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# An Anonymous Lutheran? Can Luther's Theology Permit Salvation Outside the Church

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## **An Anonymous Lutheran? Can Luther's Theology Permit Salvation Outside the Church**

"[F]or it happens, indeed it is typical of faith, that often he who claims to believe does not believe at all; and on the other hand, he who doesn't think he believes, but is in despair, has the greatest faith." - Martin Luther<sup>1</sup>

### **The Problem**

Is there salvation outside the visible church? This question has troubled Christian theologians for roughly as long as there have been Christian theologians. In today's diverse and interconnected world, the thought of excluding billions of pious, devout members of other faith traditions is a difficult pill to swallow. This issue is of tremendous importance to many Christians, especially at a pastoral level. The traditional exclusion of nonbelievers from "heaven" keeps people out of the pews. And clergy are often asked about the eternal destiny of family and friends who were Buddhists, Hindus, or Wiccans.

I am told that at ELCA seminaries today, you find three possible answers floating around campus among faculty and students. (I use the word "float" intentionally, as I have heard from various seminarians at different schools that this question is rarely treated directly or systematically in class.) These three answers can be labeled as follows.

**The Traditional Answer:** Salvation only exists inside the visible Church. Its members are the only ones who have heard the gospel – a necessary condition for salvation. This answer has the advantage of logical consistency within Lutheran theology, but it leaves us with a God who seems quite callous and uncaring. How could the loving creator condemn the majority of humanity to damnation when they never had a chance? This protest is at the heart of many people's deepest misgivings about Christianity. It is worth pointing out, however, that the objection is usually to the alleged punishment of the damned – an eternity in hell. It loses some bitterness when hell is conceived as extermination of the soul.

**The Universalist Answer:** While everyone attaining to salvation fits with our popular images of a gentle, non-judgmental Buddy Jesus, there are some serious problems that arise with this solution. First, such a theology is clearly at odds with the gospels. Reconciling the words of Jesus with universalism requires some pretty fancy eisegesis. It also challenges our fundamental notions of justice when Adolph Hitler, Joseph Kony, and Donald Trump are welcomed into eternal paradise, moving in next door to St. Francis, Mother Teresa, and Katie Luther.

**The "Good Guy" Answer:** Here, in some manner or another, salvation is extended to those unbelievers who meet some category of goodness – either doing something virtuous or avoiding moral turpitude. Perhaps they were charitable enough, made proper use of universally available grace, or at least never caused great harm in their community. While an intuitive and very popular belief, Lutherans

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<sup>1</sup> LW 40, 240; "Concerning Rebaptism" (1528).

quickly realize that it is completely incompatible with their theology. If salvation can be achieved in such a way, then Luther's theology is essentially invalid.

This leaves us with three unpleasant options. However, I would like to suggest the possibility of a fourth answer: salvation outside of the visible church that remains entirely the work of God's grace through faith alone – a type of Anonymous Lutheran. Or, perhaps it would be more accurately described as salvation through an unidentified (or misidentified) Gospel. This paper begins with the question, "Can orthodox Lutheranism permit the possibility of salvation outside the visible church?" I believe it can. We begin with a review of the specifics of Luther's theology of justification. Following this, I will present my argument for salvation outside the visible church. Finally, I will consider three objections to this proposal.

### **Luther and Justification**

After his famous "Tower Experience," Luther was clear that salvation comes about by virtue of grace alone. While it comes to us through faith alone, it is not the faith that justifies. We are justified on account of Christ, not on account of faith. Faith, rather, is the channel through which we receive the divine *gratia* (grace, forgiveness, justification, salvation) and *donum* (the "gift" of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives). Moreover, this faith is not a work of ours, as if we create the conduit through which God's grace flows. Faith itself is the gift of God.

This theology of passive righteousness might appear to open up possibilities for salvation outside the visible Church. However, there is one very important obstacle in the way. Luther believed that one thing is needed for God to provide faith: the Word.

Now when God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. *God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him,...* Observe carefully, my brother, this order, for everything depends on it.<sup>2</sup>

What we must conclude from this is that Luther's theology does not allow for God simply to zap people with faith. A universal offer or imputation of grace does not work in this theology, as there must be the Word of God present: No Word, no faith, no salvation. This is what makes the possibility of salvation for those who never encountered the gospel message of Christ so difficult, if not impossible. An orthodox Lutheran appears restricted in her theology to what I called the Traditional Answer above. Without the external Word of God present, redemption of the sinner does not happen.

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<sup>2</sup> LW 40: 146, emphasis mine; "Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments (1525).

## **What is This “Word of God?”**

To move forward, beyond the three answers treated above, we must begin with consideration of what exactly Luther meant by “the Word.” Contemporary Christians – at least in my circles - generally think of the Holy Scriptures when someone mentions the “Word of God.” However, Luther’s understanding of the Word is much broader than that. Any communication of the message of Holy Scripture is the Word of God. In his Sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther taught, “For a poor speaker may speak the Word of God just as well as he who is endowed with eloquence. A father speaks the Word of God as well as God does, and your neighbor speaks it as well as the angel Gabriel. There is no difference between the Word when uttered by a schoolboy and when uttered by the angel Gabriel; they vary only in rhetorical ability.”<sup>3</sup>

The question must arise: How accurate must the message be to function as the Word of God? How precisely must the theology be articulated? How accurate the historical claims? What errors can be overlooked and what mistakes can exist when proclaiming the Word of God? How much dross is permitted before God no longer makes use of the remaining material?

Would it still be the Word of God if everything remained complete and intact, except that the name “Jesus” was accidentally changed to “Johannes” in one community? Obviously so. What if the theology stayed intact, but they believed that Johannes had lived in North Africa, around the year 500 BC, and had been executed by drowning. Would that message still be the Word of God? Would believers be denied forgiveness because they were taught the wrong historical details?

## **How much must be understood correctly?**

When I was a college student, I was a very pious and committed Christian who desperately wanted to understand the truth of God’s revelation. In trying to understand the Trinity, I ended up (accidentally) becoming a Modalist. Later, in seminary, I was presented with an orthodox theology of the Trinity, along with the problems in Modalism. After some careful and critical thought, I made the switch to orthodox Trinitarianism. Did my name suddenly appear written in the Book of Life once I transitioned from heresy to solid Lutheran doctrine?

When asking about the minimum theological requirements for saving faith, we must look at Luther’s position on salvation among the Old Testament faithful. In Genesis 3:15, God punishes the various actors in the drama of the Fall and declares to the serpent, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” In this text, Luther found the first prophecy of the coming messiah, the Seed of the woman who would overthrow Satan. Faith in this coming savior was the requirement for redemption.

Luther wrote, “Adam and Eve were encouraged by this promise. Wholeheartedly they grasped the hope of their restoration; and, full of faith, they saw that God cared about their salvation, since He

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<sup>3</sup> LW 22, 528f.

clearly declares that the male Seed of the woman would prostrate this enemy.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Luther explained that what made Noah righteous in the eyes of God was his faith in “the Seed.”<sup>5</sup> It was through this hope that salvation came to these early figures, and indeed all who believed likewise. “In the same way the faith of all people was strengthened; from the hour in which the promise was made they waited for the Seed and derived comfort from It against Satan.”<sup>6</sup>

For Luther, there was a basic message of salvation, the belief in which was necessary for saving grace. This incomplete message was, nevertheless, the Word of God. For Luther, what was essential in the message was a coming savior who would overthrow Satan. Genuine belief in this message of the “Seed” was sufficient, without knowing about the God-Man Jesus of Nazareth, the Trinity, or forensic justification.

Truthfully, there is a problem with Luther’s conclusion here, even when we accept his theology. There is no evidence that any Old Testament figure or author interpreted Genesis 3:15 in the way that Luther did. Furthermore, Old Testament writers did not even speak of Satan as the source of evil in the world. One simply does not find any reference to Eve’s Seed overthrowing the Prince of this World anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. I am not arguing that Luther’s exegesis is wrong, but simply that it did not occur to anyone before Jesus. Go and check your favorite Old Testament heroes of faith; you will simply not find any evidence that they believed anything remotely comparable to this.

If one insists that people living before Christ needed to embrace the message of the coming Seed overthrowing the devil in order to be justified, we have no evidence that anyone held saving faith. Whereas that position is universally rejected, we are forced to be more flexible about what particulars must be believed in order for one to be claimed by God.

### **What is Essential in Faith**

I believe a more honest reading of the biblical texts from a Lutheran perspective demands that the fundamentals of the faith be more basic and foundational than Luther’s requirements. The essential message of the law and gospel are communicated in something as simple as, “God has forgiven me, a sinner.” To imagine a typical Israelite with a more nuanced soteriology (from a Christian perspective) is academically not credible. It is this belief, as the essential message of Holy Scripture, that allows one to make sense of the salvation of Old Testament figures like Moses, David, or Isaiah. In other words, this less severe requirement for what constitutes the Word of God allows us to make greater sense of Lutheran theology and its relationship to the biblical record.

If we conclude, then, that this simple message is what constitutes the bare bones of law and gospel, the most basic message of God’s Word, then it follows that God can work faith through this, admittedly, incomplete message. Indeed, it is only this position that makes salvation for the Israelites credible, not Luther’s impossible condition.

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<sup>4</sup> *LW* 1, 193; “Lectures on Genesis.”

<sup>5</sup> *LW* 2, 55; “Lectures on Genesis.”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

If this is the case, what happened in A.D. 33? The Word was made manifest in a unique, vibrant, and distinct way. The salvific act, which redeemed humanity before and after the event, was completed. The gospel was now able to be understood and preached with eyes wide open to God's eternal plan. But did the definition of God's Word change? Did God establish a new standard for when he would work faith through the Word? Now that the picture was in greater focus, did God expect people to have a more accurate theology in order to work faith in them? I find nowhere in the New Testament the message that God established a new requirement for salvation with the advent of Christ. Luther insisted that Christ's coming brings good news, not new requirements. To paraphrase Martin Buber, I am unaware of God changing the conditions for salvation after the appearance of Jesus.

Imagine a pious, God-fearing Jewish family living in Spain around the time of Jesus, far from the latest happenings in Jerusalem. We can conceive of a devout grandfather, trusting sincerely in God's "gospel" message – however he may have understood that. Let us say that the grandfather died in the year A.D. 25. His granddaughter, who held the same faith with equal fervor, died thirty years later. Not surprisingly, she had not heard of Jesus before her death. Would she be held to a different standard than her grandfather when standing before her Maker? Would it be different if she had heard a few stories about some fellow, way off in Jerusalem, who claimed he was the messiah? If her son later heard someone preach about Jesus one afternoon, would that set up a new requirement for his salvation – something other than what was required of his great-grandfather?

Christians have often given a special dispensation to Jews, as they are the Chosen People. However, as Jesus taught and Luther believed, one cannot count on a special birthright. The Jews must be saved just like anyone else – through faith. In the argument above, I have contended that what is necessary for a sinner's redemption is that she respond to the Word of God in faith – even if the theology is incomplete or corrupted. The essential message is that there is a loving God who will forgive my sin. This standard allows us to make sense of the salvation of Old Testament figures from within a Lutheran framework, and indeed can be extended to Jews living after the time of Jesus. If this is accepted, must we stop with the Jews?

### **It Doesn't End with Jews and Christians**

If we consider Islam, for example, we find individuals who also believe in the Creator, the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. While Muslims do not accept the divinity of Christ, or Luther's radical emphasis on grace, they most certainly teach and proclaim a God of "mercy and benevolence" who will forgive the sins of the faithful. From a Lutheran perspective, their theology is skewed, a distortion of the truth. However, by what measure do we say that it does not include God's moral requirements and message of forgiveness to a sufficient degree to be the Word of God? We cannot hold the Jews to one standard and Muslims to another. If a genuine trust in the simple message of God's overcoming of sin was sufficient for Noah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, then the same standard must hold for Philo, Maimonides, and my great grandfather Louis Israel Mann. And certainly the requirement would not change for Muslims, Sikhs, or Zoroastrians.

We may also consider Hindus and Buddhists, Confucianists and Daoists. Do their religious beliefs make the cut? I have no idea. I have no intention of drawing a fixed line in order to distinguish which beliefs communicate the critical message of God's Word and which do not. If I am faithful to the biblical narrative, however, I must imagine it being more inclusive than what Luther taught. When it comes to a religion like Buddhism, with its rejection of an eternal God and the concept of sin, it would appear that such a belief system would be incapable of communicating what I am calling the *essential* nature of law and gospel. However, I do not believe that one should reach this conclusion too quickly.

All religions contain "Law," that is, ethical precepts that can function like a mirror, pointing out our corrupt and mortal nature – Luther's *usus theologicus*. Moreover, the Law is not limited to moral commands. According to Gerhard Forde, "This means that law, for Luther, cannot be *identified* with any set of propositions or prescriptions, be it the decalogue or any other code. Law is anything which frightens and accuses 'the conscience.' The bolt of lightning, the rustling of a dry leaf on a dark night, the Decalogue, the 'natural law' of the philosopher... all or any of these can and do become the voice of the law."<sup>7</sup>

But how do you proclaim the gospel without God? We must remember that the nature and essence of God are clearly beyond human ken. If one believes in a less anthropomorphic divine reality, perhaps along the lines of Brahman in Hinduism, does that preclude God reaching that person in faith? In Mahayana Buddhism, the Truth can be represented through *Dharmakāya* ("Dharma-body" or "truth-body"). As Buddhist scholar Pater Harvey explains, "In this respect, the *Dharma*-body is given a semi-personalized aspect, making it somewhat akin to the concept of God in other religions." This representation has been further personified in the Buddha Vairocana. Moreover, certain Buddhist sects teach that the *Dharmakāya* is what saves a person. Buddhists take refuge in this Truth – which may or may not be personified in the form of a Buddha – and find their salvation therein.

If we consider the popular school of Pure Land Buddhism, specifically the True Pure Land Sect of Japan, we find adherents who believe that their morally corrupt nature has rendered them incapable of attaining salvation. Only faith in Amida Buddha, the great divine savior, will ensure their deliverance after death. Shinran, the founder of this sect, even went so far as to teach that we are incapable of establishing this faith ourselves; it must be given to us by the savior! One might reasonably ask, if Job was saved through his trust in God as the one who redeems him, on what basis do we exclude the Japanese farmer who trusts in Amida Buddha to save him? While we cannot know exactly how Job pictured the face of the Divine, it is unlikely to have been that much more accurate than what our Japanese farmer imagines – as if that would matter to God in any case. If it is true that in this life we only see as through a glass darkly, I am in no good position to declare how clear your vision must be.

Luther taught, "The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject is error and poison."<sup>8</sup> If this is the essential message of the Word of God, is it possible that God works faith through the teachings of the Buddha? Are Law and Gospel found in the Koran? Is a Hindu's trust in

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<sup>7</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 177.

<sup>8</sup> LW 12, 310; "Commentary on Psalm 51."

the saving graces of Krishna so fundamentally different from many Christians' faith in Jesus, because the name, face, and biography of the savior are different? Christians certainly disagree on what is needed before a teaching can be considered the Word of God. We have held this debate with regard to Arians, Nestorians, Hussites, and Mormons. Historically, the criteria have been notoriously narrow, for various reasons. And while it is impossible to know the mind of God, we hope our Creator is more forgiving of error than many of us have been.

## **Objections**

Three criticisms are likely to be raised against this idea of an "Anonymous Lutheran." First, there is the theological objection to my standard for what should be considered the Word of God. This requires the most time and care in response. Second is the question of the possible implications for the Great Commission when salvation may be found through various religious traditions. And third is the concern that such a proposal is patronizing to adherents of other religious faiths.

### *Objection 1*

The first objection is surely the one that Luther himself would make. It runs like this: For the gospel to be the gospel, it must proclaim salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Anything else invokes various degrees of work righteousness. When our own works enter into the salvation equation, you no longer have the gospel. The liberating message of God's free grace, which does not depend on our works or worthiness, is only found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From an orthodox Lutheran standpoint, this is a compelling objection. It is only in Christianity that we have this remarkable distinction between Law and Gospel. In other traditions, with the possible exception of the True Pure Land Sect discussed above, one finds salvation requiring good works of some sort on the part of the believer. When that happens, you no longer have the pure gospel. For Luther, the Law must be completely removed from the message of the sinner's redemption. "It is a marvelous thing and unknown to the world to teach Christians to ignore the Law and to live before God as though there were no Law whatever. For if you do not ignore the Law and thus direct your thoughts to grace as though there were no Law but as though there were nothing but grace you cannot be saved."<sup>9</sup>

For Luther, any sacrifice of the integrity of the gospel is an affront to God and therefore makes for a corrupt faith that cannot save. "We must assert that as you believe, so it will happen to you.... Therefore if you can grasp this and believe that God is well pleased with those who fear him (Ps. 147:11), then it will happen this way to you. If you do not grasp it, you are not under His pleasure but under his wrath, according to Christ's saying (Matt. 8:13), 'As you have believed, so be it done for you.' The thought of God's wrath is false even of itself, because God promises mercy; yet this false thought becomes true because you believe it to be true."<sup>10</sup> For Luther, if you believe that God is a righteous judge who will determine your fate on the basis of your works, He will. If you believe that he is a loving

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<sup>9</sup> LW 26, 6; "Lectures on Galatians" (1535).

<sup>10</sup> LW 12, 322; "Commentary on Psalm 51."



Creator who will forgive your sins if you repent, then that is who He will be to you. The problem is that only the latter God makes salvation possible for sinful human beings.

It is easy to dismiss Luther as being fussy about theology, but he firmly believed that this is very serious business. “Faith alone” is not just a theological assertion, but of such importance that he was ready to submit his body to the flames rather than deny it. Any soteriology that includes human effort is blasphemy. “Grace cannot stand it when we want to give God or establish merit or pay him with our works. This is the greatest of blasphemies and idolatries and is nothing less than the denial and even ridicule of God.”<sup>11</sup> Paul Althaus explained, “Whoever wishes to be righteous before God through his ethical achievement assumes the place of the creator. Creating righteousness, destroying sin, and giving life – these are all the work of the creator alone.”<sup>12</sup>

When the believer cannot trust in God alone, but must put faith in herself, this necessarily leads to doubt and fear. “Have I done enough?” she asks. This, for Luther, is not the Christian life. “But if there is any conscience or fear present, this is a sign that this righteousness has been withdrawn, that grace has been lost sight of, and that Christ is hidden and out of sight.”<sup>13</sup> Any religion that teaches a theology of works is clearly not teaching the pure gospel. And without the gospel, you are not proclaiming the Word of God. Whereas Christianity is the only religion that proclaims this radical message, it is only through the message of Jesus Christ that salvation can be received.

It is here, however, that I believe we find Luther caught in a fundamental self-contradiction. He insisted that the sinner must embrace the pure gospel, as described above, while maintaining his hamatology of *simul iustus et peccator*. The original sin which believers carry their whole lives does not only corrupt their interpersonal interactions, but their theology as well. We cannot help but try and justify ourselves. “Thus human reason cannot refrain from looking at active righteousness, that is, its own righteousness; nor can it shift its gaze to passive, that is Christian righteousness, but it simply rests in the active righteousness. So deeply is this evil rooted in us, and so completely have we acquired this unhappy habit!”<sup>14</sup>

The most noble among us still look to our good works to placate a righteous God, at least from time to time. In other words, all believers find themselves living in accord with a corrupted gospel. If one were required to appropriate the pure gospel in order to receive its benefits, none could be saved.<sup>15</sup> For Luther, believing the radical message of God’s grace is profoundly difficult. “World and reason have

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<sup>11</sup> LW 14, 34; “Commentary on Psalm 117”

<sup>12</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 125.

<sup>13</sup> LW 26, 8; “Lectures on Galatians” (1535).

<sup>14</sup> LW 26, 5; “Lectures on Galatians” (1535).

<sup>15</sup> There may be times that a Christian internalizes the completely passive nature of grace, and does not trust in his own works at all. However, such clarity of thought and faith do not persevere through every moment of life. If the believer needed to be in such a state at the moment of death, in order to be saved, there could be no peace, joy, or gratitude. Good theology would become a new law.

no idea how difficult it is to grasp that Christ is our justification, so deeply embedded in us – like a second nature – is the trust in works.”<sup>16</sup>

While at times Luther wanted to insist on faith in the untainted gospel as a prerequisite for redemption, he also acknowledged that genuine believers have held to a corrupted gospel message. “Let me tell you this, so that you’ll know it: The fathers often erred; this too is part of God’s providence, so that we stick to the gospel and do not believe everything people say, even if they be the saintliest.”<sup>17</sup> In pointing out his belief that the “saintliest” fathers erred in their teaching of the gospel, he did not suggest their salvation was in jeopardy. In his *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther pointed out that the weak in faith have the same problem all the more, yet the answer is patient instruction. “For the sake of their conscience they must be allowed for a while to go on clinging to some good works and to perform them as necessary for salvation, as long as they grasp faith properly. Otherwise, if we try to tear them away too suddenly their weak consciences may be utterly shattered and confused, and consequently they end with neither faith nor works.”<sup>18</sup>

One must grant that the blasphemous sin of not fully trusting God, thinking that I must be involved in my achieving my own salvation, is a sin like others that God forgives. While Luther preached the pure gospel, the legacy of sin has been that we all trust in our own works at times.

The saving faith possessed by the redeemed is not contingent upon perfect theology, or even an intellectual grasp of Christian doctrine. Indeed, Luther’s embrace of infant baptism is proof of that. Receipt of God’s grace is not conditional on passing a Christian literacy test. Luther referred to this faith without knowledge as “alien belief.” Faith is what God delivers to the individual human being, not what we muster up or discover. Thus, in those moments of doubt, ambiguity, and confusion, it is this alien faith, established by God, which transmits grace. Heiko Obermann wrote, “Where one’s own faith begins to waver, the alien faith appears on the scene. And this is the exact situation of the ‘infant,’ for whom the Church, godparents, and parents believe vicariously. The baptismal font is the reservoir of alien righteousness surrounded by alien belief.”<sup>19</sup>

Why was the Great Reformer inconsistent on this point? Luther appears to have been caught between monumental convictions that governed his life and theology. On the one hand is the indispensable theological breakthrough that faith alone is what brings God’s grace. The other was his certainty that all theological debates are an expression of the battle between God and the devil. The former conviction places salvation in God’s hands alone, regardless of our moral, intellectual, and theological unworthiness. The latter portrays any deviation from his theology as the work of Satan, and therefore requiring condemnation in no uncertain terms. As Obermann explained, “[W]here the Reformer suspected the Devil’s involvement, he could no longer distinguish between a man and his

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<sup>16</sup> *WABr* 4, 241; Letter to Johannes Agricola, August 31, 1527, as in Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, 324.

<sup>17</sup> *WA* 11: 19; as in Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career*, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 221.

<sup>18</sup> *LW* 44, 36f; “The Christian in Society.”

<sup>19</sup> Oberman, 230.

opinions, or between error and lie.”<sup>20</sup> Fortunately, Luther also taught us of a God who welcomes sinners, even those with flawed beliefs. Between these two theological convictions, it is easy to see which one is required of those who would embrace the true spirit of Luther’s legacy.

### *Objection 2*

If there are multiple paths leading up the same mountain, then what happens to the Great Commission? Where is the incentive to share the Gospel when it is already present within the world’s various religious traditions? While the idea of proselytizing in missions has become unpopular and even suspect in certain Lutheran traditions today, sharing the good news of salvation to the world remains a fundamental principle of the faith. However, one may wonder if it serves any purpose when salvation is found outside the visible church.

The answer is quite simple. If Jesus Christ is truly the savior and redeemer of humanity, then human beings benefit greatly from knowing this. The more they know about the one who redeems them from their sins, the better. While an incomplete or corrupted message of God’s grace may still function as the Word of God, becoming the vehicle through which faith is received, good theology is always preferred to bad.

Luther and Lutherans have long believed that the pure message of Christ brings the greatest confidence before God, assurance of salvation, and the least potential for misuse and abuse. Wherever error exists, within the Church or without, Christians have a moral obligation to root it out so that others may enjoy the peace which passes all understanding, that which brings joy, freedom, and gratitude. A religious teaching that leaves one uncertain of salvation weighs heavily on the soul. For those with a conscience weighed down by sin, their “whole life hangs in doubt and uncertainty, full of anguish and terrors at any moment of time, shuddering at the evening and at the morning, finally at every hour.”<sup>21</sup> Only Christ can truly allay such fears.

Whether in Roman Catholicism or Islam, when the righteousness of God is understood actively, as the standard that believers must meet, the serious seeker is often led to despair, or even – like Luther – hatred of God. Again, the insight from Luther’s Tower Experience liberates the sinner from such *Anfechtung*. “For there is no comfort of conscience so solid and certain as is this passive righteousness.”<sup>22</sup> The pure gospel message changes fear to love, despair to gratitude, and moves us from being curved in on ourselves to offering free service to all.

For Christians that care about the spiritual wellbeing of their neighbors, it is required of them to share the good news in all its glory. Even if salvation is available to those outside the Christian faith, sharing the benefits of Christ’s free grace and complete forgiveness has long been understood by Lutherans to bring joy, peace, and freedom. What believer worth her salt would be unwilling to share that?

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>21</sup> LW 7, 276; “Lectures on Genesis.”

<sup>22</sup> LW 26, 5; “Lectures on Galatians” (1535).

### Objection 3

The final objection is that referring to believers in other traditions as “Anonymous Christians” (or, even worse, “Lutherans”) is patronizing. Who wants to tell a Pure Land Buddhist that he is indeed being saved, not by Amida Buddha – in whom he trusts – but rather by Jesus of Nazareth? In response to Karl Rahner’s “Anonymous Christian,” Hans Küng famously expressed, “[I]t would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an ‘anonymous Christian’ as presumptuous.”<sup>23</sup>

The problem with this objection is that it conflates being polite with being a relativist. Would a Muslim find such a claim “presumptuous?” Of course. Might a Buddhist be insulted by such a statement? Certainly. Are claims that are presumptuous and insulting always wrong? Of course not. However, we should always try to communicate our beliefs and opinions about others as respectfully as possible.

Whether we like it or not, as soon as we hold any opinion on a religious issue, we are implicitly stating that we think others are in error. Ironically, the more “inclusive” we try to be, the more people we proclaim to be wrong. If I assert that all claims about the Divine are only metaphor, and that no religion’s theology is the “right” one, I have effectively told the majority of Christians and Muslims – the two largest religions in the world – that their beliefs are wrong. I may indeed be right, but I have most definitely said something that billions of people would find presumptuous and insulting.

Traditional Christianity has taught that there is one way to salvation, Jesus Christ. If one holds this view, but posits salvation for those outside the visible church, the conclusion is logically necessary that the redeemed Sikh or Wiccan is being saved by Christ without realizing it. There is no way around it. Of course, this belief can be expressed respectfully or offensively. Perhaps Rahner’s choice of words was not ideal, and maybe Küng was being too sensitive on behalf of others. However, for a Christian to politely communicate that she believes that Jews, Muslims, and Hindus are saved by the second person of the Trinity is no more belligerent than when others tell her they believe that she is worshipping a mere man as God.

### Conclusion

It is certainly possible to imagine other objections to this proposal of an anonymous (or pseudonymous) gospel. For example, what I have suggested is supported by a metaphysics of realism (wherein humanity discovers the gospel through reason), as opposed to the nominalism of Luther. This is certainly a subject worthy of further exploration.

At the same time, the extent to which faith may be incomplete or in error, and still function as a conduit for God’s grace, has been debated for two millennia. Clearly, a requirement that one unerringly know, understand, and appropriate the radical soteriology of Jesus Christ cannot exist as a condition for salvation. The question of how precise or corrupt the Word of God may be, and remain the Word of

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<sup>23</sup> Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1976), 98.

God, is an important one, worthy of continued discussion and debate. At the same time, modesty and humility must temper our considerations of this issue, as we strive to understand the height and depth of the love of God in Christ Jesus.