

Comment

Postscript to The Captivation of the Will

by GERHARD O. FORDE

Luther recognized that Erasmus put his finger on the heart of the matter. Erasmus wanted to argue that God would not have given us all these commandments if there were no possibility of fulfilling them. Law would then be indirect proof of freedom. The problem is that such indirect, would-be schemes of salvation always lead into a trap. Inferences like Erasmus' always enslave us, especially inferences about the law. So Luther would answer Erasmus, "Hold on a minute, the law doesn't prove freedom; it takes freedom away!" Freedom is not a reward that is realized—that thinking takes us right back into the law. Such inferences always begin and end with the law for the person trying to establish the powers of the free will. Use of the law in that way is automatic and deadly. That is the bondage.

The issue is exposed when one comes up against the *deus absconditus*. Erasmus does not really know what kind of a trap he is in. The fallacy of his whole argument is that he is left to infer what God must be like merely from the law, while the Holy Spirit is out making assertions apart from the law concerning the Father's only Son, Jesus Christ. In the middle of the argument Luther breaks out in the confession, "He sent his *Son* to save us." That is the heart and soul of his entire argument. The work of theology is not for making inferences from the law, but for a proclamation that is all about Christ. It is not about human possibilities and limitations, but what the Father is doing in his Son to reconcile the world to himself. Luther simply recognized that if the Father is sending his Son to save us, it is not the law that frees.

The problem of this freedom for Erasmus is that God robs us of all our claims to work salvation by ourselves and sets about to captivate us. God's very Godness then is the problem. But for Luther, God's own way of being God is also the only solution to the conundrum of human freedom precisely because he sent his Son to save us. All other inferred or preferred solutions are bogus, and it is such bogus theology that has been cheating the church ever since.

The preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified on account of sinners is God's desired way of being God. That means, according to

Luther, that preaching must be categorical. In today's jargon that means unconditional. Proclamation that gives forgiveness to sinners on account of Christ alone is the only solution for all our problems with God. The only way to end the threat of the unpreached God is by the preached God. That is the presupposition for all Christian preaching and the reason for this book. Luther is adamant at this point:

For if you doubt or disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? . . . For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered. (LW 33:42-43)

In this way, only preaching that assumes the bondage of the will for its hearers truly comes to free. Preaching, however, seems to have gotten off the track of late. And when that is the case preaching degenerates into telling cute stories with the preacher taking over as the primary narrator. The preaching then either gives anecdotes or talks about personal experience. Instead, the kind of categorical preaching that Luther describes gives a God who is truly preached. The God whom we discover ourselves is always a hidden God, literally a God not preached. The climax of this hiddenness is that God robs us of all our claims to work salvation by ourselves. Ultimately no preachers can then remain the subjects of their own fantasies. The only way to overcome the problem of the hiddenness of God not preached is by God preached. But that will not happen by attempting to infer God's will from the law. It happens only when the preaching is categorical, unconditional, just as God did not spare his Son but gave him to captivate our bound wills, drawing all to himself.

People sometimes complain that Luther seems to know an awful lot about the hidden God. Luther would simply answer, "Christ crucified draws all these things with him." God sent his Son to save us, and instead of our discovering a hidden God it is God who discovers us. So it is that the Father says, "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him!" (Luke 9:35). God does not lie, "but does all things immutably," especially in the promise of his beloved Son, so "take the saying of Christ in John 6[:44]: 'No one comes to me unless my Father draws him.' What does this leave to free choice?" (LW 33:285). That is the heart of the matter.

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