

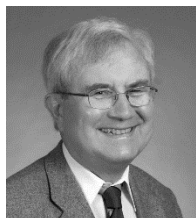
The God Behind the Cross Speaks and Sends

Robert Kolb

The 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh set the following as the immediate goal of Christian churches: “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” The vision of Western Europeans and North Americans marching into the far corners of the world with the gifts of their cultures was shared in specific form by those who sang, “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” The “Great War” gave pause to reconsider the optimism of the late nineteenth century, but World War II ended with opportunities for new expansion of mission that continues to transform the nature of the Holy Christian Church throughout the world.¹

In this new millennium, talk of “the end of the post-Constantinian era” and of “post-Christendom” has changed the mood among Christians. This discourse primarily stems from two cultural shifts: the first is significant numerical losses of Christian church members and attendees in Western Europe and North America, and the second is a general acceptance of criticism and even misrepresentation of the Christian faith in the public forum. These changes in the atmosphere around us should not spread gloom among many believers who remember that the Lord of the Church told His disciples, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves . . . and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles” (Mt 10:16a, 18).

When considering the mission of the Church in 2024, many Christians grow despondent at seeming losses and relatively few gains, at least in their own environments. They concur with the first half of the sentiment, expressed in other words a few years ago, that “God is always late,” and they tend to forget that the ditty continued, “but God is always on time.” Why the Holy Spirit alters the pace and the place at which the Word of the Lord grows is hidden from the best of our minds. Therefore, to faithfully carry out Christ’s mission, we the Church must first crucify our desire to exercise control over His mission. Put another way, we must set aside our impulse to fully understand and master what the Holy Spirit is doing with us whom He leads on His mission. Instead, we must concentrate on those to whom the Holy Spirit sends us rather than get distracted by His *modus operandi*.



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The Hidden God and the Church's Mission

For Martin Luther, the notion that the Holy Spirit's methods are beyond our comprehension would be no surprise. Much of his concept of "*Deus Absconditus*" (God Hidden) focuses on the evils believers suffer and their wondering "why?"² His discussion of the hidden God put up a "no trespassing" sign in front of the God who by very definition is beyond the complete grasp of the creatures. Luther was particularly sensitive to believers' doubts that arise when God seems to be acting like the devil. His theodicy waits patiently for "the light of glory" to reveal what the lights of nature and grace do not: why some are saved and not others. His justification for the existence of evil in a world made by the good and omnipotent God echoes Paul's in Romans 3:24–26: God justifies himself by liberating sinners through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus won for sinners. He proves that He is righteous by bestowing new life through trust in Him as a sacrifice of atonement.

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Luther did insist that the Hidden God (*Deus Absconditus*) is the Revealed God (*Deus Revelatus*).³ His comparison and contrast of God Hidden and God Revealed in Jesus Christ address directly the concerns and anxieties over the mission of God and His Church and over their seeming—puzzling—lack of success by some standards in their own efforts. Recognizing that the Holy Spirit is the Lord of the Church's mission does not banish our questions about what is happening with His mission or our doubts about the Spirit's plan or our own. However, it does put our doubt and even despair in a different framework. This Spirit-filled framework opens up possibilities for a relaxed attitude that allows us to experiment with new ways to show His love and speak His presence into the lives of those outside the faith. For He will give us sensitivity to recognize failed experiments as well as fruit-bearing new approaches. He will discipline our waywardness when we try to follow unfruitful paths too long. He wants us to listen.

In the "Schwabach Articles," a confession of the faith that Luther composed in 1529, the reformer and his followers affirmed that "God also bestows faith through this Word, as through an instrument, with his Holy Spirit, when and where he wills. Apart from it there is no other instrument or way, passage or path, to obtain faith. Speculations [about what happens] apart from or previous to the spoken Word, as holy and good as they appear, are nevertheless useless lies and errors."⁴

In the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon affirmed that the Holy Spirit brings people to faith "when and where he wills."⁵ The Wittenberg reformers insisted that the Holy Spirit brings people to trust in the only name given among human beings by which they may be saved (Acts 5:29), Jesus Christ. He does so through His Word of Gospel in oral, written, and sacramental forms. But they also acknowledged that that

Word does not work magically. The Holy Spirit remains the Lord of the process, and His ways of letting His Word grow in the hearts of His people remain beyond human grasp, despite our sometimes-helpful attempts to analyze psychologically how people come to faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit has His own plan and His own schedule.

Luther's concept of God Hidden and God Revealed may help believers rely on God's judgment in the pursuit of bringing salvation to those outside the faith. For it frees us to actively give witness through building trust through love and then through explicit and joyful speaking about our Savior and Lord without the hindrance of the compulsion to make sure we are "doing it right." The "when and where" of the Holy Spirit's wanting to work has changed for North Americans. A century ago, "mission" involved a long plane ride or ship voyage. Today, "mission" occurs just outside the doors of our homes—if not within them. "Mission" was then something that needed our "praying" and our "paying." In His mysterious ways, the Holy Spirit has taken away the believers next door and replaced them with their children who have lost the faith or with those from foreign lands whom the Holy Spirit has drawn to us. The former can particularly distress us because it is difficult to fathom why children of believers have not found Jesus Christ necessary or meaningful for them. We must simply commend them to the Holy Spirit's mysterious plan. We may also struggle to express the faith we often take for granted to those who come from strikingly different ways of conceiving of reality. In both cases, the Holy Spirit's lordship over His mission frees us to experiment with new and old ways of telling the story of His dying and rising to restore trust in our Creator and joy in His gifts.

The Revealed God and His Mission

Although Christ's crucifixion and resurrection did not claim a major role in the Heidelberg Theses, the saving work of Jesus Christ set the tone for Luther's theses and for his preaching and teaching throughout his career. The Holy Spirit gives this message to His Church today to take to people who live with all the burdens of fear, shame, and guilt. Such are the results of lives broken by temptation and mortality, imposed upon humanity since the fall into sin. The commission which Jesus has given to His Church, according to Luke, leads us to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins throughout the world (Luke 24:46–48) or, according to John, sends us to make real the forgiveness of sins for His people (John 20:21–23).

Luther presumed that believers, as children of God, act as God acts—within the limits of their creaturely humanity. That means that they talk. These children blabber out the family secrets to anyone who will listen and to some who do not want to. Luther reminded the Wittenberg congregation in 1523, "We live on earth only so that we should be a help to other people. Otherwise, it would be best if God would strangle us and let us die as soon as we were baptized and had begun to believe. For this reason, however, he lets us live so that we may bring other people also to faith as he has done for us."⁶

Almost two decades later, in 1540, preaching on John 20, Luther paraphrases, “I send you as my father has sent me”:

This same commandment I give to you unto the end of the world, that both you and all the world shall know that such forgiveness or retaining of sin is not done by human power or might, but by the command of him who is sending you. This is not said alone to the ministers or the servants of the church but also to every Christian. Here each may serve the other in the hour of death, or wherever there is need, and give him absolution. If you now hear from me the words, “your sins are forgiven,” then you hear that God wants to be gracious to you, deliver you from sin and death and make you righteous and blessed.⁷

The revealed God has chosen each one of His baptized people to speak for Him, with their conduct and with their words, with a comforting embrace or hand on the shoulder and with recollections of what Christ has been delivering in every form of our sharing the Gospel. The revealed Word made flesh continues revealing Himself through witness of every believer.

What Luther originally called “our theology”—the “*theologia crucis*” as outlined in his Heidelberg Theses of 1518—forbade speculation about God Hidden because God has revealed His person and plans through Jesus Christ and the Scriptures, “which testify of him” (John 5:39). Luther recognized that being human is more than simply being a rational being (*animal rationalis*), that Aristotle perceived as the definition of what it means to be human. Because Aristotle was operating without a concept of a person who created, certainly without the notion of an Uncreated Creator who could speak and relate to human beings, he had to define human beings simply as rational living beings. For Aristotle and his followers, reason moved them to follow the eternal self-standing law: their performance of the law was necessary and the ultimate good for human life.

By 1518, Luther had spent five years immersed in the thinking of the psalmists and the apostle Paul. Through Scripture, where the Holy Spirit chooses to speak according to Luther,⁸ God reveals himself as the Creator, who came in the second person of the Trinity, the Word made flesh, to speak as He had spoken in Genesis 1. This Word, Jesus of Nazareth, spoke from a cross and from the mouth of an empty tomb. The Heidelberg Theses emphasized that trust in Christ gives life, but they did

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not discuss the cross or the empty tomb that lay on His path toward reclaiming our lives for our Creator. What Luther only hinted in the Heidelberg Theses blossomed in his preaching and lecturing into an exposition of the revealed God as the Crucified One, the risen Lord of life, Jesus the Messiah. As the reformer wrote in his Smalcald Articles,

Here is the first and chief article [of the Christian faith]: That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, ‘was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification’ (Rom. 4[:25]); and he alone is ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1[:29]); and ‘the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all’ (Isa. 53[:6]).⁹

In twenty-first century societies in North America, Australia, and Western Europe, many people have more material blessings than any of their ancestors ever did and yet are plagued by dissatisfaction, disease, discontent, and discouragement. They feel disgruntled over irritations that their grandparents took in stride. Like Sisyphus, they strive and are frustrated when they seem to get nowhere. They sense that there is more to life but cannot let themselves hope beyond the edges of their definition of reality.

To such people, believers come with the offer of a new framework for thinking of life and a new identification of who they are and what their place is in the grand scheme of reality. Believers offer an exit from old existences and old ways of conceiving what is authentic and genuine in life through the cross. For the cross stops us from breathing the foul air of our own conceptions of how life should work. It spells death to living with false gods, relying on idols of our own fashioning. The tomb takes those who have died with Christ and buries them in His tomb. The open mouth of the tomb provides the entrance into a life lived in conversation and community with our Creator, who has come to re-create us as His trusting people. Without the cross, there is no exit that opens into real living.

Living under the Cross

In pursuing God’s mission to bring the saving message to others, believers encounter God Hidden and God Revealed. God seems at times to be hindering His own mission or putting it on hold. Or we think He is indifferent about bringing salvation to certain groups or kinds of neighbors. In the face of such impressions, believers recognize the need to hear of Christ in those whom the Spirit lets them reach with their witness. With the hurts and heartaches this outreach can produce, believers turn to Jesus on the cross and coming out of the tomb, suffering for sinners. Believers do not shy away from engaging those within our reach at their malicious or hypocritical worst. For Christ’s people know that His model for combatting evil and delivering the Goods comes in what seems a weak and foolish manner (1 Cor 1 and 2).

Luther understood the implications of the liberation for true human living that comes from Christ on and down from the cross, which flows into and out of the tomb. First, a sense of joy and peace arise for those who now hang out with God, listening to what He has to say in Scripture and responding to Him in prayer and praise. Second, believers realize that not only is Christ's life our life; Christ's battles are also now our battles. Satan continues his role as accuser; the devil cannot help but deceive and try to kill. But God has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:54–57). So, when our Lord and our faith are criticized, we must remember that Jesus promised, "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!" (Mt 10:25) and simply continue to proclaim without malice.

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Luther believed that the true Church is recognized by the opposition it encounters in the world. Christians do not pick fights. They are winsome in their witness, and that alone can arouse opposition. Among those marks of the Church's presence, he found such opposition to the Gospel. Luther's theology of the cross informed his seventh mark of the Church. In *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539, he wrote,

The holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ.¹⁰

In *Against Hanswurst*, two years later, in the face of open persecution and harsh criticism, Luther described the reaction of his followers: "we have not ... avenged ourselves in return. ... But as Christ, the apostles, and the ancient church did, we endure, admonish, and pray for others."¹¹

He meant that the Church should expect to live among wolves. Times when the Church lives among friendly cocker spaniels have been rare in history. This does not mean that Christians actively seek harassment, persecution, or milder forms of dissonance with the surrounding culture. It means that those around us are made uncomfortable by the implications of Christian living, to say nothing of Christian speaking, and that they react in self-defense. That self-defense manifests as criticism of godly living and ridicule of believers' confession that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Believers understand that the claim that the Lord makes on the lives of those outside the faith does mean death to old ways of life, so we have sympathy for the struggle to let go of old Adam. We have been there and done that. And so Christ's people take for granted that their friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers who do

not trust Jesus as Savior and Lord will be defensive in order to preserve a way of life they believe is working. Therefore, believers do not complain about the opposition, understanding it arises in good—but tragically false—faith that has substituted idols for Jesus the Lord.

Thus, we deal with those who are trying to defend their idols with cheeks expecting to receive blows. Turning the other cheek confesses that those who seek to harm us do not govern our estimation of our own worth or power. We know that our Savior has given us the ultimate worth available to human beings, that of being God’s child. We know that Jesus has given us the ultimate power in our scope, the power to forgive sins and offer the embrace of our Father to those who insult Him by objecting to our speaking His message and living His way of life. He has reserved “evening the score” for Himself (Dt 32:35–36, Rom 12:19). Believers do not take blows or blasphemies personally, figuring that the Creator can take care of Himself and us. Believers see such expressions of hostility as opportunities to talk about Christ on the cross, who suffered on behalf of His bitter enemies (Rom 5:6–9).

For Luther, the cross of Christ casts its shadow over the whole life of the Church. This is certainly true for mission on which God sends the Church. As it brings the liberating promise of new life in Christ, it points to the cross, which is history—the history of our Lord’s dying two millennia ago, and the history of our sinful identities, which He has claimed and taken from us. Living in the cross’s shadow, with the light of the Lord’s resurrection illuminating the path ahead, His people are energized to deliver new life to others. His call to every believer to testify about what God has done in our lives creates opportunities for the Gospel of Jesus Christ to eliminate sinful identities and bestow life-changing membership in God’s family.

ENDNOTES

¹ See, e.g. Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity. How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009) and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity. Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Jenkins’s bright picture of the Christian church in the majority world is tempered in his *Fertility and Faith: The Demographic Revolution and the Transformation of World Religions* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020).

² Steven D. Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God. vol. 1: Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), esp. 159–243.

³ Martin Luther, In commenting on Genesis 26:9, *Luther’s Works. vol.5*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1958-), 45. [Hereafter LW]

⁴ Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 85–86.

⁵ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 40.

⁶ Martin Luther, In his sermon on 1 Peter 2:9, LW 30: 64–65.

⁷ John Nicholas Lenker, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 392–393.

⁸ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God. The Wittenberg School and its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 75–97.

⁹ *Book of Concord*, 301.

¹⁰ LW 41: 164-165.

¹¹ LW 41: 198.