

The Hidden God

By John Schaller

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In the Holy Scriptures we enjoy the possession of God’s revelation. There God has given us information about what He thinks of man, who enters the world as a sinner. There God sketches man for us, shows us how He sees him, and shares with us how He must deal with such creatures in His eternal righteousness. To make us eternally happy, God has further revealed the full riches of His love and mercy, according to which He has from eternity determined the salvation of the whole world of sinners and has accomplished it through His own Son in time. In His Word God also announces to us how a sinner comes to possess this salvation and thus can be saved eternally. Besides these important items of divine revelation, the Bible also contains much information about God’s nature, His will, and His dealings. We could never exhaust the riches of this revelation in our preaching, or even comprehend it in our own thoughts and ponder the magnitude of it all. In connection with this revelation, then, it becomes very clear that if the Scripture does not become an effective revelation leading to a correct understanding of God and His will for someone, the reason invariably lies in the fallen nature of man. In view of the grandeur of the revelation which God has given us in the Scriptures, we simply call the entire sacred book, “the revelation of God,” and properly so.

And yet the expression, “God has been revealed,” occurs only twice in the Holy Scriptures! And in both cases we notice immediately that the expression does not mean that God has revealed Himself to men completely, that without any reservation He has unveiled His essence, will and works. Jacob called the place El-Bethel because there God revealed Himself to him (Gn 35:7); however, the revelation refers, as we know, to a definitely specified, well-defined area. It gave Jacob information about God’s plans for salvation; and even this information was given in deeply veiled form, typical of the Old Testament. The other use of the word occurs in 1 Timothy 3:16: “God is manifest (lit. ‘revealed’) in the flesh.” Here, too, it is clear that Paul is not talking about a revelation through which the divine essence and the riches of all God’s thoughts are unveiled. To be sure, we see God’s majesty in the person of Jesus Christ. There is no God other than the one we know in Jesus Christ, and whoever wants to have any knowledge of God at all, must search for Him in Christ—certainly! And yet the revelation of God in Christ is also a limited one: in spite of all the grandeur of that revelation, we know only in part the fullness of the deity which dwells in Jesus Christ. In all the other instances which deal with God’s revelation, the Holy Ghost Himself designates it as incomplete by naming the particular matter which He is revealing. For example, God’s wrath is revealed; God’s righteousness is revealed; God has revealed to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure; etc. The Scripture nowhere tells us that we would have in it a complete revelation of God from every point of view.

This truth was recognized by those enlightened men of God to whom God granted His revelation. The Holy Ghost had enlightened Paul, so that he possessed the full measure of the revealed knowledge of God. And yet Paul realized the incompleteness of even this revelation, for he wrote: “Now I know in part” (1 Cor 13:12). He is referring to precisely those things which he was to preach to the world as a called teacher. He not only wants to say that human language is an incomplete means for communicating God’s revelation, but that the revelation itself is limited, piecemeal, so that even this enlightened apostle ran into insurmountable obstacles wherever he turned with his reason. He could penetrate into God’s secrets only so far, and no further. Isaiah once gave expression to the same realization—and in the middle of a sermon in which he was proclaiming a wonderful truth from the lips of God, a truth which he could have learned only through God’s revelation. Under the powerful influence of the truths God was unveiling to him, Isaiah addressed God directly with the words: “Verily, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior!” (Is 45:15). The same God who through prophets and apostles gave us revelations concerning His being and His will; the same God who in

Jesus Christ Himself became man and as the God-man draws ever so close to us—this revealed God remains at the same time *a hidden God!*

But man is unwilling to let that truth stand. And right here is the immediate cause of all theological and religious error wherever God's revelation in the Word is found. We think, e.g., of the great throng of arrogant men who think that the great God must be measured by the short span of human brainpower. They lay their miserably inadequate yardsticks up against God's revelation and reject it completely, because it mocks their attempts at measuring it. Then they build for themselves a god after their own philosophy and become vain in their imaginations; their foolish heart sinks into darkness; they lose even what was still left over of their natural knowledge of God. And so they fall into deism, lose themselves in pantheism or materialism, and finally end up in the foolishness of atheism. All of these aberrations stem from a denial of the proposition that God is a hidden God, a God who cannot be grasped and understood by human reason. But people are not satisfied with what God has told us about Himself; they want to go beyond that. With considerable effort and with a liberal investment of intellectual acumen they seek to enlarge upon what God has told us; they speak of God's person and works in greater detail than the Scripture does. They don't want God to remain a hidden God, whose Word we must simply accept as it stands if we want to know the truth; no, what God says is to be understood rationally and documented scientifically. And tragic consequences invariably follow. Every time someone attempts to enlarge upon the revelation God has given us in the Word he falls into foolish error and false doctrine. Only that theology is sound, and only that science, which recognizes God as the hidden God, a God whose revelation is always partial and who dare not be measured with the yardstick of human logic.

For us men the hiddenness of God is in a sense also a subjective thing. The Scripture testifies that natural man does not understand even God's revelation in the Scripture; he understands nothing of the Spirit of God, that is, he has no means whatever with which to grasp the spiritual matters God has revealed and to appropriate them. That is why he cannot know these things at all (1 Cor 2:14). But also among regenerate children of God one finds a difference in the degree of their knowledge of God. Among the various gifts which the Holy Ghost distributes to His children is knowledge of divine truth. The Spirit distributes this gift of knowledge, as His other gifts, "to each one severally as He will" (1 Cor 12:11). Believers are also admonished to strive to grow in the knowledge of God (Col 1:11). This is part of edifying the body of Christ, and all Christians are urged to take an active part in furthering this (Eph 4:11–16). Therefore although the regenerate understand the great truths of the gospel well enough to realize that by knowing God and Jesus Christ they have eternal life (Jn 17:3), yet their knowledge of God's complete revelation remains imperfect and incomplete. There are many details of this revelation which they do not know and which will remain hidden for life. Actually, the more the Christian searches God's revelation, the more he is conscious of how incomplete is his understanding of these revealed truths. The foremost theologians agree with the apostle, who despite God's inspiration admitted that he had not already grasped it and that he was not already perfect (Php 3:12). And in making this confession Paul was not alone among the inspired messengers of God. 1 Peter 1:10f tells us that the prophets felt the same way about the revelation at their disposal. Because in each Christian the knowledge of God's revelation is and remains deficient, it remains important for every Christian to search untiringly in the Scripture (Jn 5:39).

But even if the impossible were to become a reality, even if some theologian were, by sheer effort, to reach a perfect understanding of God's revelation, he still would not have gone beyond the limitations of human understanding. God's hiddenness remains an objective fact; God remains a hidden God whether we understand much or little of His self-revelation. Even for the person who could understand perfectly everything that God says in His Word and could retain this understanding God would remain hidden. St. Paul makes this clear when he writes: "We all with unveiled face behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:18). Although the veil of Moses has been removed for us so that we can see the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces, we still can view the Lord only as in a mirror. Now when one looks at the image of a person in a mirror, he cannot view the person from all sides, but only from the side facing the mirror. The rest of the person remains hidden to the viewer. That this is the thought Paul wants to convey we can see from his words, "Now we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor 13:12). In the Scripture we see a clear picture of God; there we have an abundant revelation of

His essence and of His will; there He gives us satisfying information concerning many problems whose solution has evaded the best efforts of natural man. But in spite of this there is much that remains a riddle, much that remains dark; we can see only what God wants us to see—an image in a mirror!

Someone once said: Among all the sciences with which mankind occupies itself, theology is that study which by its nature can actually satisfy a person the least. Of course these words are not to say that in God's revelation a Christian theologian cannot find rich and completely satisfying comfort for a heart in need of God's mercy. Anyone who hears God's Word in believing devotion knows that there is no other wisdom which can make a man as rich as this. The God-fearing pastor or teacher must consider it a priceless privilege to be called for no other purpose than to occupy himself completely with this wisdom. But among all the sciences which men study there is none in which the true scholar realizes so soon and so often how limited his powers of understanding are as in Christian theology rightly taught. In mathematics, e.g., the student proceeds from one rule to another and knows in advance that if he correctly applies the truths previously demonstrated he will finally solve every problem. In the natural sciences there are all sorts of problems; but so many successful solutions have already been found that scientists (at least the unbelieving ones) are confident that the human mind will finally be able to find the answer to the most difficult questions. They can be optimistic because they don't know that this is an empty hope. The historian and the geographer admit that in their field of research there is still much to be learned, but they work on relentlessly to illuminate the darkness, confident that they will uncover much new knowledge. In our days, wherever the children of this world pursue the sciences they end up with nothing more than the self-satisfied conviction that the human spirit will eventually eliminate all obstacles which oppose their investigation.

By contrast, the true theologian finds in the Scriptures a completed revelation, which stands eternally unchangeable in all its features. For him it is self-evident that as soon as he abandons the basis of scriptural revelation he is not able to make any reliable and true theological statement. To be sure, he can unfold from the text of the Scripture the divine thoughts contained in it, but the minute he asserts something which is not stated in just so many words in the Scripture he has abandoned the basis of theology and has instead reached out for the tools of human philosophy.

And that is not all. He soon finds out that no matter where he begins his study of the Scriptures he is forever standing before a locked door with no key, with no power to comprehend. There is not a single part of His revelation in which God has told us the whole truth, i.e., the truth to the extent that He knows it. It is for this reason that our theological understanding remains so fragmentary that we really cannot speak of a genuine system of theology. And so theology, viewed from the standpoint of human investigation and science, remains a highly unsatisfying study. Although God has revealed to us much about Himself, He remains everywhere a hidden God, whose thoughts we can only repeat after Him, and only to the extent that He has expressed these thoughts in the first place.

Take a few examples, the first from a field which is of lesser importance in theology. Reference was made earlier to natural science, which has not only chosen as its assignment to record and categorize its observations, but which boldly attempts to explain the interrelationships of all that it sees and studies. Science likes to think that in this endeavor it has made unusual progress. It has deduced quite a number of so-called natural laws, given them impressive and scholarly names, and now seeks to convince itself that these abstractions and names truly are explanations which indicate a real advance in human knowledge. Thus science speaks, e.g., of the force of gravity, of inertia, and of the conservation of energy. With the help of these terms and concepts science has constructed one impressive system after another, each of which is supposed to be unquestionably true in every instance. By means of these systems science has pretty well designed the good Lord completely out of nature, because He simply no longer fits in. And yet many people are so satisfied with the existing scientific system that they defend it fanatically as a religion.

But consider what they have done. They have overlooked the fact that no scientific explanation for the so-called "forces of nature" exists or is possible. They have also lost sight of the fundamental principle of all true science, and that is that the only thing which man knows about nature is what he can perceive with his senses. Many today have conveniently forgotten that giving a phenomenon a name is not an explanation of the

phenomenon. If I say, "An apple falls from a tree because of gravity," all I have said is that the apple's fall has some original cause. But simply giving the unknown cause an impressive name does not represent an advance in knowledge. In the first chapters of the Bible the theologian comes up against the very questions which science seeks in vain to answer. If the theologian has the right attitude, he will remain with the single truth that since God alone was present when heaven and earth came into being, and since He alone planned them and placed them where He wanted them, therefore He alone can enlighten us concerning the origin and the innermost essence of the creation, if He chooses to do this. But since God has not answered a thousand questions about the "how" and the "why" of creation, the true theologian is content; he realizes his limitations and speaks as truth only what God Himself has spoken concerning the creation of all things.

In connection with the account of man's fall into sin, the question also arises for the true theologian: What is the origin of evil in this world? That has been a great problem for men of all ages; and their philosophers have made strenuous efforts to find a satisfactory answer. With their efforts they have given evidence of the blindness and unbelievable ignorance of the human heart. No answer which men have ever produced from the depth of their wisdom has ever satisfied a single heart. Manichaeism answered the question about the origin of evil by declaring that from eternity evil has existed as a personal principle alongside the personal principle of good (sc., God). Others, in answer to the same question, have advocated the idiotic notion recommended by Christian Science today, namely that sin and evil are only figments of the imagination, which exist only in the ideas of men. Whatever the philosophic inquiries on this point have been, they invariably lead to ideas which cannot even stand the test of natural reason. Here again the true theologian finds the correct answer to this question in the Scriptures. Certainly he maintains that according to the divine revelation the temptation of the first man originated in the arch-tempter, Satan, because God may in no way be designated as the source of evil. But no true theologian attempts to answer the question of how evil entered God's good creation in the first place. He knows that God, who alone could give information about this matter, has hidden this knowledge from us. And it would be both futile and untheological to search for the causes which may have moved God to withhold from us this part of His knowledge.

A question closely related to this is: If God knows everything in advance, why did He create man capable of sinning? He could have created man to be both holy and incapable of sinning. He could have granted him the *non posse peccare*, just as He actually did grant him the *posse non peccare*. Since God could not have treated Adam and Eve lovelessly and unjustly, why did He not right from the start exclude every possibility of the fall into sin? Here again God has veiled Himself in deep silence. He nowhere gives us the slightest hint which could lead us to the answer to this question. By so doing, God has clearly indicated to us that we have no business concerning ourselves with this question. And it is unwholesome theologizing to try in all sorts of ways to solve this problem, which must be recognized as a mystery of the divine will, a mystery which neither our observation nor our speculation will ever unlock. We will never be able to state with certainty how it could happen that a pure and holy human creature could be influenced by sin, that a creature designed to correspond exactly to the divine decree could choose the very opposite of that which is good. The problem is not going to be solved by analyzing the psychological factors which were probably involved, or by pointing out (albeit correctly) that man sinned as a matter of free choice, or by pointing to Satan's participation in the fall. Such alleged explanations of the fall actually do no more than establish the historical fact of the fall; they do not, however, touch the heart of the problem. Now if even Adam's behavior presents an insoluble problem for us, how can we ever hope to find an answer to the hidden mystery of God's will?

The entire exercise of God's will is full of impenetrable mysteries for us. Actually God has given us abundant revelation about His will. The Scripture unveils in simplest language many splendid truths about God's decrees, truths which no human philosophy could ever have devised. The Scripture offers us everything we need for a philosophy of life that is divinely simple and therefore divinely persuasive, a philosophy of life in which God's will is always the controlling factor and on which everything finally depends. Most important, the Scripture shows us that God's will for the sinful world was determined by His grace and mercy, and that the whole world continues to exist only so that God's good and gracious will may be carried out. Whoever has so recognized the will of God from His Word commits himself confidently into the hands of the Lord of heaven

and earth and knows that under God's rule all things must have a blessed end for God's children. But when we try to fit the individual instances of God's world government together to make a complete picture, we soon realize what a futile effort this is. We do have various single pieces, but we invariably lack those links needed to make the picture complete. We can never verify the ways of the hidden God, as one verifies a calculation, even though they lie clearly before us. If it were not for the fact that God's Word has created trust in the heart of the believer, we too could come up with contradiction after contradiction and never get beyond doubting God's righteousness. Actually all philosophy, even that originating in Christian countries, endeavors to discover the secrets of God's will with the resources of human reason, because it refuses to believe God's revelation in the Scripture.

The destinies of people and nations present us with all sorts of puzzles; these are secrets of God's world government. We certainly recognize the great purpose which determines God's will. He tells us that sin is the downfall of people and that nations will be punished for their sins just as individuals are. It is clear that He has "made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and that He has determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation (Ac 17:26). There is no doubt about it, all the destinies of the nations stand in some sort of connection with God's plan of salvation. It is clear that the Almighty does not play games with the children of men, but that His ultimate concern is always to extend His gracious rule and to bring it to its fulfillment. But who would dare to demonstrate in each instance how God carried out His gracious will? How many times, for example, historians have tried to explain the rise of Islam, its surprising conquests and its seemingly indestructible vitality. It has intruded itself into world history like a wedge, destroying all symmetry. It has brought about changes in the world of nations which have no apparent connection with previous history. And as far as we are able to judge, what a hindrance Islam has been to the propagation of the gospel! In India it is still one of the greatest obstacles, in Africa the greatest obstacle to Christian preaching. This riddle cannot be explained simply by referring to the fact that Islam has not yet run its full course, so that we cannot yet make our final calculations. Even without considering its vigorous development and growth, its success and stamina, Islam is a mystery of God's world government which defies our solution.

A similar problem involving God's world rule lies before us in the peculiar history of the Japanese people. Here we have a heathen nation, which after long years of isolation finally allowed European culture to influence it. By clever utilization of the advantages this culture offered, Japan has in an amazingly short period of time gained an influential position among the great nations of the world. Japan is involved in power politics not only in Asia, where she is carefully pursuing far-reaching goals, but as an ally equal in rank with so-called Christian nations. Japan has entered the war against people of another culture (sc. Germany). Furthermore Japan has without a doubt been a major factor in bringing about the inglorious situation in which our own nation presently finds itself, exposed as it is to the contempt of other nations. And yet from earliest times Japan has lain in the deepest darkness of heathenism. Messengers who attempted to bring the Christian faith have found little, if any, entrance into Japan. Meanwhile our land has become a haven for the pure teaching of the gospel, a place where God's Word has free course in a manner unmatched in world history. This puzzle is not solved by saying that Germany deserves the chastisement it is presently receiving, and that America by its sin has earned its present humiliation as well as all the horror that may yet await her. This attempt at solution fails to answer the question why precisely the heathen nation of Japan has been chosen by God for this purpose.

The war in Europe, which has caused unspeakable misery for all participants, presents a similar puzzle. It certainly is true that for all combatants, Germany included, God's chastisement is completely justified and appropriate. Actually, when compared with what the sins of nations have deserved, this judgment of God would have to be called moderate. But again this explanation does not solve the problem confronting us. The problem is not God's chastisement per se, but that He chastises the way He does. Could He not have carried out His punishment in ways other than through such devastation, through such a frightful bloodbath? One may speculate about the problems raised by world history, but ultimately there is only one suitable answer: God wanted it this way, and He has not told us why. We must be content to know that His gracious rule in the hearts of men is not affected by the confusion everywhere evident in world history, and that His blessed activity is

quietly and steadily moving toward fulfillment, even though every political relationship in the world may in the process be turned upside down.

What is true of world history is true also of our individual histories. Every Christian knows well that his life is in God's hand, that God has from eternity foreordained the course his life will take. Every Christian lives in the confidence that all things which will be a factor in his life must work together for his good. But every child of God must also learn the lesson which once caused Job so much grief, and that is that even in His dealings with His own children God is a hidden God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways. The ungodly prosper; they enjoy complete satisfaction in life; misfortunes do not seem to touch them. They build up financial security which pretty well protects them against bad times. By contrast, the godly man is no stranger to suffering. Everything seems to happen to him. He knows what it is to do without; tears are his constant companion. This is the picture which the psalmists have painted for us in colors drawn from their own experience, and every Christian knows that these are not rare exceptions which the psalmists describe. The complaint of the psalmist is a common complaint of God's children. This is the problem whose solution Christian Science claims to have found. It preaches a gospel of liberation from everything which now torments the citizens of earth. According to its message, God ceases to be a hidden God. Christian Science makes man his own god, who has the power to determine, by an act of his own will, how things are to be in his life. By so teaching, Christian Science insanely denies the reality of evil on earth, as well as the reality of man's natural depravity and of sin. And yet this dare not blind us to the fact that many nominal Christians have fallen for Christian Science, since it denies God's personal ruling activity in this world, thus wiping Job's problem off the earth.

An even more difficult problem for the thinking man is this: If God determines absolutely everything in the world, how can He permit evil to exist and to do its dirty work without Himself becoming at least partly responsible for the evil? In order for a sinful action to have taken place, God must have supplied the physical strength for it; even more, He must actually have produced the action. God not only sustains the soul-life of a person, but God's creative activity produces every impulse of that person's spirit. God has not created either the world in general or the people in it as machines which operate without His personal participation. If it is true that in God we live and move and exist, then every single activity of man, just as all goings-on in the universe, are somehow produced by God. Since man by nature uses all his physical and mental powers for sinful purposes, can it be said that God has nothing to do in causing sin? Is it fair for Him to make man totally responsible for sin?

We usually answer this question by saying, "God works only the *materiale* of the sinful action," i.e., the intellectual and physical action *per se*, "but the man alone works the *formale*," i.e., that which makes the action sinful. Actually, though, this is only an apparent solution; it does not solve a thing. It merely emphasizes the scriptural truth that man is personally responsible for the sinful character of his actions. All we can do is express the truth of that fact, without solving the logical difficulty which that fact brings with it. Of course God remains just when His actions are judged. Perhaps He will one day permit us to understand this more fully. But for now He has chosen not to give us an insight into this particular mystery of His way of doing things.

In recent decades we have had to say much about the mysteries of God's election. Our opponents are willing to admit that there is a mystery here, but they are reluctant to look for the mystery in the will of God. They feel that in the matter of election, if anywhere, one ought to explain God's dealings in a manner that satisfies our human reason. According to their opinion, in order to avoid Calvinism, one must not speak of a hidden God but only of a hidden man. As they see it, the mystery of election does not lie in the fact that God chose the elect out of the whole world, but rather in their faith, which God foresaw. Here, they say, is the mystery: two people are equally guilty before God, and both receive an identical measure of God's grace. One by a proper use of God-given powers of grace decides to accept God's mercy, while the other uses these same powers to say no to God.

Now, to be sure, all of the goings-on in the human soul are in the final analysis inexplicable; they will forever remain an unsearchable realm. Since we do not know how the soul assimilates impressions that come to it from the outside, it certainly is also a psychological secret why the same gospel has different results in

different people. But this is not what our opponents think. They do not want to explain the psychological processes in the human soul but rather their moral quality. As our opponents see it, that is the psychological secret, how a man can be so bad that he uses the gifts of God's grace in a manner exactly opposite of what God wants. Nevertheless they try continually to explain the mystery, but they are not satisfied with the Bible's explanation of the corruption of the human heart. And so without Scripture they feel constrained to introduce "willful resistance," which is supposed to distinguish the man who is not converted from the man who comes to faith. To see that this explanation is not in conformity with the Lutheran Confessions, consider this one sentence from the Formula of Concord (S.D.,XI,57): "One is hardened, blinded, given over to a reprobate mind, while another, *who is indeed in the same guilt (qui in eadem culpa haeret)*, is converted."

On the other hand, we have the clear word of Paul for our teaching that the secret of the election lies in God, and that it remains a secret because He has not told us a single thing about what, in addition to His grace and Christ's merit, moved Him to choose the elect personally for eternal life. "Therefore hath He mercy on whom He will have mercy and whom He will He hardeneth" (Ro 9:18). Paul bases his statement on the word God once spoke to Moses: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Ro 9:15). This is a magnificent thought of God, a thought no man could possibly have originated or would have dared to utter. It is also a thought which one dare not weaken without destroying its meaning. To illustrate, Paul uses the comparison of the potter and the clay. As little as we could prove from the finished product why the potter made one vessel for honorable use, another for common use, so little dare we look for some reason, some quality, some attitude in the receptacles of God's grace which influenced God to bless them while giving the next person over to well-deserved condemnation. If the potter himself does not explain why he made one piece of clay into a vessel for honorable use, then no one can explain it. But since God has not told us how He accomplished the election of His children, no one can give accurate information about that. Although the fact of election (the *alii prae aliis*) is expressly taught in the Scripture, it is the height of presumption even to ask the question *cur alii prae aliis?* (Ro 9:20). Here God has remained a hidden God.

The Formula of Concord (Article XI) reminds us of this time and again; it presents the election as a mystery of God's will. "This eternal election or ordination of God to eternal life is not to be considered in God's secret, inscrutable counsel in such a bare manner" (S.D.,XI,9). "We should accustom ourselves not to speculate concerning the bare, *secret, concealed, inscrutable* foreknowledge of God" (S.D.,XI,13). "We should not attempt to investigate the *secret, concealed abyss* of divine predestination" (S.D.,XI,25). "Thus far (*hucusque*, i.e., up to this point) is the mystery of predestination revealed to us in God's Word" (S.D.,XI,43). "For, in addition to what has been revealed in Christ concerning this, of which we have hitherto spoken, God has still kept secret and concealed much concerning this mystery, and reserved it for His wisdom and knowledge alone" (S.D.,XI,52). "For that we neither can nor should investigate and fathom everything in this article, the great apostle Paul declares, who, after having argued much concerning this article from the revealed Word of God, as soon as he comes to the point where he shows what God has reserved for His *hidden wisdom* concerning this *mystery*, suppresses and cuts it off with the following words: 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!'" (S.D.,XI,64).

When God reveals something to us concerning His will, we get the impression that we really know something, since the important expressions of God's will do refer to us and can in a sense be understood by us. But when God reveals something to us about His *essence*, our thoughts must stop precisely where the word of Scripture stops. In other words, we could hardly hope to say anything correct about God's essence the moment we try to reproduce God's revelation in other words. The expressions which the Holy Ghost chose correspond exactly to the divine essence, at least to the degree that human language can serve as a vehicle for expressing the truth about God's essence. The moment we substitute other expressions, which may indeed appear synonymous to us, there will always be a question as to whether we have spoken accurately about God's essence. With our intellectual equipment we can in no way progress beyond the simple statements of the Scripture. To expand on the message of the Scripture is beyond our ability.

Take for example the doctrine of the Trinity. This term is of human origin; the Holy Ghost never uses it. We feel that the term is a convenient way to describe briefly two important truths which the Scripture brings us: the first, that in His essence God is one; the other, that He is a God in three, distinguishable persons. These two truths stand side by side on the pages of the Scripture, without any relation to each other; actually they contradict one another. The contradiction is not simply this, that here three are somehow supposed to be one. This sort of thing happens often, that three distinguishable things combine to make one. But then this one new thing is itself none of the three, but a fourth, formed by combining the three. In contrast, the Scripture tells us concerning the divine essence that God is one person, but that in God there are also three persons. The Scripture also assures us that each of the three persons is the one person whom we call God. We are not allowed to visualize God's essence as divided into three parts, because then the unity of His essence would no longer exist. But the word *triune* does not say this; it can express only a tiny bit of what God has revealed about this matter, and is therefore not an adequate expression. We will, however, look in vain for a better one. The only one who could have given us a better one, the Holy Ghost, has not done so, perhaps because our rational ability must stop when confronted with these two truths, and also because there could hardly be a human term to describe a concept which no human being has ever comprehended or could ever comprehend. The description given above of the relationship between the persons of the Godhead actually does not explain this relationship at all, and it will not lead anybody to an understanding which goes beyond the simple statements of the Scripture. One will also not reach such understanding by using comparisons which may seem to apply, for there simply are no parallels to illustrate the essence of God. We rejoice that in this revelation of His essence God has placed the entire gospel, just as at our baptism, according to Christ's institution, we were baptized in the name of the Triune God and thus were baptized into the gospel. It is in this sense that the Athanasian Creed correctly teaches that whoever does not keep this true Christian faith about God's essence whole and undefiled shall without doubt perish eternally. He thereby rejects the gospel. Our whole knowledge of God's saving will for us is dependent on the revelation of the three persons in the one divine essence. But for that very reason the doctrine of the Trinity will remain a mystery of faith. Faith generally accepts what God reveals and does not feel slighted if it must despair of more complete understanding.

The same holds true of all the so-called attributes of God. This term, too, is of human origin; the Scripture never uses it. The term is completely inadequate and therefore very misleading. Usually when we speak of the attributes of things we make a conscious distinction between the thing's attributes and its essence; the essence can coincide with the attributes only in the case of abstractions which have no real essence. In God, however, the words which we designate as attributes describe the very essence of God. God does not only have love in Himself; He *is* love. It has been suggested that instead of speaking of God's attributes we ought rather to speak of His perfections. But actually that form of expression offers little help toward real understanding; the word perfection as generally understood adheres to some thing, whereas God's perfections are the personal God Himself. God is Life in person (*das persoenliche Leben*), Light, Power, Knowledge, Existence, Presence. This is how the Scripture speaks of Him. Here is the reason why we will strive in vain to define the attributes of God. Our best definitions are only negative; they express what God is not. On the other hand, our positive definitions are *propositiones identicae*, i.e., expressions in which the predicate contains no more than the subject, and in effect is no more than a repetition of the subject. An expression of that sort leads to no further knowledge, for it contains no more than has already been given in the subject. If we say: "God is almighty, for He can do all things," we have with what looks like an explanation added no new thought; we have merely paraphrased; we have added a *propositio identica*. If we say: "God is almighty, for with Him nothing is impossible," we have given our definition negatively; we have avoided a false conception, but we have not enhanced the true idea at all. In our preaching and in our catechetical instruction we can use such definitions with profit, for the Scripture indeed gives them to us, but we cannot substitute for them any other definition which would be more satisfactory to our reason. Something like that is impossible, since God has given us no further information.

Apply this to God's other attributes. God assures us that He is eternal. We explain that for ourselves and our children by saying that God has neither beginning nor end. But even with this definition we show how limited our knowledge is; we take a term which reveals to us that God is not bound by limitations of time and

explain this term with words taken from our time-centered existence (*unserer Zeitlichkeit*). We have neither the words nor the thoughts with which to grasp and to express God's perfection.

We say that God is omnipresent. God wants us to picture Him as a God who indeed created space; but is not in any way limited by space. But even when we define omnipresence in this abstract way and negatively, we cannot possibly understand our definition; for the human mind "presence" invariably describes something which can be measured in terms of space. We cannot conceive of an existence outside of and with no reference to the three dimensions. Even less could we hope to make clear that God permeates our whole world with His essence and yet is never subject to the laws of space; or that He fills heaven and earth and yet takes up no space; or that, to quote Luther, He is completely in the smallest nut and yet neither small nor large by human standards of measurement.

God declares unmistakably that He is omniscient. We say that means He knows everything—and with that we have explained nothing! When we say: Nothing is hidden from Him, we have not taken the smallest step forward. We try to expand the content of the declaration and say: God knows everything that was and is and will be; He knows all things at once; He sees all occurrences not according to their duration but in depth, so that all incidents in His creation are known by Him at the same time, although He also knows the chronological order as such. We define even more precisely and say: God knows all occurrences that are possible; He knows not only the conclusions which every human being, by using his free will, *will* reach; He even knows what every human being *could* think, which conclusions he *could* reach—and on and on until the mind boggles. But how far will this bring us toward understanding God's omniscience? It is apparent that we cannot comprehend all these concepts as a connected whole, but can only set them down neatly after the other. It is also apparent that our awareness of space and time underlies all these concepts, an awareness from which we cannot free ourselves. To understand God's omniscience we would have to be as omniscient as God. All we can do is to repeat after Him what He says about Himself. "The things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:11).

It will not be necessary to continue this proof. Whoever approaches the statements of Holy Scripture with proper humility of faith will certainly try to understand them more in detail, but he will soon find out the limits which the hidden God has fixed everywhere. In spite of all His revelation, God still dwells in a light which no man can approach unto. And faith is satisfied with this. It is not disgraceful for a believing theologian to have to confess that he does not have a solution to a thousand "problems" which human reason finds in Scripture. Orthodox Lutheran theology looks upon this attitude of faith as being the one basic principle of knowledge. Even though in dogmatics it organizes its individual insights into a system of doctrine, yet Lutheran theology has no other purpose than to record and to organize what God Himself has declared in the Scripture. Her principle is: What is biblical is theological. What Scripture truly understood really teaches has its place in theological presentation, no matter if it does break the unity of the system or not. On the other hand, it is also clear to her that, "What is not biblical, is not theological." What Scripture rightly understood does not really teach has no place in theological presentation, even if it seems perfectly to fill out a blank in God's revelation.

This is how the theology of our Lutheran fathers of the 17th Century ought to be understood. The important question here is not whether these pious and perceptive people always remained true to the principle of letting God be a hidden God where He has revealed nothing to us. It is clear that they wanted nothing else. They pressed into the service of their theological presentation every philosophical mechanism available to them. They fitted everything together as closely as possible into a tight logical structure, with one distinction and one conclusion following the other. This was not just intellectual satisfaction for these fathers, although one can sense how happy they were if a tentative explanation worked out well. The dogmatics of any period must record and illumine also all the false teachings which have been taught up to that time and which obscure the true knowledge of Scripture. And because error invariably stems from the philosophy of men, it is natural and often unavoidable that the refutation of error will take philosophical form.

In the use of philosophical forms our old dogmaticians were unsurpassed masters, and the certainty with which they handled these spiritual weapons may on occasion have led them to superfluous detail, even to dogmatic excess. But at the same time a holy reverence for God's revelation governed them. It would have been

simply unthinkable for Gerhard, Calov, and Quenstedt to spin a dogmatics out of their own intellect, as has been the custom with so-called positive theologians in Germany for several decades. The fathers indeed placed their dogmas at the head of their presentation and followed with the scriptural proof, but this was only their method of presentation, not the way in which they had arrived at their results. They wanted to say nothing else but what they had learned from the Scriptures. It never entered their minds to imagine that they, with all of their distinctions and syllogisms, had found even one grain of theological truth not contained in the word of Scripture. They may have investigated and discussed a “problem” of Scripture by applying all imaginable acumen, but they did not advance beyond the simple statement of Scripture and did not desire to draw God out of His concealment.

The development of our Lutheran church here in America has brought this with it, that we have adopted the teachers of the 17th Century and their dogmatical method as our models. Now to be sure this has many advantages, which we do not want to underestimate, and it would indeed be a distinct loss if we were gradually to lose contact with those great teachers of the church. But, on the other hand, we dare not close our eyes to the fact that this pattern of our church’s development has not always been to our advantage. We must consider it a disadvantage that those 17th Century dogmaticians have in many circles gained a reputation which goes beyond their real importance. In contrast to present-day teachers, they are given the reputation for being the ones who truly represent the Lutheran Church, even in those portions of their presentations where we have found important and significant flaws (*naevi*, “warts”). Some have made them into a sort of staff of teachers (*collegium*), to serve as a source of theology. Some have actually (though not in so many words) adopted the principle: What is Lutheran is what the dogmaticians of the 17th Century have taught unanimously. This is an honor we give not even to Luther, who certainly far surpasses those teachers.

However, even though we have managed to maintain our freedom from such unjustifiable dependency on our dogmaticians, there is another danger that threatens us. Whoever builds the structure of his theology after the 17th Century pattern will experience a certain intellectual satisfaction in the effort. And he is going to be tempted to imagine that the intellectual satisfaction he has achieved is evidence that he has uncovered, at least partly, God’s secrets. Let us say that you have built up a theological argumentation carefully and logically and have carried it successfully to its conclusion. You may then want to consider your argumentation convincing proof of the truthfulness of the doctrine you have explained; what you are then doing is only to confuse your intellectual satisfaction with the certainty of faith. Against that sort of thing we must be on our guard, if we want to preserve any sort of confidence of faith. The time could come when we see our pretty argumentation melt away before our very eyes, and the truth come at us very forcefully that God is a hidden God, who cannot be pulled out of His hiddenness with the best of our little tools of intellect. And that shock could result in our being led astray from God’s truth! Only that theologian is safe from that sort of experience who derives his theological knowledge from the Word of God and not from the words of men and who recognizes the limits God has set to our theology. The only safe principle of orthodox theology is: *Let the hidden God remain hidden where He wants to remain hidden!*