

# Grace, Doubt, and Evil: The Constructive Task of Reformation Theology

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**Abstract:** The Lutheran vocation is to be a friend of grace; and since the 16<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran systematic theology has built upon a foundation of grace. Two apparent barriers to grace need addressing. First, doubt in the form of agnosticism and atheism provides a metaphysical argument against God's existence. Second, evil and suffering provide a moral argument against God's existence. From a Lutheran point of view the question of God's graciousness takes precedence over God's existence.

**Key Terms:** Luther; grace; doubt; agnosticism; evil; theodicy.

Constructive theology for heirs of the Lutheran Reformation is built on a foundation of grace. Commitment to grace is vocational; it is the Lutheran charism. Lutheranism has been conscripted, so to speak, to construct a theology of grace in every context.

The conscription took place during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation where termites were weakening the structures of grace: 'merit', 'works righteousness', 'faith formed by love', and Tridentine statements such as, "If anyone shall say that by faith alone the sinner is justified, so as to understand that nothing else is required to cooperate in the attainment of the grace of justification, and that it is in no way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will: let him be anathema."<sup>1</sup> Christian theology needed a reconstruction, the pouring of a new foundation in bedrock. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what was being built was much more sturdy. "Together we confess," said Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians together, "by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving

work, and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to do good works."<sup>2</sup>

It appears that the underpinnings of grace have been reestablished. We are now free to rebuild the house of systematic theology on a firm foundation. What this means is that explication of remaining theological *loci* should cohere as complementary articulations of the graciousness of the God in whom we put our faith. Everything we say should be grace imbued.

This will not be easy. Near invisible barriers obstruct easy construction. Of course, we are familiar with perennial barriers in anthropology such as the human propensities for self-justification and hypocrisy. Here I would like to look at two others, two other impediments to an easy construction of a grace-based theology: doubt and evil. The form that reflection on doubt and reflection on evil take in contemporary culture do not appear automatically on the theological

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agenda as questions for which grace is the answer. The form in which these theological questions are ordinarily posed presuppose an understanding of God that disregards the question as to whether God is gracious or not. If doubt and evil are to be given room in theological construction as Lutherans envision it, we need reformulations so as to make the foundation in divine grace visible.

In what follows I would like to remind Lutheran theologians of their original and enduring vocation to cultivate our understanding of divine grace both in the work of redemption and also in creation. My point here will be that the concept of grace refers us first and foremost to a quality of God, namely, that God is loving, and this love is unilateral and unconditional. Exactly what this means for contemporary theological thinking and for cultural thinking remains to be explicated. Once this point is made, I would like to turn to two barriers to a healthy understanding of grace: doubt and evil. On the one hand, both doubt and evil are perennial opponents to God's gracious activity. On the other hand, contemporary intellectual life provides them with recognizable uniforms on the cultural battlefield. Doubt wears the uniform of a scientifically based agnosticism and even atheism; and evil wears the uniform of philosophy of religion as it raises the theodicy problem. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century the cultural context has changed, but the Lutheran charism – the call to construct an understanding of the whole of reality based upon the grace of God – remains in tact.

### **Sola Gratia, Sola Fide**

By 'grace' we refer to the "unmerited assistance from God, especially as it pertains to salvation," in the words of David Yeago.<sup>3</sup> The final phrase here, "as it pertains to salvation," recognizes the original context in which Lutherans received their charism. As we shift from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the terrain has shifted somewhat away from salvation and back to creation. Not that salvation has been forgotten, to be sure; yet the challenge is to extend our apprenticeship in salvation to *loci* such as God and creation.

As it pertains to salvation, Martin Luther found himself analyzing the dynamic interaction between grace and faith like a Swiss watchmaker analyzes each and every gear in an elegant time piece. Among other things, the spring for faith is an "alien righteousness." Faith receives justification and salvation from beyond, from God. "This alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone – while the Father, to be sure, forwardly draws us to Christ – is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow."<sup>4</sup>

What makes this alien righteousness effect salvation in us is the presence of Christ placed in our faith by the Holy Spirit. By God's grace, Christ is present in our faith. His presence is that alien righteousness. True faith "takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself."<sup>5</sup> Faith justifies and hence saves, according to Luther's theology, because Christ is himself present in our faith.

The presence of Christ and the accompanying alien righteousness effect salvation through what has come to be known as the happy exchange (*frölicher Wechsel*), the Lutheran answer to atonement theology. "Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sin, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's."<sup>6</sup> We are deemed just and hence justified, because Christ is just and we have received his justness through this exchange of properties.

At stake here is something more important than death. It is ultimate. In fact, justification by faith incorporates death and life, death to a sinful state of existence and resurrection to eternal life with God. The promise of resurrection is the future hope of the Christian gospel; yet, there is more. That future resurrection can be present in faith now because the Easter Christ is present in faith. The gospel means "death and new life in the crucified and risen Christ," writes Gerhard Forde.<sup>7</sup> The Christ present to faith has already died, so his death becomes our death. The Christ present to faith has already risen from the dead, so his resurrection becomes our resurrection. This makes the

pronouncement of grace unconditional. "To the age old question, 'What shall I do to be saved?' the confessional answer is shocking: 'Nothing! Just be still, shut up and listen for once in your life to what God the Almighty, creator and redeemer, is saying to his world and to you in the death and resurrection of his Son! Listen and believe!'"<sup>8</sup> Because God has acted toward us in an unconditioned way, we speak of salvation as *sola gratia*, by grace alone. Because faith here refers less to a human activity and more to the dynamic of Christ's presence in the life of the believer, we speak of salvation as *sola fide* and *solus Christus*, by faith alone and by Christ alone.<sup>9</sup>

### Grace as God's Favor Towards the World

Worthy of note here is the locus of the activities of grace. It is historically assumed by Lutherans that grace, "as it pertains to salvation," acts primarily in the human soul and in the life of the church. The interaction of grace and faith takes place in human subjectivity, in the faith of the individual and in the church, the *communio sanctorum*. Lutherans affirm an objective component, namely, the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the elements of the eucharist, to be sure; yet the arena of action is the subjective domain within persons of faith. Does this exhaust the scope of grace?

What about other domains, such as the attributes of God or the created order of nature? Certainly we consider the loving disposition within the divine life to be the fountain of all God's gracious activity; and the physical world God has created is a sign of God's glory and a means of divine grace. Grace is God's favor, and God favors the world.

Grace is a quality that belongs first and foremost to God. "I take grace in the proper sense of the favor of God," remarks Luther, contrasting it with a quality of the human soul.<sup>10</sup> Joseph Sittler reiterates that grace is rooted in God's love, and it is expressed toward creation: "The fundamental meaning of grace is the goodness and loving-kindness of God and the activity of this goodness in and toward his creation."<sup>11</sup> What we know as the temporal creation is a gracious act deriv-

ing from God's eternal love. "Love is the only real answer we have to the startling question, why should there be anything at all rather than nothing? Love grants existence and grants it contingently," writes Wolfhart Pannenberg.<sup>12</sup>

Thinking of grace in terms of God and creation expands our frame of reference. We, today's people of faith, are but a brief paragraph within the chapter on the church, which in turn is but an episode in the epic narrative of God's creation stretching back to a Big Bang beginning and forward to a transformative new creation. The Christian gospel is the message that all of this is graced. "The gospel reaches backward and forward all along the line from creation to consummation because Christ is the eschatological revelation of God already at the beginning of things," writes Carl Braaten; "The world was created through Christ, and all things will ultimately reach their end in him as the Judge and Lord. This is the biblical meaning of calling Christ the *alpha* and the *omega*."<sup>13</sup>

The divine grace of which we speak, in summary, has certain characteristics. First, the word 'grace' is a descriptor for a divine disposition, namely, the disposition for love that leads to both creation and redemption. Second, grace is unconditional; it originates solely in divine *aseity* and at God's initiative. Third, in our faith grace is experienced as a gift, not as a reward for works accomplished or merits earned. Fourth, the content of this gift is the presence of Jesus Christ, the uninvited but very welcome guest from heaven dwelling with us on earth.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation was rocked by controversies over the role of grace in justification and salvation; and Lutheran theology was born with a special vocation to champion the cause of *sola gratia* within Christendom. The former controversies have not entirely disappeared, to be sure; yet both the church and the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century provide a significant shift in context. If to be a friend of grace is the distinctive Lutheran charism, then this new context extends the call to penetrate more deeply into understanding that grace by discerning spirits – by discerning the supports and barriers to grace – in the *Geist* of the new millennium.

## Barriers to Grace

It is a most curious exercise to entertain the idea that barriers would stand in the way of grace, that grace would fail to prompt a fully paved road to welcome it. It seems so unlikely. If grace refers to a gift freely given, how could this possibly elicit a negative response? Gifts are almost universally welcome; and gratitude is the normal response. Yet, the drama of biblical history and subsequent history demonstrates that divine love stirs up human anxiety, divine giving stirs up human pride, divine care stirs up human self-assertion, and divine presence leads to crucifixion and death. One of the challenges to God in this drama is for divine grace to turn human enemies into friends.

This biblical drama reminds us that existing friends of grace have two overlapping tasks. First, theologically, we need to penetrate surface images to an underlying understanding of human nature. We need to assess theologically just why we human beings have a predisposition to resist grace, a propensity to repudiate the God who unconditionally loves us. Second, we need to survey the contemporary cultural landscape to identify the topography of intellectual, spiritual, and political landmarks where grace has no safe haven. We need to mount a theological apologetic, speaking directly to contemporary discontent within the church and within the world. This article will deal primarily with the latter task.

Yet, before we turn to our contemporary context, a word about human nature is in order. In the New Testament the word for 'sin' (*hamartia*) connotes missing the mark, as an archer may miss the targeted bull's eye. What is positive about this metaphorical image is that we human beings are aiming at something, perhaps aiming at a target God has placed before our eyes. Note in the quotation from Luther above that original sin is a form of alien unrighteousness just as what grace imparts is an alien righteousness. This could imply that our deepest human inclination is to aim for what is holy and divine; but our trajectory misses the mark and strikes a substitute for the true God. With Augustine's helpful insights, we understand this substitute for the true God to be ourselves. We are, said the Bishop of Hippo, turned in upon ourselves;

we are *homo incurvatus in se*. By missing God, we hit ourselves. God's grace can straighten out the arrow so that the bull's eye gets hit, according to Augustine.<sup>14</sup>

If we draw anthropological corollaries from the controversies over justification by faith, we can posit that we human beings have a built in propensity for self-justification. The medieval derailing of Christian spirituality by the merit system should not have been unexpected; whether within Christendom or without the pressure will always be with us to build our own ladder to heaven, our own Tower of Babel, and then climb up.

Deep within the human soul is a sense of justice; more, an inchoate sense that justice represents what is eternal. As temporal beings pursuing eternal life, consciously or unconsciously, we seek to appropriate justice to ourselves; because we presume that in justice is power, and in power is life. 'Self-justification' becomes the term for describing the fruit of our passion for ourselves, for establishing our security and our stature in our public image and before God.<sup>15</sup> Here, then, is the unavoidable conflict. If justification is given us by God, then self-justification is unnecessary. If justification is a gift, then our earning it is unnecessary. If justification is the result of an alien righteousness, then possessing it as an attribute of our own is unnecessary. If justice is something we wish to own for ourselves rather than borrow from Christ, then we have located a point of conflict. We must conclude that a potential for resistance to God's grace inheres in universal human nature; so we should not be surprised to find such resistance occasionally actualized in human spirituality, religion, and culture.

In what follows, I would like to name and review two barriers resisting grace: doubt and evil.<sup>16</sup> Like a natural geyser, resistance to grace lies under pressure well beneath earth's surface and then gushes forth when an opening appears. Resistance can spurt up without warning within the privacy of our individual psyches, within the spiritual customs of our religion, or within secular realms of self-understanding.

## Doubt

Doubt in our era is sometimes formulated as a question, "does God exist?" Those who find it difficult to affirm a positive answer may attach a bumper sticker to their car, "Dog is my copilot." ("Dog" is "God" spelled backwards.) Beyond bumper stickers we find a range of tacit assumptions and articulate ideologies about the nonexistence of God voiced in various forms of naturalism, materialism, scientific humanism, and overt atheism. Short of atheism, most prevalent in modern intellectual culture is agnosticism, the position of considered doubt. The term *agnosticism* comes from Thomas Huxley in 1869 and reflects the image modern science has of itself, namely, as modern it replaces the religion of the past. Using the metaphor of maturity, Huxley says: "When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist ... I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer. They [believers] were quite sure they had attained a certain 'gnosis,' – had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble."<sup>17</sup> Maturity, it is assumed here, refers to an open-minded agnosticism that has outgrown the narrow-minded dogmatism of premodern religion.

Agnosticism both depends on yet fosters naturalism. According to modern naturalism, nature is the only reality there is. The natural realm is self-sustaining, self-regulatory, and even self-explanatory to those who know how to understand it, namely the scientists among us. The world of nature has no windows that open toward another world; no such thing as transcendence can be relied upon to ferry us beyond the material shore of existence. We simply cannot know anything about a noumenal reality that allegedly transcends the phenomenal world which we can study through science.

Even though religious people among us speak of heavenly realities, skeptics doubt that such speech refers to anything heavenly. What appears clear since Feuerbach and Freud, Marx and Lenin, is that religious symbols express human wishes, that religious

visions are unconscious projections onto heaven of wishes for fulfillment that are unattainable on earth. What exists is human subjective desire, to be sure; what is doubted is the divine object of that desire. What needs explanation, contend the skeptics, is not God but rather religion.

Evolutionary theory has in recent decades become the materialist explanation of choice. Fields such as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are trying to develop a comprehensive naturalism that will explain theological claims about God exhaustively in terms of evolutionary principles such as adaptive advantage. Religion, some claim, increases procreative advantage for some human groups over others; therefore, the religions that have survived to the present day must be the most reproductively successful. According to this theory, religion provides ethics as a cultural justification and inspiration that enhances our biological drive to produce children, an epigenetic tool in the construction of a preferred gene pool. Robert Wright speaks for the field of sociobiology here: "The reason they want children is because their genes 'want' children ... why fight it?"<sup>18</sup> Because of this, says Harvard entomologist E. O. Wilson, "Ethical and religious beliefs are created from the bottom up, from people to their culture. They do not come from the top down, from God or other nonmaterial source to the people by way of culture."<sup>19</sup>

What we find here is an alternative explanation for religious beliefs about God and about human values. It is a purported *scientific* explanation. The scientist says that we should abandon asking the theologian to explain religion; rather, we should ask the scientist to provide a more accurate understanding of why people believe in God or adhere to ethical principles. The underlying agnosticism with regard to matters divine justifies drawing a strictly mundane or this-worldly picture of religious believing.

Agnosticism supports religious pluralism. The impetus derives primarily from the opposition to perceived dogmatism on the part of traditional religion, an opposition thought to be supportive of open-minded science. "I believe that gods exist to the extent that people believe in them. I believe that we created gods, not the other way around," writes the director of the Skeptics Society, Michael Shermer; "whether God *really* exists or not is, on one level, not

as important as the diverse answers offered from the thousands of religions and billions of people around the world . . . . My only gripe with religion is when it becomes intolerant of other peoples' beliefs . . . or the cultural suppression of diversity."<sup>20</sup> The impetus for religious pluralism among such skeptics and agnostics does not derive from a desire to pursue theological knowledge. They are not traveling many roads up a single mountain – that is, no motive exists here to study a large number of religious claims in order to accumulate increased knowledge of transcendent reality. Rather, pluralism protects the right of each religious tradition to create its own projection of gods.

In some instances, agnosticism can make way for full fledged atheism. Atheism is the positive assertion that no transcendent reality answers to the name of God. Paul Kurtz, avowed secular humanist and editor of *Free Inquiry*, makes this point by asserting that no God is listening to our prayers and supplications. "Prayers to an absent deity . . . merely express one's longings. They are private or communal soliloquies. There is no one hearing our prayers who can help us. Expressions of religious piety thus are catharses of the soul, confessing one's fears and symbolizing one's hopes. They are one-sided transactions. There is no one on the other side to hear our pleas and supplications."<sup>21</sup> There is no grace for atheism, because there is no God who could be gracious.

What appears on the surface here is that the question looks like this: "does God exist?" The emergence of the scientific method with its antipathy towards religious dogmatism and the emergence of a naturalistic worldview with windows closed to the transcendent make this a question of wide cultural significance. Yet, it is not the Lutheran question per se. The Lutheran question is this: "is God gracious?" It would matter little if we could find a way through empirical science or philosophical reason to demonstrate beyond a doubt that God exists in the sense that nature would have a creator and sustainer. As dramatic as such a proof might be, merely establishing a designer for nature falls short of establishing what is most vital to us existentially. The question of the existence or non-existence of God takes second place to the question of God's graciousness. What makes the difference in our lives and in our destinies is the presence or absence of divine grace.

Paul Tillich positively incorporates doubt into his concept of faith. An honest agnosticism, thinks Tillich, derives from a commitment to truth. When evidence is insufficient to be convincing, a person committed to truth must withhold judgment. Because knowledge of God differs radically from knowledge of things of this world, convincing evidence comes in insufficient supply to provide apodictic knowledge of God. Some measure of doubt is unavoidable, even healthy, especially when it is serious doubt accompanied by a sense of ultimacy. It is healthy because it exhibits faith in the truth, and true faith is trust in the God of truth. Indirectly, doubt is a form of faith; it is trust in the same truth that faith knows as God. "Serious doubt is confirmation of faith."<sup>22</sup>

Yet, this is insufficient as an apologetic because it deals only with the subjective side of the ledger, with a person's disposition toward pursuing what might or might not be true. What remains to be addressed is the objective question, "if there is a God, is this God gracious?" One resource Lutheran theologians can bring to the question is the Theology of the Cross (*theologia crucis*). "The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness . . . . it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross . . . . God can be found only in suffering and the cross," says Luther.<sup>23</sup> According to this Theology of the Cross, the glory and majesty of the invisible creator is hidden behind the visible phenomena of suffering and death. In addition, this suffering and death belong to the reality of God proper; they are manifestations of the invisible God's gracious presence within a visible world.

Among the many things the Theology of the Cross tells us is this: pursuing knowledge of God by speculating on the origins and design of the natural world is a diversion, whether successful or frustrating. The best it could yield would be knowledge – more than likely projected speculation accompanied by doubt – about a divine architect or celestial engineer. Only by looking at the cross – the finite, historical, this-worldly cross – does God's grace become visible. Only in the cross can we see God present as the one who shares our suffering, who becomes the victim of our sin, who by this very acceptance of victimage bestows forgive-

ness and by promising resurrection bestows eternal life. Only in the cross can we see an eternal love coming to temporal expression.

We may be dealing with three types of hiddenness here. The first is the philosophical concern for apprehending an infinite God from a finite perspective, a noumenal reality from the world of phenomena. This appears to be the way the problem as a metaphysical problem is formulated by modern agnosticism and atheism. The second is the hiddenness of God's grace, God's care for us in our human plight. This is where Luther felt the tyranny of *deus absconditus*, the God of majesty who foreordains our creation and our destiny in sheer mystery. Is this high God indifferent to our concerns? Why doesn't this God answer prayer the way we ask? Then, as Lois Malcolm argues, there is a third kind of hiddenness: the hiddenness of Christ in faith. Malcolm turns to an "apocalyptic epistemology" to refer to the light shed by a promised future transformation, a future reversal of darkness and light. God now "sees" in the depth of creation what we can only hope for by faith, a new reality. "The full redemption we await lies in the future. Evil and suffering have not ceased . . . . Christians believe that the very redemption of the world (the primary sense of hiddenness) takes place in *creaturely* flesh. This, then, is the challenge of hiddenness language: to confess to the goodness of reality and God's redemptive purposes for it even when it is hidden by the brokenness and horrors of life."<sup>24</sup>

Looking at the cross will not provide the empirical evidence or philosophical proof sought by agnostics of the modern scientific era. But, then, the cross does not purport to deliver what agnosticism is searching for. Rather than prove the existence of God metaphysically, the cross provides an oblique peek into the realm of transcendence and then turns our attention around so as to see the presence of the transcendent God in the most mundane of the mundane, the physical world replete with finitude, suffering, and death.

## Evil

Suffering and death bring us to the problem of evil. According to philosophers of religion, the problem of

evil combines doubt about God's existence with doubt about God's grace understood as God's goodness. Skeptical philosopher David Hume lays down the gauntlet: "Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he is both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"<sup>25</sup> Raised as a problem of logic, philosophers of religion frequently point out the incompatibility of three propositions:

- God is omnipotent (all powerful).
- God is omnibenevolent (all loving).
- Evil and suffering exist.

As Hume points out, the affirmation of any two of these negates the third. Contemporary atheistic philosophers find the irresolvability of the *problem of evil* to be support for the denial of God's existence. Theologians who wish to defend the existence and the righteousness of God, find themselves in the position of proffering a *theodicy*, an argument that justifies God in the face of the presence of evil and suffering.

What the logical problem alludes to without capturing is the depth of anguish we undergo when faced with the ugliness of evil and the horror of suffering. Whether natural evil in the form of suffering from disease or disaster, or historical evil in the form of human violence, we find ourselves victims of suffering we did not invite nor wish to endure. Agonizing questions are flung heavenward. Why do so many children who desperately need caring families and loving nurture find themselves trapped in cycles of abuse leading to torture and scarring for life? Why would European civilization with all its industrial advances and democratic achievements fall into wanton self-immolation by mustard gas and saturation bombing over two world wars? Why would a nation with a millennium of Christian influence devise a secret police force, death camps, and gas chambers? Why would the Japanese army massacre a quarter million Chinese in Nanjing, or al-Qaeda incinerate three thousand of our globe's citizens in New York's World Trade Center? Why would the 20<sup>th</sup> century chronicle genocide after genocide: the Ottoman Turk genocide of Armenians; Nazi eradication of people with disabilities, Jews, gypsies, and enemies of the state; Bosnian Serb massacres of non-Serbs, Hutu extermination of Tutsis?

Genocides are the result of human sin; we refer to them as *human evil*. But, in our own era, *natural evil* also challenges religious commitments to a loving God. The controversies over evolutionary biology, beginning already with Charles Darwin himself, include the observation that, given the overwhelming amount of suffering by sentient beings in the predator-prey struggle and the extinction suffered by the vast majority of species due to the cold law of natural selection, no God could be considered responsible for creating such a brutal and bloody world of nature. And, if God is in fact responsible for creating the world ruled by natural selection, such a God would be morally unworthy. Niels Henrik Gregersen poses the challenge: "In two ways has the problem of theodicy been sharpened since Darwin, first because the existence of pain and suffering can no longer be explained by human sin, and secondly because the existence of what we (as ethical primates) cannot but term as brutal, can no longer be seen as accidental to evolution. The struggle for life is pre-human in origin and is built into the very way in which the world is wired for complexification. Wired by God?"<sup>26</sup>

Marilyn McCord Adams would refer to such genocides and such suffering in nature as "horrendous evils." With this term she refers to victimage so destructive that, it would seem, no future redemption could reinvest the victim's life with meaning. "*Horrendous evils* ... I define ... as evils the participation in which ... constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could ... be a great good to him/her on the whole."<sup>27</sup> In the middle of anguish over evil, it appears that the depth of suffering is so overwhelming that no incorporation into a more meaningful whole could provide healing.

Some theologians have dared to try to address the existential anguish by resolving the logical conundrum. One solution is to deny being to evil, to render evil something that has no being in itself. Augustine tried taking this route. Evil is the privation of what is good (*privatio boni*) he said.<sup>28</sup> It may work philosophically to say that evil is a parasite off the good and deny to it any independent being; but the way we experience evil is as a structure of destruction, as the force of nonbeing destroying what is.<sup>29</sup> Whether it has being or not, evil is real and we reel from the suffering it causes.

Another of Augustine's tactics has become known as the free will defense. In principle Augustine affirms all three propositions, but by adding free will he transmutes evil into an expression of divine omnibenevolence. The creation of free creatures is a higher achievement than the creation of mere things such as robots or automatons, the argument goes; but when God bestows freedom upon us the risk arises that we might engage in evil and cause suffering. This is just what happened historically, says Augustine. Our primordial parents, Adam and Eve, voluntarily (*voluntas*) chose to turn away from God; they turned away from the eternal and immutable goodness of God toward the temporal and mutable goods of this world. From then on their choices and hence our choices (*arbitrium*) are made on behalf of ourselves, not God, because we are now *homo incurvatus in se*. We began with a free will and lost it to sin; later, God will restore us to a higher level of freedom where we will be freed from the inclination to sin. "God's foreknowledge had anticipated both – that is to say, both how evil the man whom he had created good should become, and what good he himself should even thus derive from him ... [E]vils are so thoroughly overcome by good that, though they are permitted to exist for the sake of demonstrating how the most righteous foresight of God can make a good use even of them ... And evil is removed, not by removing any nature, or part of a nature, which had been introduced by the evil, but by healing and correcting that which had been vitiated and depraved. The will, therefore, is then truly free, when it is not the slave of vices and sins."<sup>30</sup>

Two notions are attached to evil for Augustine: first, evil is the privation of what is good and has no eternal being in itself and, second, it is a temporary concession God has made to human history to allow the story of human freedom with its loss and redemption to go forward. Evil and its concomitant suffering are the price paid for a redeemed creation of freely loving citizens in the City of God. Evil is a negation that is in turn negated by grace; it becomes a means for a higher redemption.

Augustine's theodicy is lumped with others making the free will defense because, according to this account, evil is the product of the creature's free decision. Even though God could foresee the human fall,

God did not create evil. Evil is not a created entity, so it is the creation of no one. Yet, one can still assert that the responsibility for the fall into evil lies on human shoulders. God is responsible for providing us with the first freedom and the redeemed freedom by grace. God is justified by this theodicy, because God is not responsible for the origination of evil and yet is responsible for our redemption from evil.

Free will defenders contend that it is better for God to bring into being a creation which is capable of being corrupted, capable of having evil and suffering as a by-product of free will, than it is to bring into being creatures without free will. With this axiom, evil becomes a tolerable risk. "In freely willing the other's freedom, God does come to be affected by the contingent reality of that which is not God" writes Paul Sponheim; "Evil deeds carry such efficacy as to weave a web of brokenness in which every human life is caught – that also speaks of the degree of risk and cost involved in God's will for the freedom of the other."<sup>31</sup> God here is further justified because freedom is such an overwhelming good that God rightly risked evil in order to make freedom possible.

In addition to the free will defense, other theodicies are available among contemporary theologians, most prominently the developmental view of John Hick following Irenaeus that sees evil and suffering as necessary to the growth process in soul-making.<sup>32</sup> Whiteheadian process theologians offer an alternative theodicy that denies the first proposition – they deny that God is omnipotent – while strongly affirming divine love and assigning God the role of luring actual entities beyond evil toward God's subjective aim.<sup>33</sup> All three of these positions – free will defense, soul-making teleology, and limiting God's power – affirm theism and do not yield to the conclusion that our experience of evil is sufficient to persuade us that no God exists. In addition, all three are not willing to give up on affirming God as gracious. God's love is not a negotiable item. If there is a God, then this God is loving, even all-loving. God is justified because the world's evil either lies beyond God's power to control or is taken up into a more inclusive good.

Is proffering a theodicy the vocation of a Lutheran theologian? Is it the task of Lutheran theology to justify God in the face of complaints about evil and suffering within the creation? Is theodicy the way to pose

the *Fragstellung*, to pose the question to be pursued? A summons to "justify God" ought to ring dissonantly in Lutheran ears. For a theological tradition struggling to understand how God justifies us whose sins lead to evil and suffering, this reversal of the agenda ought to seem odd.

Just what is the barrier to grace here? It may seem like the evil we experience is the obstruction; yet, the cross, which takes sin and suffering unto itself, is the fundamental symbol for the presence of grace. So, this cannot be the barrier. Perhaps then the barrier is found in those philosophical reflections upon evil that nominate God as the one guilty for evil and, with a curious turn in logic, count this as evidence that God does not exist. The argument against God's existence includes the side corollary that if there would be a God who would permit such horrendous evils that this God would not be worthy of existence. In short, this is a moral argument, not an ontological argument, against God's existence. Defenders of God unanimously affirm in their theodicies that God is moral; God is all-loving despite the way the world looks.

Is this the kind of argument Lutheran theologians ought to take on? Lutherans should be acutely aware of the dynamic of self-justification operative everywhere in human self-promotion; and we should look to see if it is operative even in theological discourse. Turning our attention in this direction uncovers a subtle assumption at work in both atheistic and theistic theodicies, namely, that our human perspective on evil and suffering is placed in the judgment seat. The theodicy has claimed the role of judge and placed God on trial. As Job found out, the mysterious and magnificent God who established the foundations of the world does not subject divinity to trial by humanity, even on moral charges (Job 38-42). Timothy Lull reminds us, "One thing we know about God, or ought to know about God, is that God is God and we are not."<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps this is what prompts Robert W. Jenson to sidestep the task of providing a theodicy within the scope of his systematic theology. "No theodicy is proposed. It is in any case not possible within the system here presented to 'justify the ways of God to men'."<sup>35</sup>

Yet, an appeal to the privilege of divine mystery is but one resource Lutheran theology brings to the problem of evil. Again, the Theology of the Cross places

itself front and center. Our concern in this instance is first an epistemological one, to be sure – the concern over knowing the hidden God within or behind the God revealed in the cross. The epistemological concern has to do with revelation. “Thus the characteristic of God as the *Deus theologicus* is that he is *Deus crucifixus* and *absconditus*,” comments Gerhard Ebeling, indicating that to know God truly is to know God in the crucifixion.<sup>36</sup> This also has to do with avoiding a Theology of Glory (*theologia gloriae*), wherein we construct an image of God based upon the strengths and perfections we can imagine by looking at the works of creation. Such imaginings that seem to glorify God but in fact glorify our human imagination are just what get dowsed when turning our attention to the revelation of God in the cross. “No matter what the issue or the problem in life,” writes Eric Gritsch, “the theologian must see it within the shadow of the cross. Thus theology must ultimately concentrate on Christ and not on the believer. True theology, therefore, always crucifies the theological ego.”<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the epistemological problem with divine hiddenness, secondly, the Theology of the Cross also points to what is revealed, namely, that God is present in the suffering and death that comes with the cross. The crucifixion of Christ is God incarnate with us, taking evil and evil’s guilt into the divine life. God is the victim of human evil, not its perpetrator; and God freely absorbs this victimage as an expression of a divine love that does not fight evil with evil but rather with the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation. Luther emphasizes “how much it cost Christ and what he paid and risked . . . he suffered, died, and was buried so that he might make satisfaction for me and pay what I owed, not with silver and gold but with his own precious blood.”<sup>38</sup> One clear message relevant to the problem of evil is this: God is present with the world as it undergoes evil and present with us as we undergo suffering. God is not divorced from evil, but rather has become one with those of us who suffer evil. God is not immune to the suffering of the world, but rather shares in that very suffering.

The problem of evil is not reducible to a logical dilemma. Evil belongs to the drama of the world, a drama in which God struggles with and for the world. The resolution to the theodicy dilemma will not be found in clever redefinitions of the propositions or new

insights into logical connections. Rather, we will find the meaning of evil and redemption from suffering in God’s promise. By raising Christ from the dead on Easter, God has shown that the cross is not the last word. By promising an eschatological new creation, God has shown that the sins and sufferings of this present aeon are not eternal. Death will bring an end to suffering; and resurrection will inaugurate an aeon of healing. God’s omnibenevolence is demonstrated by his empathic love in the cross; and God’s omnipotence is demonstrated by his power over death, the power of creation and new creation. This is the drama in which we find ourselves, a drama with both evil and the promise of redemption from evil. Friends of God’s grace share the anguish of those who suffer; they also share the promise of redemption.

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## Ethics

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They also share the ethical commitment to combat sin and serve those who suffer. “For Luther, concern for the true knowledge of God and concern for the right ethical attitude are not separate and distinct but ultimately one and the same,” says Paul Althaus making the move from the Theology of the Cross to ethics.<sup>39</sup> Tuomo Mannermaa makes the same move when expanding out from the indwelling of Christ in faith; “Faith means participation in the being and thus in the properties of God. And one of the properties of which the Christian in his faith partakes is love. Christ, who is present in faith as *donum*, brings love with him, because Christ is in his divine nature God, and God is love.”<sup>40</sup> Via either route, the destination is neighbor love.

Neighbor love – a love that requires definition according to the needs of the neighbor plus devotion to serve the neighbor as one’s lord – has become a hallmark of evangelical ethics in Lutheran circles.<sup>41</sup> The attention of faith is turned from our relationship to God toward the world. “God does not need our works,” says Marc Kolden, “our neighbors do.”<sup>42</sup> Freed from the tyranny of judgment and death, the person of faith is freed to become voluntarily enslaved to the needs of neighbors who suffer. “The intimate connection in which Jesus places our relation to God and our rela-

tion to the neighbor presupposes that we are, as Luther expressed it, 'daily bread' in the life of one another."<sup>43</sup>

Sin, evil, suffering: these matters alert us to our ethical responsibility. Yet, Lutheran theologians have less to offer that is distinctive here; in fact, common cause with like-minded Christians and non-Christians of good will is readily available. What Lutherans lack in distinctiveness could be made up in passion or zeal. This remains an ever present challenge and opportunity.

## Conclusion

The original Lutheran vocation to build upon a foundation of grace was issued in the context of a struggle with works righteousness on the terrain of salvation. Conscientious Lutherans have been building a grace oriented piety ever since. Many of the perennial impediments to enjoying grace such as pride, legalism, and hypocrisy still obstruct development, to be sure; and these obstructions will require continued attention.

In our own era, doubt and evil appear as additional barriers to further construction. Each denies the existence of God, doubt making a metaphysical argument and evil making a moral argument. Without God, Lutherans find it difficult to make the claim that God is gracious. Yet, building a theological interpretation of reality is salutary only if it stands on a foundation of belief in a God who is gracious.

In addition, we must testify to a certain ambiguity. Both doubt and evil have some admirable qualities. Doubt, in the form of scientific agnosticism, retains an implicit commitment to truth. Evil, as reflected upon in theodicy, reminds us of our implicit commitment to a world that should be governed by love rather than suffering. What these barriers place before us requires respect. What Lutheran theology seeks is something short of total elimination of these barriers; rather, theological construction should incorporate them.

It is not the distinctive vocation of Lutheran theology to provide proofs for the existence of God, whether they are metaphysical or moral. What is a distinctive Lutheran charism is the Theology of the Cross. By

appealing to the Theology of the Cross, Lutheran theologians can point to Jesus Christ and say, "here is grace." Grace comes in the form of suffering with us; and if by faith we can perceive the presence of the invisible God then we can affirm that it is God who shares in our suffering. This is also the God who redeems, who heals the broken, who lifts up the unworthy, who reconciles enemies, who invites the stranger into his eternal home. This is the only foundation worthy of further theological construction.

## Endnotes

1. The Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, can 9. See: *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, edited by Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 34.

2. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, par. 15, The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 15.

3. David S. Yeago, "Grace," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. By Hans J. Hillerbrand, 4 Volumes (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2:184.

4. Martin Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness" in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Volumes 1-30 edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1967), Volumes 31-55 edited by Helmut T. Lehman (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955-1986), 31:299. Here in 1519 Luther saw the dynamic of grace's effect on faith in terms of growth or even progress. "For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death" (Ibid.). As Gerhard Forde develops the theology of justification by faith, he decries the notion of growth or progress. Grace at the beginning must be final, he emphasizes. "In its simplest form the problem may be stated thus: If justification conceived as forgiveness comes at the beginning of the process, the process is superfluous . . . [I]f, on the other hand, justification comes at the end of the process, justification is superfluous . . . Both the divine act of justification and the human process of becoming just according to the law cannot simultaneously be real." Gerhard Forde, "The Christian Life," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. By Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, 2 Volumes (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 2:404. The instillation of salvific alien righteousness, according to Forde then, is immediate and total; righteousness or justification is not distributed bit by bit over time. Despite what Luther says, is this what Luther actually means?

5. Luther, "Lectures on Galatians" of 1535, *Luther's Works*, 26:129. Tuomo Mannermaa recognizes that the role of the indwelling Christ in faith is central to Luther but not necessarily to Lutherans. "According to Luther, Christ (in both his person and his work) is present in faith and is through this presence identical with the righteousness of faith. Thus, the notion that Christ is present in the Christian occupies a much more central place in the theology of Luther than in the Lutheranism subsequent to him. The idea of a divine life in Christ who is really present in faith lies at the very center of the theology of the Reformer." "Why is Luther So Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research," *Union With Christ*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

6. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *Luther's Works*, 31:351.

7. Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification By Faith - A Matter of Death and Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982), 3.

8. *Ibid.*, 22.
9. If the phrase 'justification by faith' implies salvation achieved as the result of human faith as a human work, complains Paul Tillich, then we risk a misleading interpretation. "The cause is God alone (by grace), but the faith that one is accepted is the channel through which grace is mediated to man (through faith)." *Systematic Theology*, 3 Volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 2:279. He suggests using the phrase 'justification by grace through faith' to emphasize that salvation is a divine, not a human, work. When properly understood as involving the presence of Christ, the biblical phrase 'justification by faith' sufficiently implies *sola gratia*, however.
10. Luther, *Luther's Works*, 32:227.
11. Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1972), 24.
12. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1969), 65.
13. Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 111.
14. "The fault in man is contrary to nature, and is just that which grace heals ... not that nature is a denial of grace, but that grace is the mending of nature." Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 47 (xxvii).
15. Such an analysis of self-justification is taken up in chapter 6 of *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society*, by Ted Peters (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994).
16. I first introduced discussion of these four as "hurdles" to be jumped in an editorial, "Barriers to God's Grace," *Dialog*, 37:2 (Spring 1998), 82-83. In this editorial I listed four enemies: doubt, evil, legalism, and hypocrisy. Legalism and hypocrisy are still with us, and they also cry out for an updated analysis.
17. Cited by Michael Shermer, *How We Believe* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000), 7.
18. Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 148.
19. Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 247.
20. Shermer, *How We Believe*, 11, xiii.
21. Paul Kurtz, *Transcendental Temptation* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 22. "The presupposition of contemporary Western atheism lies in the development of modern natural science and its mechanistic picture of the world ..." Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Types of Atheism and their Theological Significance," *Basic Questions in Theology*, 2 Volumes (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1970-1971), 2:184.
22. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), 22.
23. Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31:52-53.
24. Lois Malcolm, "A Hidden God Revisited: Desecularization, The Depths, and God's Sort of Seeing," *Dialog*, 40:3 (Fall 2001), 189.
25. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. By Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1980), 63.
26. Niels Henrik Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," *Dialog*, 40:3 (Fall 2001), 200.
27. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1999), 26.
28. Augustine, *City of God*, XI:22; XII:3; XIV:11; *Enchiridion*, XIV.
29. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:60.
30. Augustine, *City of God*, XIV:11.
31. Paul Spohnheim, *Faith and the Other* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 91-92.
32. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper, 1978).
33. Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (New York: SUNY, 1984); Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The End of Evil* (New York: SUNY, 1988).
34. Timothy Lull, "God and Suffering: A Fragment," *Dialog* 25:2 (Spring 1986), 94.
35. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 Volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997-1999), 2:21.
36. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1970), 227.
37. Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther: God's Court Jester* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 168.
38. Luther, "Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 434-435.
39. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966), 27.
40. Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating," 16.
41. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *Luther's Works*, 31:329-377.
42. Marc Kolden, "Ministry and Vocation for Clergy and Laity," *Called and Ordained*, edited by Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 196.
43. Knud Eijler Logstrup, *The Ethical Demand* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 5.