly Books/Eerdmans). He did so, as always, on exquisitely Lutheran grounds. One might argue that he also danced as only Bertram could around the core question: can those outside the Church be saved? Can those who think as Luther thought admit to this as a possibility, if nothing else?

In that same year, 2008, Kurt Hendel addressed this very issue in an article for *Currents in Theology and Mission* [1]. His title: “‘No Salvation Outside the Church’ in Light of Luther’s Dialectic of the Hidden and Revealed God.” We are delighted to be able, with his permission, to push this out a second time through *Thursday Theology*. It’s a splendid antidote to the glibness that characterizes the salvation debate in current Lutheran circles. Can one speak of an antidote as lengthy? If so, it’s also that, and so we administer it in three parts, beginning today. We’ve done a bit of trimming on the original and have also attached our own somewhat cheeky title, for which we hope Kurt will forgive us.

A reminder, if one is needed, that Kurt has devoted his long teaching career—at Seminex and LSTC—to Reformation history.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

On the Question of Salvation Outside the Church: Luther vs. Luther (Part 1 of 3)

By Kurt K. Hendel

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Christ commanded His disciples to be His witnesses. [2] The church’s vocation therefore seems to be quite clear. Indeed, throughout much of its history the Christian community has responded to Christ’s call with a desire to be obedient and with the conviction that witnessing Christ is essential for the salvation of humanity.

The meaning of Christ’s command and the evangelistic heritage of the church have, however, inspired a lively and persistent debate within the Christian community in recent decades. Missiologists, mission executives, church leaders, and members of Christian faith communities have expressed various opinions and pursued a variety of strategies that seek to clarify and implement the church’s contemporary mission in the world and to evaluate the role of evangelism in that mission. As the debates continue and different strategies and programs are created and implemented, crucial questions emerge about what it means to be Christ’s witnesses, whether the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world is still the church’s calling, and, ultimately, how salvation is understood and whether the church is to be an instrument of salvation in the world. These

questions challenge the church's very identity.



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The claim that there is no salvation outside the church has been an integral part of the Christian tradition since the time of Cyprian (c. 200-258 CE), the Bishop of Carthage in North Africa during the third century. While this assertion continues to be affirmed within the Christian community, it has also inspired substantial debate. Missiologists like Paul Knitter, a leading contemporary spokesperson of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue, have rejected such an exclusive claim and argued for a universalistic perspective that obviously challenges traditional understandings of evangelism and of God's relationship with humanity. The Lutheran community, especially in the northern hemisphere, is also discussing whether evangelism, interreligious dialogue, accompaniment, or the quest for justice should be the ultimate priority of the church as it pursues its vocation. Some see all of these callings in a symbiotic relationship, while others see them in tension or are inclined to insist on the priority of some over others.

The theological, missiological, ecclesial, and ecumenical implications of Cyprian's and of the church's traditional claim that there is no salvation outside the church are varied, and this claim presents the contemporary church, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with complex challenges as the community of faith strives to carry out God's mission in the world. What, then, is the church to do? How are God's people to be witnesses of Christ? What does such a witness entail? Is the proclamation of the gospel still central to that witness? In responding to these questions, this presentation explores the Lutheran confessional heritage and the theological perspectives of Martin Luther.

For the sake of transparency, it is crucial to confirm that the assertion that there is no salvation outside the church is consistent with the Lutheran Confessions' and with Luther's evangelical perspective. I intend to propose, however, that Luther's dialectic of the *Deus revelatus* (revealed God) and the *Deus absconditus* (hidden God) provides the contemporary Lutheran communities with resources to amend and reinterpret this assertion. Such a reinterpretation is warranted as particularly Lutheran Christians seek to be faithful to Christ's Great Commission, while avoiding the triumphal, exclusive, and imperial spirit that has too often characterized the Western church's attitudes toward other religions and, thus, has also impacted its missionary enterprise. As we consider these important matters, it is advisable to remember that Luther's dialectical doctrine of God also affirms the Christocentric perspective and the evangelistic commitment that is inspired by faithfulness to Christ's call to be His witnesses. Such faithfulness necessitates the church's continuing conviction that the gospel remains God's ultimate and absolutely essential good news that is addressed to all of humanity.

Luther clearly supports the assertion that there is no salvation

outside the church. It is either explicitly or implicitly articulated in much of his theological corpus. Nowhere is it stated more clearly, however, than in a normative text of the Reformation movement, a text that was ultimately included among the Lutheran confessional writings—namely, the *Large Catechism*. In his discussion of the third article of the Creed, Luther makes a variety of statements which clarify his position. While criticizing the Roman church for fostering human works as a means of obtaining grace and salvation and thereby obscuring Christ's redemptive activity and the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification, Luther asserts,

Where he [the Holy Spirit] does not cause it [the Word] to be preached and does not awaken the understanding of it in the heart, all is lost... For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, apart from which no one can come to the Lord Christ. [3]

Stressing the necessity of forgiveness in the lives of sinners, he warns: "Outside this Christian community, however, where there is no gospel, there is also no forgiveness, there is also no holiness." [4] However, his clearest statement occurs in the conclusion of his explanation of the Creed when Luther praises the Creed as a careful explication of the essence, will, and work of the Holy Trinity. He points out that

...we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is the mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit. [5]

The saving self-revelation of God in Christ occurs only within the community of faith. Hence Luther concludes with this striking assertion:

These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God—nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. [6]

It is not surprising that Luther makes this bold assertion, for it is clearly consistent with the chief articles of his evangelical theology, namely, his Christology and the related doctrine of justification. On the basis of his biblical studies and his own spiritual struggles, those *Anfechtungen* [7] which were a consistent aspect of his faith journey, Luther articulated a doctrine of justification which he considered to be a faithful explication and proclamation of the gospel. St. Paul was Luther's chief teacher and provided him with the "grammar of faith," as Kenneth Hagen has argued. [8] The impact of St. Augustine is, of course, also readily apparent in Luther's thought. The Reformer maintained that since the fall all human beings are sinners whose nature is radically corrupted by original sin, which is hereditary and which manifests itself in sinful deeds. [9] While humans have difficulty obeying the second table of the law, especially as Luther explicates the Decalogue in his Catechisms, [10] they are absolutely incapable of fulfilling the first table, especially the first commandment. [11] Thus, natural human beings are concupiscent; that is, they are inclined to sin, and they are enemies of God who have lost the freedom of the will and the image of God. Echoing St. Augustine, Luther insists that while Adam and Eve were able not to sin (*posse non peccare*) as well as to sin (*posse peccare*),

their progeny are no longer able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). Hence, they stand under God's just condemnation and are wholly dependent on God for their salvation. God has, of course, redeemed humanity through the Christ, who is fully divine and fully human, [12] who became incarnate and took on humanity's sin and punishment, and who was victorious over all the powers that separate human beings from God. [13] It is only because of Christ's redemptive work that life and salvation are once again human possibilities. They cannot be earned or merited, however, but are free gifts received in and through faith, for the sake of Christ. [14] Faith is absolutely essential, for only faith trusts God's promises and, therefore, receives what is promised. Faith is not a human work, but, like all other life-giving and life-sustaining blessings, it is a gift of God. It is created in individuals by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. Those means, the Word and the sacraments, are God's gifts to the church and are available only in and through the community of faith. Thus, the church is the arena of God's justifying activity. Those who come to faith receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation and are incorporated into the church, the body of Christ. There their faith is also nurtured through the Word and the sacraments. The members of the church, both individually and corporately, then become means of the means of grace and agents of salvation to those who are not yet part of the body of Christ. This is, for Luther, the church's ultimate purpose and function.

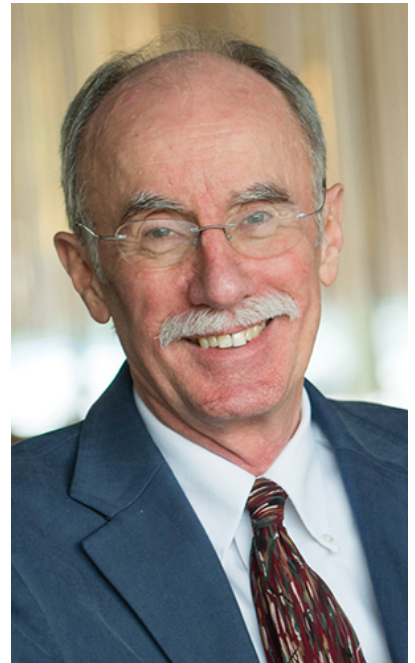
Luther's conclusion that those outside the church face God's wrath and condemnation therefore reflects his evangelical theology. Indeed, the theological logic behind his conclusion can be traced through a series of assertions:

The Reformer was convinced that Christ alone redeems (*solus Christus*). The benefits Christ has won for us are received only through faith (*sola fide*) because of God's grace (*sola gratia*).

Faith is created by the Holy Spirit only through the means of grace. Those means are available only in the church. All who receive the gift of faith become members of the church where their faith is then nurtured through Word and sacraments. It is for these reasons that there is no salvation outside the church.

The various assertions that Luther made which led him to that conclusion, except the last one, are indeed necessitated by his evangelical theology. This contention will be supported later in this essay. However, a significant dilemma of Lutheran, evangelical theology must first be addressed because it is related to Luther's notion of the *deus absconditus* (the hidden God), and it has implications for the topic under discussion.

–to be continued



Kurt Hendel

Endnotes

[1] *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Volume 35, Number 4 (August, 2008), pp. 248-257. Used by permission

[2] Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8

[3] Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), The Large Catechism, The Creed , III, 436,45. Hereafter referred to as *Book of Concord*.

[4] *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, The Creed, III, 438,56.

[5] *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, The Creed, III, 440,65.

[6] *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, The Creed, III, 440,66.

[7] See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, tr. by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 76-82. Brecht provides a concise but helpful discussion of the role of the *Anfechtungen* in Luther's spiritual quest.

[8] Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as Seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993).

[9] *Book of Concord*, The Smalcald Articles, III,1, pp. 310-311, 1-3.

[10] *Book of Concord*, The Small Catechism, The Ten Commandments, pp. 351,1-354,22; The Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, pp. 386,1-431,333.

[11] *Book of Concord*, The Smalcald Articles, III,2, 312,4.

[12] Luther's most incisive Christological writings dealing with

the two natures of Christ are his Eucharistic treatises which he addressed to Huldreich Zwingli and his supporters. See especially "That These Words of Christ, 'This is my Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics" and "Concerning Christ's Supper" in Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, eds., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), Vol. 37. Hereafter referred to as LW.

[13] *Book of Concord*, The Large Catechism, Creed, II, 434,25-435,33.

[14] *Book of Concord*, The Smalcald Articles, II, 301,1-5.

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