



## The Preached and Unpreached God

From Martin Luther's "Bondage of the Will" (1525) in Luther's Works, vol. 33<sup>1</sup>

*In this section of Luther's answer to Erasmus of Rotterdam's Diatribe on Free Will (in which he chides Luther for his theology and behavior), the reformer speaks about God who works death and the God who finds death. He asserts that God operates differently in each case. [Commentary in notes by Ken Sundet Jones.]*

*[God Preached, God Hidden; God's Will Revealed, God's Will Secret]*

This word, therefore, "I desire not the death of a sinner," has as you see no other object than the preaching and offering of divine mercy throughout the world, a mercy that only the afflicted and those tormented by the fear of death receive with joy and gratitude, because in them the law has already fulfilled its office and brought the knowledge of sin. Those, however, who have not yet experienced the office of the law, and neither recognize sin nor feel death, have no use for the mercy promised by that word. But why some are touched by the law and others are not, so that the former accept and the latter despise the offered grace, is another question and one not dealt with by Ezekiel in this passage. For he is here speaking of the preached and offered mercy of God, not of that hidden and awful will of God whereby he ordains by his own counsel which and what sort of persons he wills to be recipients and partakers of his preached and offered mercy. This will is not to be inquired into, but reverently adored, as by far the most awe-inspiring secret of the Divine Majesty, reserved for himself alone and forbidden to us much more religiously than any number of Corycian caverns.<sup>2</sup>

When now Diatribe pertly asks, "Does the good Lord deplore the death of his people, which he himself works in them?"—for this really does seem

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, [Luther's Works, Vol. 33: Career of the Reformer III](#), ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 138–140.

<sup>2</sup> Luther is responding to Erasmus argument in *Diatribe*: "There are secret places in Scripture into which God has not wished us to penetrate too deeply, and if we try to do so, then the deeper we go the darker it gets, so that in this way may be led to acknowledge both the unfathomable majesty of the divine wisdom and the weakness of the human mind. It is like that cavern near Corycos of which Pomponius mela tells, which begins by alluring and drawing one to itself by the pleasantness of its aspect, and then as one goes deeper a certain terror and majest of the divine presence inhabiting it makes one draw back." [LW 33:26 n. 15]

absurd—we reply, as we have already said, that we have to argue in one way about God or the will of God as preached, revealed, offered, and worshiped, and in another way about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not offered, not worshiped. To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours. For here the saying truly applies, “Things above us are no business of ours.” And lest anyone should think this is a distinction of my own, I am following Paul, who writes to the Thessalonians concerning Antichrist that he will exalt himself above every God that is preached and worshiped [2 Thess. 2:4]. This plainly shows that someone can be exalted above God as he is preached and worshiped, that is, above the word and rite through which God is known to us and has dealings with us; but above God as he is not worshiped and not preached, but as he is in his own nature and majesty, nothing can be exalted, but all things are under his mighty hand.

God must therefore be left to himself in his own majesty, for in this regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him.<sup>3</sup> But we have something to do with him insofar as he is clothed and set forth in his Word, through which he offers himself to us and which is the beauty and glory with which the psalmist celebrates him as being clothed. In this regard we say, the good God does not deplore the death of his people which he works in them, but he deplores the death which he finds in his people and desires to remove from them. For it is this that God as he is preached is concerned with, namely, that sin and death should be taken away and we should be saved. For “he sent his word and healed them” [Ps. 107:20]. But God hidden in his majesty neither deplores nor takes away death, but works life, death, and all in all. For there he has not bound himself by his word, but has kept himself free over all things.

Diatrobe, however, deceives herself in her ignorance by not making any distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God himself.<sup>4</sup> God does many things that he does not

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<sup>3</sup> This is the God Moses encountered on Mt. Sinai, one too dangerous to see in his full-frontal naked power. This is not the God to be preached, for God instead wants to be found clothed in his word. He thus gives Moses the word in the tablets of the Commandments. Here Luther wants to point even further to God becoming the Word of John 1:1. Clothed in the flesh, Christ comes not to inflict death but to counter it. Thus, the Lord argues that the Great Physician comes only for the sick. The implication for preachers is that the naked God who wields death is already present for their hearers in many and various guises, but what’s needed from the preacher is the revealed God, the *deus revelatus*. In other words, preacher, give them Christ and him crucified.

<sup>4</sup> The technical terms for God not preached and God preached are the **proper** and **alien** work of God. The proper work of God maintains God’s absolute freedom and sovereignty. The temptation for preachers is to engage in theodicy to explain away the death that God wields (see above) and, thus, arrive at a God who is either the cause of evil or impotent against it. But Luther here argues that we must leave God’s proper work alone, and preachers are called into the alien work of God. Proclamation

disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word. Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his. It is our business, however, to pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone, for we must be guided by the word and not by that inscrutable will. After all, who can direct himself by a will completely inscrutable and unknowable? It is enough to know simply that there is a certain inscrutable will in God, and as to what, why, and how far it wills, that is something we have no right whatever to inquire into, hanker after, care about, or meddle with, but only to fear and adore.

It is therefore right to say, "If God does not desire our death, the fact that we perish must be imputed to our own will." It is right, I mean, if you speak of God as preached; for he wills all men to be saved [1 Tim. 2:4], seeing he comes with the word of salvation to all, and the fault is in the will that does not admit him, as he says in Matthew 23[:37]: "How often would I have gathered your children, and you would not!" But why that majesty of his does not remove or change this defect of our will in all men, since it is not in man's power to do so, or why he imputes this defect to man, when man cannot help having it, we have no right to inquire; and though you may do a lot of inquiring, you will never find out.<sup>5</sup> It is as Paul says in Romans 11[9:20]: "Who are you, to answer back to God?" Let these remarks suffice for that passage of Ezekiel, and let us go on to the rest.

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of the gospel entails bringing your hearers to the place God *wants* to be found: the mercy of Jesus Christ for the sake of sinners, the broken, and the godless.

<sup>5</sup> In other words, to ask why God saves some through faith and leaves others to unfaith (like God choosing Jacob over Esau), is to engage in the same-old same-old of theodicy. The only option for preachers is to deliver the gospel over and over and over again, trusting that this is the Word that brings faith. The answer to the question of evil is always "Look for a preacher." Use your own logic to find the connection to a parallel ecclesiology.