

# Preaching and Teaching the Law and Gospel of God

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## Law, Gospel and the Beloved Community

**Paul R. Hinlicky**

**C**an we gain a fresh take on ecclesiology in the light of the law-gospel debate? I believe that some of the early writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer can give Lutheran theology today that fresh approach. Twenty years ago arguments over ecclesiology blew the opportunity at the Call to Faithfulness conferences for confessional Lutherans from across denominational lines to unite at a critical juncture in North American history. What follows is dedicated not only to developing a fresh approach to the problem of the church in Lutheran theology, but is given urgency by this all the more precarious moment in history.

### **Action and Being**

We can gain a fresh take on ecclesiology by asking, in Pauline idiom, What is the relation of coming to faith in Christ and being in Christ? We could ask the same question in Johannine fashion by asking how coming to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, connects with abiding in Jesus and His word. Or, again, in the Synoptic optic, by inquiring how the Lord's commandments coordinate: 'Repent and believe; the Reign of God draws near,' and, 'This is My Body, given for you; Do this in remembrance of me.' The three major groups of New Testament literature exhibit this same pattern of relating two distinct aspects, action and being, of the gospel and I will treat the New Testament witness as one in this regard in what follows. What we have is a calling out of this dying world and a calling into new life in Christ; a separation and a new assembly; becoming a Christian, which happens one by one in the Spirit's

gift of the new birth by Holy Baptism and staying a Christian, which happens as we gather together as church to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again by the *koinonia* of his Body and Blood. So how do these relate? That is the question before us. Let's unpack the question a bit further by way of introduction.

Coming to faith in Christ is some kind of action, indeed divine action. That is why we insist in Lutheran theology that faith in Christ happens to us by grace, it comes as a gift, it is the action and gift of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, and the Word's visible form, Baptism. This coming to faith, moreover, comes about incalculably, as Augsburg Confession V insists, where and when it pleases God so to work through Word and Sacrament. Being in Christ by contrast designates a state into which one has entered, a continuity, a persistence, a perseverance through time to eternity — this too, of course, by divine action and grace, in that he who has begun a good work in you will not fail to bring it to completion. Abiding in Jesus is abiding in the word of Jesus that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, continually brings to mind and by which he leads the community to all truth; it is being branches rooted in the vine that is Jesus. When the proclaimer, Jesus, becomes the proclaimed, Jesus Christ, repentance and faith at the nearness of God's reign becomes the gathering together to eat his Body broken for us and to drink his Blood poured out for us. Such being, abiding, feeding in Christ, as per Jesus' own promise, happens predictably, if I may use such a strong word, to indicate the very purpose and goal of God. Consequently, Augsburg Confession VII insists that there is and will be one holy church forever against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.

But what links these two, the free making of each Christian and the assured keeping of Christian community? How do they go together so that we do not play action against being or being against action? Or individual against community or community against individual?

If we polarize these two, we get deformations, either an activist church of restless doers or a static church of stick-in-the-mud stay-putters and in neither case then do we honor the free

and faithful grace of God. In the activist church (let the reader understand) *our hands replace God's work* — she who has ears to hear, let her hear! Here the church is nothing but a tool, always getting captured for someone's agenda. In the static church, human traditions quench the Spirit because we circle the wagons to protect our little piece of ever shrinking turf against religious competitors and a hostile world. Here the church becomes a mighty fortress rather than the loving anticipation for the whole world of the beloved community of the Lord who alone is our mighty fortress. So with the antagonistic dualism of action and being we are handed over to all of our traditional, debilitating binaries: evangelical or catholic, low church or high church, pietist or orthodox, liberal or conservative. If we find the way to think these things together, however, maybe we can find again *sanctorum communio*, the communion of people made holy in holy things by the Holy Spirit, where saints are just those worldlings who have been called out and called together by the coming of the Spirit and faith.

Here the free and faithful grace of God would be honored in both the doing and the being, because, if I may cite St. Thomas Aquinas, as cited by the lay Catholic theologian Ralph Del Colle, our belief in 'one holy Church' is "directed to the Holy Spirit, Who sanctifies the Church; so that the sense is: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit sanctifying the Church.'" There you have in a nutshell an answer to the question of what links action and being. The Holy Spirit links being and doing, the One who keeps being and doing together — just as Martin Luther also explained the Third Article: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or understanding believe in my Lord Jesus Christ or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel ... just as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one, common, true faith." As we shall see, the Holy Spirit does just this by the purposeful proclamation of God's law and God's gospel.

As mentioned at the outset, we may recognize in this introductory analysis of the question before us the work of the early Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose doctoral dissertation had the title,

*Sanctorum Communio*, and whose next major work, *Act and Being*, diagnosed this problem for a Lutheran theology of the church of overcoming a false and crippling dualism of act and being that in either case removes God the Holy Spirit as the agent in both action and being and thus reduces the church to a human doing or a human being. That is where we are headed in this presentation. But I want to get there with you today in a more accessible way than Bonhoeffer did in the incredibly insightful, yet also incredibly dense writings of his youth. I want to start instead where Luther left off, continue where the *Formula of Concord* left off, and only then come to Bonhoeffer's ecclesiological insight. But having now explored our topic, I can announce a thesis borrowed from Bonhoeffer: *It is the divine presence of Jesus Christ as the Man for Others that at once makes each Christian a disciple and keeps Christians together as his own Body in the world.* Thus far Bonhoeffer, to which I now add: *Christ accomplishes this doing and being by his Spirit's purposeful proclamation of law and gospel.* That is to say: the right proclamation of law and gospel is ordered by the Spirit to being in Christ; calling to faith in Christ purposes being in Christ to the glory of the Father and the world's salvation.

To demonstrate this thesis, I need to show, first, that for Luther, there is an indispensable ordering principle to the relation of Law and Gospel. It is expressed in his Latin by the purpose clause that is introduced with the particle, *ut*, "in order that." God does an *opus alienum*, *ut faciat opus proprium*. God does an alien work, by the Law indicting, judging and executing *in order to* do his proper work, by the gospel showing mercy, justifying and vivifying. This little particle, *ut*, taken as an ordering principle yields two crucial clarifications about the proper distinction and relation of law and gospel: 1) under discussion here is not human legalism or human antinomianism, but *God's* action, what *God* is doing in the Law and in the Gospel; 2) thus further, that God's devastating action in the Law to undo the sinner is incomprehensible violence (thus, something *demonic*) if it is not ordered to God's merciful justification and vivification. Going back to Luther himself, the recovery of this

ordering principle constitutes the first step I wish to trace on the way to Bonhoeffer's fresh ecclesiological proposal.

I need to show, second, how this purpose clause is lifted up at the conclusion of the *Formula of Concord*, in its final article XI, as the very key to the comforting and strengthening doctrine of God's predestination of us in Christ to be his beloved children and therewith the revelation, according to Ephesians 1, of the mysterious purpose of God in creating, redeeming and fulfilling the world: namely, the coming and the eternal triumph of the Beloved Community. This Beloved Community in Christ is the true object of God's foreordination in all things, not some double list of the damned and the saved. Thus the *action* of God the Holy Spirit in the purposeful proclamation of law and gospel is ordered to our *being* in the eternal life of the Triune God now and forever. What we say about the church finds its proper place within this eternal and divine self-determination, the economy of salvation revealed in the canonical Genesis-to-Revelation narrative.

#### **Law and Gospel in Luther's Last Lecture**

Let's begin the demonstration of this thesis where Luther left off. The last public lecture of Martin Luther's academic career, just three months before his death, took place on November 17, 1545. It was the concluding lecture of his decade long series on the Book of Genesis, comprising more or less what is published as the commentary on Chapter 50. Poignantly, Luther concluded with the words: "I can do no more. I am weak. Pray God for me that He may grant me a good and blessed last hour." When we reflect on this, we realize that in the final lecture Luther took occasion to deliver his swan song on law and gospel, to proclaim his last will and theological testament on the crucial and elusive art of properly relating and properly distinguishing law and gospel. What prompted him to do so in the Genesis text is the worry expressed by the brothers, following father Jacob's death: "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil which we did to him." This worry induces Luther immediately to remark: "You see here what a hor-

rible evil and what an almost incurable wound sin and an evil conscience are." He then likens the pastoral theologian to a medical doctor whose healing art attends to such wounds of the spirit. I summarize and analyze Luther's last lecture on law and gospel thematically in the following way.

First, *beloved community*. Luther notes that "for 17 years, [these brothers had] received many great blessings from [Joseph], and experienced grace and mercy without intermission, as though he were their father. They had seen and felt his *philadelphia* in the fact that he loved his brothers and cherished them most affectionately." He is speaking of how Joseph forgave his brothers and rejoiced to rescue them from the famine and to restore fellowship when they and all their families migrated to Egypt. Reconciliation restores beloved community. Yet somehow these 17 years of shalom seem not wholly to be real to the brothers. They wonder if it was only for the sake of aged father Jacob that Joseph has put up with them and has not exacted revenge. Luther remarks: "Their hearts are still disturbed, and they are so tormented by their consciousness of their crime and the sting of death that they cannot trust the man who has deserved so well of them." Thus it is under the presupposition that beloved community is both the basis and the goal of reconciliation with God and one another that Luther's analysis of the art of timely and pertinent proclamation of law and gospel takes place.

Second, the *horror of sin*. "Therefore is sin not a horrible thing?" Luther asks. Not just the earthly crime that the brothers committed years before when out of envy they sold their brother Joseph into slavery. That kind of sin, the visible crime that human eyes can see and judge, Luther remarks, "is easily permitted, especially when there are no trials and people sin without fear and with the greatest freedom and smugness." The horror of sin is not only such crime, horrible enough as it is. But that is not the horror Luther has in mind here, which is rather "the great difficulty" with which the "heart longs for the kindness of pardon from God, from whom it [instead] flees and turns away by nature when it feels that He has been offended by many great and enormous sins." This flight from

God compounds sin with more sin and this compounding of sin in unbelief is the "sharp poison," that Luther is pointing at. Not even Joseph's forgiveness and manifest good will for seventeen years overcome it. For sin is a problem with God — a horrible, self-compounding problem.

Third, *the law's impotence and its power*. The law gives no remedy for this poisonous and hellish evil, because it is rather the law's divine work to revive and reveal this "very poison of sin." Given the divine prohibition of envy, of betrayal, and of murder they cannot believe in Joseph's mercy and forgiveness in spite of seventeen years experience of it, in other words, they cannot believe that Joseph's mercy is God's own immutable mercy, divine and certain forgiveness. So the brothers are like "many who do not hear the Word of grace [and] are driven to despair... for they are not able to bear the power of sin when it has been revealed and is alive." Let us learn, writes Luther, "that sin is a horrible evil, not when it is committed — for then it gives pleasure and satisfaction in a strange way — but that when it has been revived through the Law, it is hell itself and far more powerful than heaven and earth..." Sin, not the crime, but the crime's sinfulness is "doubt, unbelief, and hatred for or flight from God..." who by the Law exposes, judges and condemns this flight. God is the One who knows and judges the heart, who seeks and finds all who would flee and hide. That is what Luther means by the "law," the almighty and all-knowing Creator in the office of judge, true and just, before whom no secrets are hid.

Fourth, *the grace of Christ*. Hence, before God the judge the grace of Christ is not and cannot be a mere idea, an "opinion conceived on the basis of human persuasion," as Luther puts it in criticizing notions of faith as merely *notitia*, not self-entrusting *fiducia*. No, here we need a stronger medicine and antidote to meet and defeat the horrible poison of sin than mere ideas, even true ideas such as that God is loving. Here the grace of Christ arrives on the scene, not as an abstract idea, a so-called Christian idea of God as love or grace or any other such abstract sentimentality, for the holy love of God, according to

Luther, is a fiery furnace and severe mercy (Augustine), a divine love that hates what is evil, that hates sin and condemns it. No, here the grace of Christ must come as power to defeat power and as justice to defeat injustice in an historical event. As Luther graphically expresses it (forever to the chagrin of refined taste), grace comes as the "blood of the Son of God": "Medicine and help as powerful as this are required, namely, the Godhead become incarnate and the very blood of the Son of God" — divine power and justice respectively. Only this grace of Christ in the flesh is and can be "as new to me now as if He had shed his blood at this hour..." since it is at this very hour that I am in need, found out and judged by God at work through His law, just as I am, all alone with my guilt, without one plea except the new justice of Christ who loved me and gave himself for me.

Fifth, *faith*. Faith, as we have just heard, is not the mere opinion that God is gracious, an opinion which is cheap and cheap covering for persistence in sin, suppression of the knowledge of the truth, and flight from the true God. Faith is not knowledge of the historical fact that 2000 years ago Christ died for us or even belief that Christ's death avails for original sin or past sins. But faith, Luther writes, comes upon the contrite and stricken brothers as they move from introspection to extraspection, so to say, learning to look away from themselves to the bronze serpent lifted up by God. In extraspection it is "not that the memory of sin is completely destroyed," but rather that the "conscience is not tortured but knows that it has the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Christ." How is this extraspection of faith possible? Christ in his grace must come to them! How does he come to them? Luther's Joseph, in his holy sufferings and eventual vindication by which God worked the salvation of many, is a type of Christ, and now, as a type of Christ, Joseph preaches his own forgiveness of his brothers to them as God's very forgiveness: "If God has pardoned you, if you have a good conscience and are sure of His pardon and forgiveness, why should you have doubts about me? For I am not above God, am I? Remain with me under God..." Return to our beloved community, your sins are born away by the Lamb

of God, truly away. The poison has been drawn, the horror met and vanquished for you. So is born Luther's faith, justifying faith, as he so often expressed it in his picture of the joyful exchange, where the risen and present Christ declares, "I am yours and you are mine. I take your sins and give you my righteousness." Faith concurs to just this personal promise made in the flesh by the One who comes to rob us of our sins and replace them with the new and powerful justice of his own self-giving sacrifice. Accordingly we may say with Dietrich Bonhoeffer about justifying faith: only such faith obeys because only such obedience believes in the present Christ who is really there for us — even before God.

Sixth, *the theodicy of faith*. But we can press the question even further with Luther. Why should the brothers give up their horror and be reconciled to God as also to Joseph, even taken as the type of Christ? How can they believe Joseph's forgiveness, or Christ's forgiveness, as God's when it contradicts God's just judgment on their crime, not to mention their sinful flight from just this divine reckoning? Luther gives the reason why they can believe when he writes how Joseph now "adds an exceedingly serious statement: 'It is indeed true that you meant evil against me, but God is wonderful in His counsels and has turned your worst thoughts to our advantage and the greatest good....'" Many would have died of hunger in the famine, in other words, had not God used your evil plan for his own good and saving purpose. Luther connects Joseph's interpretation in faith of God's purpose supervening his sufferings with Romans 8: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose." Recalling that Joseph is for Luther a type of Christ, then, the good reason why the brothers can believe that the forgiveness of Joseph, the very victim of their own crime, is indeed God's forgiveness is that Joseph himself, standing for Christ, has received his innocent suffering from God in love and obedience for the sake of many, even for his guilty brothers. What an awesome and unheard of righteousness! Joseph justifies God in his obedient faith. By this spiritual obedience many are justified; this pre-

cisely is Paul's argument about the validity of Christ's obedience for us all in Romans 5, which atones for us all. At Gethsemane, Christ received his own suffering from God for the sake of others. They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. This I call the theodicy of faith.

Luther further connects the "wonderful counsel" of God with Augustine's theodicy from the *City of God*, "God is so good that He does not permit evil to be done unless He can draw great good from it." This is wisdom, to be sure, of the Spirit and only for faith. It is not philosophy or philosophical theodicy; it is the theodicy of faith. Otherwise, we shall scornfully infer that God is the author of evil and ask, "Shall we sin then that grace may abound?" "Why not do evil that good may come?" Immediately and with no little passion, Luther fends off this unspiritual inference of the unbelieving philosopher who hears the thought, but not as one who loves God or is called according to God's purpose. Oh no, Luther replies, "God certainly detests and hates sin," and his purpose is for you "to flee for refuge to Christ the Savior, who does not want the death of a sinner, just as He does not want a sinner either." God causes good to result from evil, resurrection from crucifixion, not that he wants evil to be done, but rather "His goodness is so great that even in our wickedness He cannot do otherwise than forgive sin if the sinner sobs and implores His mercy." By the same token the "danger" remains that "those who are without fear will be seized by death and descend into hell before they can flee for refuge to God's mercy." The theodicy of faith thus includes true contrition or repentance; it is the very judgment in faith by them that love God according to God's own purpose. In this ultimate perspective, however, we do see how justifying faith is a Gethsemane of the soul that in Christ obediently justifies God in his judgment, trusting in his mercy. Just so, "when consolation has been grasped, sin already has been cured." A new being has been born.

Finally, according to Luther, this new being in Christ walks the royal road between pride and despair. Spiritual pride is legalism, the presumption that one can and does fulfill the law

without the mediation of Christ and the gift of the Spirit. Spiritual despair is antinomianism, the abandonment of oneself to sin as either helpless to do otherwise or as fated to failure and condemnation. One or the other overtakes us when we do not let the law be God's holy law, by which the Holy Spirit reveals the poison as poison so that he may heal. Once again invoking Augustine, Luther resolves the theodicy of faith into the practical maxim: "one should fear God. He hates both presumption and despair." Luther's final counsel to the believer runs: "Therefore you should not sin rashly, confident of obtaining God's pardon; but you should rely on this pardon and find rest in it only when you are in despair." His corresponding admonition to pastors is that they should "give assistance; and mercy, which is far greater than sin, should be glorified."

Let me summarize this way: Luther orders law and gospel with the purpose clause of the Holy Spirit, as we hear again and again throughout the Genesis commentary. For example, through the Holy Scriptures, Luther writes, the "Holy Spirit speaks to us in this manner: 'I am a God who kills and brings to life, brings down to Sheol and raises up, makes poor and makes rich (cf. 1 Sam. 2:6-7). Not separately or disjunctively. Killing is not the only thing I do. No, this would be devilish. But I am a God who kills and brings back to life. I bring down to Sheol, but in such a way that I bring back....' [This] is the special wisdom and teaching of the Christians...." Or again, "God wants you to be humbled, not to perish. He is not angry with you. Nor has He hurled this thunderbolt against you in His rage. No, it has been His purpose to lead you to knowledge of your sins and to buoy you up and strengthen you when you have been humbled." Note now two consequences. If, first, we presented a *Deus absconditus*, One who finally only kills, or kills and makes alive indifferently or capriciously or purposelessly, that would not simply be bad theology, or even heresy; it would be *devilish* — the work of the unholy spirit! Thus, second, when Luther says that God is "exempt" from the Law and that he should not be "subjected to it" because "He is its Lord and can manage and act otherwise than the Law commands," the sense



is not *a priori* put *a posteriori*, not ethical but juridical. God is not bound to execute the sinner, end of story, since in fact God finds the way both powerful and just in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ to turn human evil to his good, merited condemnation to unmerited justification, death to life. The God whom Luther discovers in his christological reading of the Joseph story is not in principle a *deus exlex*, an arbitrary God, but a *Deus supra legem*, God beyond law. And God surpasses his own holy law in Christ's death and resurrection, figured in Joseph's innocent suffering for the sake of God's beloved community, when trusting Joseph owned that suffering sent upon him from God for the sake of others, even those worthy only of punishment for their crimes. By this christological mediation and joyful exchange, God shows himself Lord also of the law which must now serve the purpose of the Holy Spirit for beloved community.

### **The Formula of Concord's Last Article**

I introduce this next section on FC XI into our considerations in order both to confirm the preceding understanding from Luther of God's law as ordered to God's gospel and to move our understanding of the ordering principle, the purpose clause, at once *back* to God's eternal self-determination to create, redeem and fulfill the world through the missions of the Son and the Spirit and *forward* then to the act and being of the church as harbinger of eternal life in God's beloved community. FC XI, the concluding article of the Formula, expressly states that it does not propose to settle any intra-Lutheran disputes as the preceding ten articles do. Rather it expresses an early Lutheran consensus. Looking out at the looming schism among the Reformed over predestination that will eventually erupt between the orthodox Calvinist doctrine of double predestination on the one side and the Arminian doctrine of free will on the other, FC XI attempts preventative medicine, "to prevent disunity and schism over these issues" of "the eternal election of the children of God." But that is not the only motive. The formulators are just as convinced that "no one should ignore or reject this

teaching of the divine Word just because some have misused and misunderstood it" and so they propose to "explain the proper understanding of it on the basis of Scripture." The reason for this conviction, I submit, is that the eternal election of the children of God provides us the theological grounding of that ordering principle of law and gospel. The beloved community in Christ is God's goal in creating, redeeming and fulfilling the world; the proper distinction and relation of law and gospel is thus a distinction within this divine economy.

Indeed, FC XI concludes just where we left off with Luther, forbidding pride and despair alike. "By instructing people to seek eternal election in Christ and in his holy gospel as the Book of Life, this teaching gives no one cause either for faintheartedness or for a brazen, dissolute life. For this teaching excludes no repentant sinners. Instead, it calls and draws all poor, burdened, and trouble sinners to repentance, to the recognition of their sins, and to faith in Christ. It promises the Holy Spirit for purification and renewal. Thus, it gives the most reliable comfort to troubled, tempted people, that they may know that their salvation does not rest in their own hands... [but] in the gracious election of God." Just like we heard from Luther, then, it is "devilish" whenever this purpose clause is not working to order the proclamation of law to gospel. The formulators, citing the Apostle's statement that all Scripture is written that we might have hope, stipulate that any presentation of the doctrine of election that produces pride or despair "is not being presented according to God's Word and will but rather according to reason and at the instigation of the devil."

At the same time, the formulators advance the case for this ordering principle beyond its rudiments worked out by Luther. They do so by several crucial moves. They begin with a daring argument that violates the venerable principle of divine simplicity that had driven Zwingli and the orthodox followers of Calvin by logical necessity, the doctrine of the eternal divine reprobation of the wicked. Divine simplicity means that God is simply one in knowing, willing, and doing. So if anyone is damned, God has known it, willed it and done it. Against this

principle of divine simplicity, the formulators demand that we “carefully note the difference between God’s eternal foreknowledge and his eternal election of his children,” the first understood as an act of divine intelligence which knows all things in advance but the second as an act of divine love by which God determines himself towards creatures in one way and not another. The formulators say there is a difference here, that God is not simply one in knowing and willing. Thus according to these early Lutherans God can know and permit that Adam will sin but not properly will it, just as God can foresee and determine that Jesus will be crucified but not desire or author the malice and injustice of his crucifiers. According to the doctrine of simplicity, however, this Lutheran distinction is quite impossible. There can be no real difference between God’s knowing and God’s willing; in God both are simply one and the same. God knows what he wills and wills what he knows, otherwise he would not be God.

If divine simplicity is true in this way, there are indeed only limited options. One would be to limit God’s governance, like Plato did, and say that God can’t help it. God is only good, not powerful; God is limited by the material he has to work with, which is at fault in failure or sin. Or, as Christian Platonism argued, for example, in Luther’s beloved Augustine, one could say that God is alone really real, hence evil is unreal to him and thus cannot affect God. At the same time, if one sees that evil is actual on the earth, and if one is unwilling to give up God’s governance over all things, there seems to be no other conclusion to be drawn by Christian Platonism from the evident fact that many are called but few are chosen than that God properly wills also the loss of those not chosen, as Augustine sometimes darkly suggests and as Zwingli picked up and argued in principle in his treatise against Luther *On the Providence of God*. The Lutheran formulators, however, mock this conception of God’s election and reprobation as an absolute divine decree. They compare it to a military “muster, in which God said, ‘this one shall be saved, that one shall be damned; this one will remain faithful, that one will not remain faithful.’” They assert instead

that God’s preordination “does not apply to both the godly and the evil, but instead only to the children of God, who are chosen and predestined to eternal life ‘before the foundation of the world’” as elaborated in Ephesians 1. Thus, while God surely foresees sin and its evil consequences, God hates and rejects the sin he foresees and does not desire it, will it, purpose it or author it. Yet it happens. God permits it.

Note then what this Lutheran view of the divine permission of evil entails: strictly speaking, God suffers. Not of course in the pathetic way of human creatures, but in the spiritual way that befits God as Creator. In creating a world that is genuinely other than God, God suffers the contradiction of wills other than his own that are actual and do actual violence to God’s name as well as the creation’s goodness. That is why Paul the Apostle speaks of the long-suffering patience of God. God is not surprised by sin, but sin occurs as a real effect in the world, e.g., the crime of the brothers in selling Joseph into slavery and their ensuing flight from God’s judgment as discussed in the previous section. It does real damage, not only to creatures, but to God’s name and authority in the world. In such a world, the victory of the Triune God is the accomplishment of his determination from the beginning in Christ by the Spirit to turn our evil to his good. This, according to the formulators, is what God predestines, the final victory of the beloved community, including even us ungodly as nevertheless beloved children. Just as we saw Luther interpreting the Joseph story, the Lutheran view of election is that God is not surprised by the sin that He does not will. But reckoning with it from all eternity as the very cost of creating us, God’s own self-determination is to redeem and fulfill the very earth on which the cross of his Son would stand. God permits evil that he does not will in order to accomplish his own good purpose from out of its ruins. Whoever comes to this judgment in faith — that God receives me the sinner for the sake of Christ — experiences divine election.

Building on Luther, the approach of the formulators thus articulates four new things. First, “God’s counsel, intention, and preordination in Jesus Christ (who is the genuine, true ‘Book

of Life') is revealed to us through the Word. This means that the entire teaching of God's intention, counsel, will, and preordination concerning our redemption, calling, justification and sanctification must be taken as a unity." Jesus Christ is not God's second thought, his "Oh gee, Adam sinned, what do I do now?" Creation is not a neutral, empty stage on which a human drama unfolds one way or another. But creation is part and parcel of one will of God in Jesus Christ to redeem and fulfill a world other than God for communion with God. Second, in Jesus Christ, accordingly, there is and can be no deception, no pretense as if outwardly God calls by the gospel but inwardly were play acting with someone already secretly fated to death. God is true in his self-giving in Christ and self-revealing by the Spirit. Third, the "human race has been truly redeemed and reconciled with God...," the "promise of the gospel is *universalis*, that is, it pertains to all people." The notion of a limited atonement only for the elect gets things precisely backwards: all are included in Christ's atoning death; election in this One rejected for us is universal; only self-exclusion that persists in owning sin rather than surrendering it to the Lamb of God remains as a mysterious final possibility. Fourth, God's permission of evil in the kenosis of creation, so to say, is just this mysterious final possibility of God's suffering sinners to have their way eternally, letting them exercise their powers just as they see fit, forever. That would be hell.

This is the most difficult point. The formulators allow this kind of human freedom, if such it be called, our freedom in sin to sin forever. "Thus the Apostle very carefully distinguishes between the work of God, who alone makes vessels for honor, and the work of the devil and of human beings, who, at the instigation of the devil and not of God, have made themselves vessels of dishonor." Indeed, "as God is not the cause of sins, so he is also not the cause of punishment or condemnation." Following the Apostle's teaching in Romans 1:18ff, they teach that God abandons the wicked to their wickedness, "God punishes sin with sin." God permits the evil that he does not will. Yet the reverse does not hold; they deny that there is "some-

thing in us" which is "a cause of God's election." So we have a paradox. We are unfree in our election, as Jesus says, "You did not choose Me. I chose you." But we are free in our rejection. In wanting to be the free cause of our existence, we cause our own condemnation as we persist in refusing God's election of the rejected to life in Jesus Christ. Of course, even more paradoxically our unfreedom in election gives us the glorious liberty of the children of God while the so-called freedom to reject the grace of Christ gives persistence, even eternal persistence, in bondage to sin and death. Difficult as that final paradox is, it gives the reason why Jesus in Johannine idiom brings the *crisis* of the world, its on-going, provisional but actual *division*. Just this *crisis* of Jesus who elects in the gospel only those rejected by the law makes and marks the division between the church as harbinger of the Beloved Community and the dying world that flees from God. The church that is not in this sense *against the world* is not holy and has nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus Christ.

When we follow out the theologic of Article XI fully, we come to the eternal counsel and proper will of the Triune God: "for the Holy Spirit wills to be present with his power in the Word and to work through it. This is the drawing of the Father." We see that this "eternal election of God should be considered in Christ and not apart from or outside of Christ. For in Christ, the holy apostle Paul testifies, we have been chosen before the foundation of the world, as it is written, "He has loved us in his Beloved.... Thus the entire Holy Trinity, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, directs all people to Christ as the Book of Life, in whom they should seek the Father's eternal election." This beloved community of God, then, is the intention, the purpose, the goal of the Trinity for the creation, the Trinity's own proper self-expression in and for creation. Notice what has happened: in the course of thinking out God's purpose in Christ, the framework of religious individualism with which the late medieval quest for a gracious God began has been transcended, without however abandoning the existential and personal dimension of faith. Rather the redeemed indi-

vidual has been correlated essentially with the Beloved Community, God's action has been correlated with God's final purpose, shedding light on the church's battle in the fog and friction of human history.

### **Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio***

Bonhoeffer's discussion in *Sanctorum Communio* is so rich, so laden with insight, so fruitful for our situation, so suggestive for all of us seeking new directions for Lutheranism and a fresh approach to "life together" that in my remaining space I can hardly do it justice. I am satisfied if, by narrowly discussing it in connection with the themes thus far introduced, I can call this text to attention and urge its study and further exploration.

Just like the Lutheran formulators before him, Bonhoeffer drew on Ephesians 1 to maintain that "the church is God's new will and purpose for humanity... [that] begins to be implemented in history." "We experience our election only in the church-community, which is already established by Christ, by personally appropriating it through the Holy Spirit, by standing in the actualized church." Bonhoeffer found in this Lutheran approach to ecclesiology a threefold advantage. First, as just mentioned, it transcends religious individualism and indeed exposes individualism as sin, yet without diminishing the existential seriousness of personal faith. Second, it expounds the being of the church as "Christ existing as community" over against modern political sovereignty, Hobbes' mortal God, the Leviathan, the "being in Adam" that Bonhoeffer sees taking fresh and ominous form in Hitlerism. And third, it renders the ordering principle of the proper distinction of law and gospel that I have been discussing throughout. In Bonhoeffer's own words: "The cord between God and human beings that was cut by the first Adam is tied anew by God, by revealing God's own love in Christ, by no longer approaching us in demand and summons, purely as You [i.e., as in, "Adam where art thou?"]], but instead by giving God's own self as an I, opening God's own heart. The church is founded on the revelation of God's own heart." Let's probe these points, beginning with his criticism of individualism.

To be more precise, I should say egoism, both individual and collective. People ask, Bonhoeffer says, "whether the religious community... is a necessary consequence of the Christian religion, or whether Christianity is essentially individualistic." But as posed this question is false because it does not begin with "the reality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ" as that which "simultaneously establishes the church as a reality of revelation." Action of God and Being in God correlate. Indeed, Bonhoeffer continues, "only the concept of revelation can lead to the Christian concept of the church," that is to say, "only when faith accepts the meaning of redemption does it become clear what makes this reality [of the church] necessary." Only when God's action in making a Christian is clearly understood is the necessity of being in Christ grasped. The usual question whether religion is collective or individualist trades one kind of egoism for another; but the reality established in Christ by God's act of love is one in which "community is an integral element of its nature." Community here means sharing not just outward association. Bonhoeffer's Christ-existing-as-community, in other words, is not any old collectivity but exactly sharing, God in Christ sharing his divine life with creatures so that creatures share their lives with one another in new "life together." Sharing unifies acting and being. Sharing is the act which gives new life. The sharing, the *koinonia*, the communion of the Holy Spirit makes a Christian when Christ becomes present to take sin and give righteousness and keeps a Christian when the same Spirit bonds each one so claimed by Christ to all the others in beloved community.

These affirmations about the church — neither as institution nor as association but as sharing, as holy community, as joyful exchange — utterly depend on Bonhoeffer's Christology of the real presence and active work of Christ in history: "To be noted is the use of [the Greek] *en* [in] throughout — 'we are reconciled not only by him, but in him.' Hence to understand his person and history properly is to understand our reconciliation properly. If we, the members of the Christian church-community, are to believe that in Christ we are reconciled with

God, then the mediator of this reconciliation must represent not only the reconciling divine love, but also at the same time, the humanity that is to be reconciled, the humanity of the New Adam." In lifting up the New Adam aspect of Christology, Bonhoeffer, following Luther following Augustine following Paul, draws here upon the notion of collective person: "In Christ humanity is really drawn into community with God, just as in Adam humanity fell." Although we are all Adam and so there are many Adams, many egoisms, there is only one New Adam, one Christ, one righteous man, Jesus, this Man for Others. His unique and particular action makes sharing the Christian state of being.

In this way Bonhoeffer is able to anticipate and meet the nervous objection to his fresh take on ecclesiology, namely, that Christ existing as community implies that the community swallows up Christ and controls him; that Christology becomes a function of ecclesiology. Remarkably he defeats this objection by retrieving the offense of Luther's sharp teaching on the penal suffering of Jesus Christ as the indigestible stone that forbids and forestalls any such ecclesiastical swallowing.

What "sheds the clearest light on the fundamental difference between Adam and Christ" is Jesus' "*function of vicarious representative*." "God does not 'overlook' sin; that would mean not taking human beings seriously as personal beings in their very culpability; and that would mean no re-creation of the person, and therefore no re-creation of the community." The penal suffering of Christ is therefore the ultimate, inconceivable act of divine sharing: "in the death of Jesus on the cross God's judgment and wrath are carried out on all the self-centeredness of humanity... Because he was made sin for us, and because he was accursed by the law for us, Jesus died in solitude." This work of Jesus alone is Jesus' alone. So, "though innocent, Jesus takes the sin of others upon himself." Consequently in obedient faith to Christ's gracious command, 'I take your sin, I give you my righteousness,' we *ought* to share in turn, "we *ought* to let our sin be taken from us, for we are not able to carry it by ourselves; we *ought* not reject this gift of God." Just

this passive obedience of our faith brought about by Christ's proffered robbery of our sins, just this trusting and obedient surrender to this divine Robber is "*the reality of the divine love for the church community*" by which it is called out from the world and united in the gift of Christ's own, to us alien, righteousness. The church of forgiven sinners lives in this obedient separation from the world that is dying only because it holds onto its sins and does not share them with Christ. The church of forgiven sinners lives together in sharing, in turn, not by bearing one another's sins, the work of Christ alone, but by sharing one another's burdens.

Notice, then, how Bonhoeffer has related faith in Christ to being in Christ: "Faith is based on entry into the church-community, just as entry into the church-community is based on faith." There is a Trinitarian dialectic at work here: the Word points to the Spirit and the Spirit points to the Word. "Thus Christ and the Holy Spirit are at work in this word; and both are inseparably linked — the Holy Spirit has no other content than the fact of Christ." What the Holy Spirit does in proclaiming the gospel is to make the crucified Christ present to us as the Risen One who robs us of our sins in Word and Sacrament so that we surrender to this divine Thief in the faith which reckons this thievery as God's own new and stunning justice, which gives precisely what we do not deserve. The church-community, in turn, is just this economy on the earth, just this field of joyful exchange. "He who knew no sin was made to be sin in order that in Him we might become the justice of God:" such *becoming* by faith is *being* in Christ.

### **Law, Gospel and Beloved Community**

I draw to a conclusion with the words of Eberhard Jüngel, who notes that our Latin-based word, sacrament, translates Paul's Greek, *mysterion*, the "mystery of God's gracious primal decision for sinners" that in Christ and by the Spirit they would become now and forever the beloved children of God. In Jüngel's felicitous formulation of this line of thought, Jesus Christ is the sacrament of God, and his community is the worldly

sign, the element, the material of it in which he abides. In coming to this conclusion, I have shown how Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is rooted in Luther's ordering principle and in the FC XI's doctrine of our election in Christ as the children of God and how the Lordship of Christ over and in the church is maintained by the uniqueness of Christ's penal suffering for others at the cross.

In the process, we have seen how Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology also worked to purge modern Lutheran law-gospel theology of a vicious though subtle anti-Judaism, influentially extended, for example, in the docetic and antinomian theology of Rudolph Bultmann. Here a shell game took place. The problem of the law of God was reduced to anthropology, to human "boasting" or spiritual "pride," emblemized by Judaism, as if Paul were Marcion and our problem was merely legalism rather than sinful flight from God at work as Judge in his own holy law. But the law of Israel is for Bonhoeffer the holy law of God, by which the Creator calls and judges the called for their fidelity to his calling, that is, as the *ecclesia*, as the church. "The law of God for Israel is the calling properly heard. Law and calling belong together.... Both ideas of God's call and God's law, therefore, point to community." Bonhoeffer is thinking of the preface to the Decalogue, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage," the saving act of divine grace which grounds the community in the commandment, "have no other gods before Me." He is as well thinking of Luther's own theological thinking with our Christian Old Testament, as we heard earlier in the commentary on the Joseph story, namely, that the promise, "I am the Lord your God" and the faith which believes it is in principle and in power the obedience that does not merely observe but spiritually fulfills the law, as in holy Joseph, the very type of Christ, though paradoxically in vicarious or representative suffering. "The law," Bonhoeffer explains, "does not establish community [*Gemeinschaft*] but solitude [think of Joseph in prison or Jesus on the cross!] — as a consequence of human sin, of course — for the law is holy and good and was meant to be the norm and

pattern of life of a *holy* people of God. The law can only be fulfilled in spirit through spirit, that is, an unbroken will to obey God, i.e., through perfect love."

So, just as Joseph loved the brothers who had betrayed him and restored them to beloved community, so Christ who loves the unlovely overcomes the condemnation of the law by fulfilling its demand for love, even for those unable and unworthy — an action of grace and Spirit that meets and defeats actual sin, real betrayal in real history and thus defeats the law's condemnation not only with power but also with justice. This event and this being are what we should be thinking about with the term "church." Here "the preaching of God's love speaks of the community into which God *has* entered with each and every person — with all those who in utter solitude have known themselves separated from God and other human beings and [yet] believe this message." The Spirit's active assembly of such people by the purposeful proclamation of law and gospel so that we abide in Jesus is here and now on this earth the Father's ever new beginning of the Beloved Community.